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# Rethinking the Chinese World Order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China

SUISHENG ZHAO*

*Looking to China's imperial history to understand how China as a great power will behave in the twenty-first century, some scholars have rediscovered the concept of the traditional Chinese world order coined by John K. Fairbank in the 1960s in the reconstruction of the benevolent governance and benign hierarchy of the Chinese Empire, and portrayed its collapse as a result of the clash of civilizations between the benevolent Chinese world order and the brutal European nation-state system. China was forced into the jungle of the social Darwinist world to struggle for its survival. As a result, China's search for power and wealth is to restore justice in an unjust world. China's rise would be peaceful. This article finds that while imperial China was not uniquely benevolent nor uniquely violent, the reconstruction of China's imperial past to advance the contemporary agenda of its peaceful rise has, ironically, set a nineteenth century agenda for China in the twenty-first century to restore the regional hierarchy and maximize China's security by expanding influence and control over its neighborhoods.*

## Introduction: China's peaceful rise determined by its peace-loving tradition?

The decline of imperial China in the nineteenth century and the rise of China in the twenty-first century have completed an imperial cycle. The long curve of history has colored Chinese thinking of foreign affairs. While the memory of the glorious empire has left a legacy of an ethnocentric world outlook, the century of humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialist powers has created a unique and strong sense of victimization, insecurity and righteousness in foreign affairs. These historical memories have been a powerful force that not only bind the Chinese people together and form their national identity but also motivate Chinese leaders to find what they regard as China's rightful place in the world.

Chinese leaders have, however, selectively used these historical memories to serve their political and strategic objectives. For more than half a century after the founding of the PRC, the leaders focused on commemorating the century of humiliation to help solidify the regime legitimacy based on the nationalist credential of driving

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imperialist powers out of China. Their attitude toward imperial China, however, was ambivalent because the Chinese empire, like other empires in the world, expanded across vast territories along its frontiers and left complicated historical legacies, such as the territorial disputes, cultural chauvinism and the rights of immigrants that impacted its relations with its Asian neighbors. Following the guidance of communist ideology to emphasize class struggle between the exploited and the ruling classes, the Chinese leaders blamed imperial warfare and expansion on the ruling classes of the emperors and their officials.

China's reemergence in the twenty-first century has led to a gradual change in the historical consciousness of Chinese leaders as they have become more willing to celebrate the glories of imperial China to boost national pride and redefine China's position in the world. But what they have celebrated is an imperial China reconstructed as the benevolent center of East Asia until Western powers invaded and humiliated China, so as to advance the agenda of China's rise as a return to the harmonious state and to reassure its neighbors, who have become worried about China's rising threat, that a powerful China would be peaceful.

Starting with President Hu Jintao's concept of the harmonious world derived from traditional Chinese philosophy that 'harmony' was at the core of dealing with everything from state affairs to foreign relations,[1] President Xi Jinping has become obsessed with citing Confucian classics and using Chinese history to present China's domestic and external policies. He is famously known as saying that 'the genes' order' (基因测序) and 'inherited national spirit' (薪火相传的民族精神) determine that 'the Chinese nation is a peace loving nation'. The pursuit of peace, concord and harmony (和平、和睦、和谐的追求) has been deeply rooted in the spiritual world of the Chinese nation and the blood of the Chinese people. China's unswerving pursuit of peaceful development represents the peace-loving cultural tradition the Chinese nation has inherited and carried forward over the past thousands of years. Citing Chinese classics, such as 'A warlike state, however big it may be, will eventually perish' (国虽大,好战必亡), 'Peace is of paramount importance' (和为贵), 'seek harmony without uniformity' (和而不同), 'replace weapons of war with gifts of jade and silk' (化干戈为玉帛), 'bring prosperity to the nation and security to the people' (国泰民安), 'forming friendships with neighbors', (睦邻友邦), 'achieve universal peace' (天下太平) and 'Great Harmony of Tianxia' (天下大同), he asserted that 'China was long one of the most powerful countries in the world. Yet it never engaged in colonialism or aggression. The pursuit of peaceful development represents the peace-loving cultural tradition of the Chinese nation over the past several thousand years'.[2]

The celebration of China's imperial glory by Chinese leaders has coincided with an emerging scholarly debate on the 'Chinese world order' coined by John K. Fairbank in the 1960s. While some scholars have criticized the concept as a myth, others have rediscovered the concept and represented the Chinese world order as benevolent

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1. Liu Jiafei, 'Sino–US relations and building a harmonious world', *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (2009), p. 479.
2. '习近平在德国科尔伯基金会的演讲' ['Xi Jinping speech at the Korber Foundation, Germany'], *Xinhua News Agency*, (28 March 2014), available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-03/29/content_2649512.htm.

governance and benign hierarchy. They argue that imperial China maintained a regional order that was not only unique but also more peaceful than its counterparts in other parts of the world. Some Chinese scholars even went so far as to argue that imperial China resisted the temptation of expansion and won the admiration of its neighbors. The collapse of the Chinese world order, therefore, was a result of the clash of civilizations between the benevolent East Asian order and the brutal European nation-state system. China was forced into the jungle of global imperialism to defend its survival as a weak nation. China's search for power and wealth is thus aimed at restoring justice in an unjust world. A powerful China would be peaceful. This discourse of China's entangled imperial cycle has, ironically, set a nineteenth century agenda for China in the twenty-first century—to restore the regional hierarchy of imperial China and maximize China's security by expanding influence and control over its immediate neighborhoods. One scholar hence asked the question: how can China's neighbors manage 'China's superiority complex' as 'the imperiousness that once dictated ancient China's policies seems to be manifesting itself once more in the present day'.[3]

Keeping this question in mind, this article starts with an exploration of the Chinese world order as a conventional paradigm, and moves on to examine if imperial China was uniquely benevolent, how a peaceful Chinese empire has been rediscovered and reconstructed, and to what extent the collapse of the Chinese empire was a clash of civilizations.

## The Chinese world order as a conventional paradigm

The Chinese world order has been a conventional paradigm in the studies of imperial China's relations with its East Asian neighbors since the publication of the edited volume by Fairbank in 1968. It held that a China-centered regional order 'handled the interstate relations of a large part of mankind through most of recorded history'.[4] This Chinese centrality was based on the belief of 'China being internal, large, and high and the barbarians being external, small, and low'.[5] The concept of legal equality or sovereignty of individual states did not exist. All countries arranged themselves hierarchically around the Chinese emperor known as the Son of Heaven (天子). China's central position was manifested in a highly sophisticated tributary system, a term John F. Fairbank started using in the 1940s, that was, in effect, the only institution for international relations in the region.[6] The tributary system was the most highly developed during the Ming and Qing periods when Korea, the Ryukyu, Annam, Burma, Laos and Nepal sent tributary missions regularly to China.[7]

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3. Reuben Mondejar, 'China's superiority complex must be carefully managed', *South China Morning Post*, (26 February 2015), available at: http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1723741/chinas-superiority-complex-must-be-carefully-managed?utm_source=edm&utm_medium = edm&utm_content = 20150227&utm_campaign = scmp_today.

4. John K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary framework', in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 1.

5. Lien-sheng Yang, 'Historical notes on the Chinese world order', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, p. 20.

6. John K. Fairbank and Shu-yu Teng, 'On the Ch'ing tributary system', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6(4), (1941), pp. 135–148.

7. Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming relations with Southeast Asia: a background essay', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 34–62.

Tributary relations were performed through a set of rituals and ceremonies. 礼部 (the Board of Rites Reception Department) in the Ming dynasty and 理藩院 (The Vassal Affairs Department) in the Qing dynasty were in charge of establishing the rites and forms derived from traditional Confucian teachings. The Collected Statutes of the Great Qing (大清会典) described the operation of the tributary system in a very ceremonial way. The Qing court, in most cases, paid for all the expenses of the tributary missions from their arrival at the Qing border to their departure. The tributaries brought tribute with them and were escorted to court by the Qing officials. After performing the appropriate ceremonies at the Qing court, notably the three kneeling and nine prostrating (三拜九叩) ceremonies, they presented tribute memorials and a symbolic tribute of their precious native products. They then were given an official seal and imperial gifts. Finally, Chinese missions were sent to visit them in return.

Although the tributary system sometimes embarrassed the tributary states and bore a heavy cost to China, it was valuable for both the tributary states and the tribute receiver. For tributary states, the presentation of tributes enabled them to trade with China through the legalization of controlled trade along their frontiers. For example, through imperial bestowal and legal trade, Korea could get certain luxuries and necessary medicines from China. The Ryukyu received the privilege of carrying trade goods duty-free to China's southeast coast and missions stayed in China at the expense of the Chinese court.[8] Politically, the tributary states received validation of their political power from the Chinese emperor in the form of patents of office and investiture. This was a valuable technique for the establishment of legitimacy by local rulers.

The Chinese court also benefited from this system. Although, in financial terms, China paid out far more than it received, the tribute received from neighboring countries was the ritual that acknowledged the superiority of the Chinese culture, recognized the greatness of the Chinese civilization and the existence of Chinese authority and, consequently, the inviolability of China's frontiers. Economically, China was able to trade with its neighbors for items necessary without admitting China's dependence on these items of trade with the barbarians. For instance, the Central Asian nomads were 'permitted' to present horses as tribute although China needed horses for its armies. Actually, depending on the nomads for this important item, the emperor granted the nomads the right to trade horses for Chinese products at frontier markets as a gracious boon to the nomad economy while preserving 'the myth of China's self-sufficiency'.[9]

The Chinese world order was an ethical hierarchy, maintained by the power of the Chinese civilization. Developed within Chinese cultural boundaries, many societies in East Asia were strongly influenced by the Chinese civilization, for example, by the Chinese ideographic writing system, the Confucian classical teachings, the official examination system, and the imperial monarchy and bureaucracy. Vietnam and

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8. Ta-tuan Ch'en, 'Investiture of Liu-ch'iu kings in the Ch'ing period', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, p. 161.

9. Mark Mancall, 'The persistence of tradition in Chinese foreign policy', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 349, (1963), reprinted in King C. Chen, ed., *The Foreign Policy of China* (South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University Press, 1972), p. 30.

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Korea are good examples of long centuries of Chinese control and political and cultural influence. Their state structure and literature were patterned on China's example, and their written languages and spoken tongues were strongly influenced by the Chinese. Confucianism, along with its examination system, dominated their political and intellectual life. Even though some countries, such as Japan, never fell under China's political domination, they could not escape from the strong influence of Chinese culture. Japan adopted its character-based writing system from China during the period from the fourth to the sixth century AD. Knowledge of the Buddhist religion, also from China, reached Japan through Korea.

China's relations with its neighbors were thus culturally superior–inferior. The superior Sinitic zone was at the center, including the core China proper and the most nearby and culturally similar tributaries, Korea, Annam (Vietnam) and the Ryukyu Islands, parts of which were in ancient times ruled by the Chinese empires. Tibet and Central Asia, whose cultural developments were more or less independent of Chinese civilization, were located next. At a further distance were outer barbarians (外夷) or uncivilized people. The Chinese culture and civilization demarcated the boundary between China's sedentary agricultural society and the barbarian's nomadic steppe societies. Clear legal boundaries of jurisdiction did not exist. The ocean could not prevent Korea, the Ryukyus and the Southeast Asian kingdoms from coming to China to learn Chinese culture and to pay tribute. China's power, despite her continental orientation, extended culturally and sometimes politically to maritime nations.[10]

China's cultural superiority was based on the belief that the Chinese imperial system and Confucian ideology preserved domestic social order and political stability and therefore extended to the surrounding areas. Chinese culture was so powerful that even the barbarians, such as the Mongols and the Manchus, who conquered the Middle Kingdom militarily, had to turn to Chinese culture in governing the country. Chinese culture was seen as a great lasting power to bridge periods of disunity and to infuse new governments, whether Chinese or alien, with values supportive of the traditional Chinese order. The term 'culturalism' is thus used to describe the dominant world view of imperial China.[11] The hegemonic nature of Chinese culture gave rise to a false sense among the Chinese that the hierarchy was universal. There were no other hierarchies and no other sources of power in the world. All countries within the tributary system were culturally subservient to China, and those countries that were geographically too distant to participate simply lived in a kind of limbo or cultural vacuum.

Chinese culture put special emphasis on the virtue of the Chinese rulers. The mandate of heaven extended to international society through China's ethical position: 'The Chinese, with their Confucianism, created an elaborate intellectual structure of an ethical order which all enlightened peoples were expected to acknowledge and respect'.[12] Harmony was the product of the emperor's virtue. If the emperor violated the virtue, the rivers would flood, the mountains shake, the people revolt, and by

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10. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.
11. James Harrison, *Modern Chinese Nationalism* (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1969), p. 2.
12. Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics, the Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 41.

extension, the Chinese order would crumble. The Chinese order was thus sustained by a heavy stress on ideological orthodoxy, especially on the idea that adherence to the correct teachings would be manifested in virtuous conduct and would enhance one's authority and influence. Right conduct, according to the proper norms, was to move others by its example. According to this mystique, proper ceremonial forms influenced the beholder and confirmed in his mind the authority of the superiors. The Chinese emperor's superior position, exhibited through proper conduct including ceremonies, gave one prestige among others and power over them. In the Chinese order, the hierarchical power relationship, therefore, was by definition more 'moral' than in the West.[13]

## Was the Chinese world order uniquely benevolent?

The prospect of China's reemergence as a great power in the wake of the twenty-first century has led to a scholarly debate about whether imperial China was uniquely benevolent. On the one side of the debate, William A. Callahan criticizes the Fairbank paradigm as an 'idealized version of a hierarchical Sinocentric world order with the Chinese empire at the core and loyal tributary states and barbarians at the periphery'.[14] Peter Perdue labels the tributary system a myth, which endured only because it reflected the political concern of the time. Many of the scholars writing with Fairbank in the 1960s were émigrés from China and in opposition to prevailing views that China was merely another totalitarian Communist state during the height of the Cold War, they argued for China's distinctive history as a long civilized society, with the implication that the current Communist direction might be temporary, and that long-term historical trends would prevail. Although the paradigm now serves useful purposes for those who endorse and predict the coming hegemony of China in Asia, Perdue argues that there is a 'scholarly consensus' that 'there was no tributary system' and 'historians who investigate the actual conduct of foreign relations by Chinese dynasties have, by now, nearly uniformly rejected the validity of this concept'.[15] To prove his point, Perdue cites the contribution by Mark Mancall in the Fairbank volume that:

> the concept of the tribute system is a Western invention for descriptive purposes … The Confucian scholar-bureaucrat did not conceive of a tribute system (there is no Chinese word for it) as an institutional complex complete within itself or distinct from the other institutions of Confucian society.[16]

Indeed, there is not a Chinese term accurately corresponding to the English term. The closest terms in Chinese are 进贡 (pay tribute) and 朝贡 (pay respect and tribute), but neither of them implies an institutionalized relationship. A Chinese

13. Mancall, 'The persistence of tradition in Chinese foreign policy', p. 31.

14. William A. Callahan, 'Introduction: tradition, modernity, and foreign policy in China', in William A. Callahan and Elena Barabantseva, eds, *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), p. 6.

15. Peter Perdue, 'The tenacious tributary system', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670864.2015.1030949.

16. Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing tribute system: an interpretive essay', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, p. 63.

scholar, therefore, distinguishes the tributary (朝贡) system from what he called the patriarchal–vassal (宗藩) system. Tributary relations were not institutional and were often conducted on a case-by-case basis in more or less equal footing between imperial China and the tributary states for the purpose of trade. But the patriarchal–vassal system was institutionalized and maintained as a part of hierarchical monarch relations (君臣关系). The Chinese emperor treated local rulers not as equals but vassals because they accepted the canonization (册封) of the Chinese court. The vassal states had to pay tributes regularly, following the rituals defined by the Chinese court. During the Ming and Qing periods, there were three vassal states that had institutionalized tributary relations with China: Korea, Annam (Vietnam) and Ryukyu. Nepal, Laos, Burma and other Southeast Asian states only had irregular tributary relations with China.[17]

A Thailand scholar's study of diplomatic document (letters) exchanges between the Qing court and the Siamese (Thai) court in the 1780s found that although Siam responded to the tributary system, it did not accept the Chinese perception of world order. In Siamese letters to the Chinese emperor, the Siamese court preserved its identity as an independent kingdom equal to the Qing court. When the tributary missions arrived in the Chinese port, Guangzhou, the Chinese officials edited the letters in their translation to comply with the Chinese hierarchical concept before presenting them to the Chinese emperors. The Chinese letters from the Qing court to the Siamese court, written in hierarchical terms, were similarly edited in translation and arrived in the Siamese court as diplomatic documents exchanged between two equal rulers. Examining the Siamese tributary articles and the Chinese imperial gifts, this study found that the major role played by the tributary missions was commercial. Through imperial gifts from China, Siam received certain luxuries and commodities unavailable locally whereas China acquired goods and medicines. Since trade with China was vital to the Siamese, they were willing to conduct the commercial relations through the tributary system but the Siamese court never accepted the canonization from the Qing court.[18]

In this case, Perdue's criticism of the tributary system as a myth makes sense because most of the tributary relations were more ritualistic than substantive. But his flat rejection of the existence of the tributary system may have gone too far. Odd Arne Westad presents a more balanced view, suggesting that 'there was no *overall* "tributary system"' and the tributary relationship was one of a variety of ways imperial China conducted foreign relations. He found that the Qing operated in three distinct spheres of foreign affairs in the nineteenth century: Central Asia, where the theme was expansion; coastal Asia, where the theme was trade tribute; and Russia, where the theme was diplomacy. Recognizing the existence of 'a Sino-centric system, in which Chinese culture was central to the self-identification of many elite groups in the surrounding Asian countries', Westad raised the critical question— whether Chinese centrality was maintained mostly by cultural superiority or coercive

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17. 魏志江 [Wei Zhijiang], 论东亚传统国际安全体系与所谓华夷次序 ['Traditional East Asian international security system and the so-called Chinese–barbarian order'], paper presented at the 11th Beijing Forum, *The Harmony of Civilization and Prosperity for All*, 7–9 November 2014.

18. Prapin Manomaivibool, 'Viewing Sino–Siamese tributary relations via the two courts' letters of the 1780s', paper presented at the 11th Beijing Forum, *The Harmony of Civilization and Prosperity for All*, 7–9 November 2014.

power? His study revealed that 'The dramatic Qing penetration of Central Asia is a story of intense conflict and, eventually, of genocide'. His evidence was the Qianlong emperor's expedition in the 1750s into the Zungharia, a mighty khanate led by Mongols, covering the territory between western Central Asia and the Mongolian heartland, down to the Tibetan borders. After having defeated Zungharia in battle, the Qianlong emperor ordered his army to kill all of the Zunghar elite whom they could lay their hands on. 'Then he incorporated most of eastern Zungharia and the minor Khanates to its south into China, creating one region that Qianlong, triumphantly, referred to as China's new frontier (Xinjiang)'.[19]

Indeed, warfare was constant in imperial China because it was often in disunion or under foreign invasion. Prior to the Qin Dynasty, China was divided into many small warring kingdoms fighting wars for dominance. After the establishment of the first Chinese dynasty by the Qin emperor, the geographical scope and military power of the Chinese empire began to expand immensely. China's ruler during the Yuan dynasty, Kublai Khan, expanded the empire by military expedition, stretching across Central Asia, Burma and Vietnam. In 1263, Kublai Khan made Korea his vassal and aspired to the conquest of Japan. His fleets twice reached the shores of Japan in 1274 and 1281 but were shipwrecked by typhoons, which were to become legendary in Japan as the *kamikaze*, or 'divine wind'.[20] The last Chinese dynasty, Qing, expanded to unprecedented size, nearly doubling in land from the previous Ming dynasty, mostly through military force.

It is from this perspective that Peter Perdue claims that the China of today is a product of the vast conquests of the Manchu rulers, who defeated the Zunghar Mongols, and brought all of modern Xinjiang and Mongolia under their control, while gaining dominant influence in Tibet.[21] Perdue argues that the techniques used by the Ming and Qing dynasties to legitimize their rule over their subjects and to claim superiority over rivals were not radically different from those of other empires. Citing the comparative history studies that pointed to substantial similarities of the Ming and Qing to the Russian, Mughal and Ottoman imperial formations, or even to early modern France, Perdue suggests that the concept of 'colonialism' (殖民主义) could be usefully employed to describe certain aspects of Qing practice.[22]

In this context, a Korean scholar confirmed that although the Qing court failed in its attempt to legally incorporate its tributary state Choson Korea as part of China's territory by international treaty in the 1880s, the Republican Chinese text book and historical geography still regarded Choson Korea and other tributary states in East Asia as recently lost Chinese territories. He is concerned that such an 'expansionist territorial imagination' has come back and gained ground in China as it is re-emerging as a great power.[23]

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19. Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), pp. 9–10.

20. Claude A. Buss, *Asia in the Modern World: A History of China, Japan, South and Southeast Asia* (London: Coller-Macmillan Limited, 1964), pp. 34–35.

21. Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

22. Perdue, 'The tenacious tributary system'.

23. 柳镛泰 [Yu Yongtae], '以四夷藩属为中华领土：明国时期东亚认识的另 一 面' ['Territorial imagination and perception of East Asia in the Republic of China'], paper presented at the 11th Beijing Forum, *The Harmony of Civilization and Prosperity for All*, 7–9 November 2014.

Some earlier Chinese historians admitted that the formation and maintenance of imperial China was more by force than by cultural appeal. Fan Wenlan's study in 1962 found that conflict rather than harmony led to the formation of the Chinese nation. Fan even went so far as to argue that wars and conflicts were conducted among different nations and states rather than ethnic groups of China. These states did not co-exist equally nor were they peacefully amalgamated. Instead, their relations were confrontational and determined by their relative power. Bigger and more powerful states always tried to conquer smaller and weaker ones.[24] Fan was brutally attacked and his article was not published until 1980, ten years after his death during the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after Fan's article was published, another Chinese historian, Sun Zamin, argued that there were many hostile nations and states fighting wars in Chinese history. The relations between the majority Han and other ethnic minorities were not domestic ethnic relations within the Chinese family but that of 'one nation and state vis-à-vis foreign nations and states' (外族和外国). The wars were caused by the aggressive invasion of one nation over another. The current boundary of Chinese territory was created by the victory of the Chinese empire against other states.[25]

The emerging literature on Chinese strategic culture has documented that the Chinese empire was maintained as much by military force as by virtue, even though Confucian teachings of harmonious rule through the civilized power stated to the contrary. Viewing war as a central feature of interstate relations, imperial China used military force as strategically and constantly as other empires. Alastair Iain Johnston's study of Ming dynasty classics reveals two sets of Chinese strategic culture. One is a symbolic or idealized set and the other is an operational set. The symbolic set is based on Confucianism—that conflict is avoidable through the promotion of good government and the co-opting of external threats. When force is used, it should be applied defensively, minimally, only under unavoidable conditions, and then only in the name of the righteous restoration of a moral-political order. The symbolic set, for the most part, is disconnected from the operational decision rules governing strategy and appears mostly in a discourse designed, in part, to justify behavior in culturally acceptable terms. The operational set assumes that conflict is a constant feature of human affairs, due largely to the threatening nature of the enemy. In this zero-sum context, the application of violence is highly effective for dealing with the enemy. This operation set, in essence, argues that the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force.[26] Chinese decision makers have internalized this ideationally based strategic culture that has persisted across vastly different interstate systems, regime types, levels of technology and types of threat.[27]

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24. 范文澜 [Fan Wenlan], '中国历史上的民族融合与斗争' ['The struggles and amalgamations among nationalities in Chinese history'], 历史研究 [Studies of History] no. 1, (1980), p. 7.

25. 孙扎民 [Sun Zamin], '处理历史上民族关系的几个重要准则' ['Some important norms concerning research on the relations among nationalities in Chinese history'], 历史研究 [Studies of History] no. 5, (1980), pp. 40–43.

26. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

27. Alastair Iain Johnston, *The Culture of National Security, Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996).

   Imperial China had to use military force to defend and expand the empire because its territorial domain, defined loosely by its cultural principles, was not always accepted by its neighbors. Following the policy of fusion and expansion (融合扩展), whenever imperial China was powerful, it always tried to expand it frontiers and territories (开疆扩土) by claiming suzerainty over its smaller neighbors. The expansion, however, often met with resistance. Although Vietnam, Korea and Burma became the vassals of the Middle Kingdom, they refused to be fused (融合) into the Chinese empire. Mongols, Tibetans and other Central Asian peoples accepted Buddhism and Islamism rather than Confucianism. But, unlike the Mediterranean or European world where states with relatively equal capabilities were constantly competing for power, imperial China was an empire without durable rivals in East Asia for many centuries. Although the Chinese empire was not shy about military conquest, the Chinese empire was able to sustain both the illusion and sometimes the reality of imperial power status as a result of rarely facing serious and viable rivals.

   In addition to military conquests, the Chinese empire deployed various instruments of persuasion and coercion, including the art of statecrafts or using one neighbor against another, awarding those who were obedient and chastising those who were defiant. Such practices worked successfully when the empire was unified and strong. When the empire was weak and divided, the neighbors in turn conquered it. Sun Tzu's *Art of War* was thus written to the complex political and military struggle, survival and, in some cases, triumph at a time when war was a permanent condition:

> The bulk of Sun Tzu's work is how to prevail in a conflict against another state or states by either non-military or military means. Taken in isolation, it can be interpreted as meaning that conflict and war represented the natural and inevitable condition of humankind.[28]

Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, pointed out that while President Xi drew repeatedly on the phrase from the 'Methods of the Sima' that 'A warlike state, however big it may be, will eventually perish' to emphasize China's peaceful intention, he would also be aware of the following phrase in the same book that 'those who forget warfare will certainly be endangered'.[29] The two phrases together reflected the fact that imperial China was both war-aversion and war-ready at the same time because warfare was constant.

## Reconstruction of a peaceful Empire

On the other side of the debate, some scholars have rediscovered the Fairbank paradigm and reconstructed imperial China as more peaceful than the European empires in the attempt to support the claims of China's peaceful rise. They argued that China's reemergence as a great power has created an opportunity to reshape the Western-centric world order and result in a more peaceful world. Martin Jacques, a British journalist, published a book with a sensational title, *When China Rules the*

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28. Kevin Rudd, 'How ancient Chinese thought applies today', *The World Post* (4 February 2015), available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-rudd/chinese-strategic-thoughts_b_6417754.html?clear.
   29. *Ibid*.

*World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order.* He argues that China is a 'civilization-state', inheritor of the oldest continuous history in the world, whose underlying cultural unity and self-confidence were without equal. Long before the West, its rulers created the first modern bureaucracy, imbued with a Confucian outlook, controlling domestic subjects more by moral education than force, and organizing adjacent regions into a consensual tributary system. As it rapidly reassumes its traditional place at the center of East Asia, the old tributary system would resurface in a modern form, contemporary ideas of racial hierarchy would be redrawn and China's age-old sense of superiority would reassert itself. China's rise signals the end of global dominance by the West and the emergence of a world which it would come to shape in a host of different ways and which would become increasingly disconcerting and unfamiliar to those who live in the West.[30]

David Kang, an International Relations scholar in the US, argues that although China was the unquestioned hegemon in the region, the tributary order entailed military, cultural and economic dimensions that afforded its participants immense latitude. Because the tributary system played a positive role in maintaining stability in East Asia and in fostering diplomatic and commercial exchange, China engaged in only two large-scale conflicts with its principal neighbors, Korea, Vietnam and Japan from the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368 to the start of the Opium Wars in 1841. These four states otherwise fostered peaceful and long-lasting relationships with one another.[31] In an earlier book, criticizing those scholars who downplayed the role of political cultures and suggested a rising China would be a destabilizing force in the region, he argued that China's rise had brought about more peace and stability than at any time since the Opium Wars of 1839–1841. East Asian states had grown closer to China because certain preferences and beliefs were responsible for maintaining stability in the region.[32]

In a celebration of the lifelong scholarship of Wang Gungwu, a contributor to Fairbank's 1960 volume, Paul Evans praised Fairbank for painting a picture of the traditional Chinese world order as being sophisticated, durable, and based on the notion of superiority and hierarchy without the Western-centric notions of sovereignty, territorially bounded nation-states and balance of power. As Chinese leaders today were increasingly looking toward their history to chart a path forward, that part of history would affect China's contemporary foreign relations in a profound way. Brantly Womack agreed that the historic centrality of China produced a basic East Asian regional pattern of asymmetric relations based on 'attention' rather than power, with leadership asserted by the soft means of prestige and authority. He praised Wang Gungwu's contribution in Fairbank's book for revealing three unique traits of Chinese imperial diplomacy: virtuous superiority, impartiality and inclusiveness, providing 'rituals and routines that met the needs of both the center and the various polities on the periphery … The exchange of deference for recognition of

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30. Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

31. David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

32. David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

autonomy was a fundamental contribution to stability'. James C. Hsiung joined these scholars by presenting a vigorous defense of the imperial Chinese approach to foreign relations. According to Hsiung, unlike the power balancing model of the Eurocentric system, the Chinese order 'consisted of formal hierarchy but informal equality' and led to less wars in the Asian system than in the Eurocentric system over the previous 600 years because the Asian 'bandwagon approach' within the context of a 'central state', which had no territorial ambitions, allowed for secondary states to attain equilibrium by acquiescence to the dominant state and yet retiring autonomy and de facto equality as well as enjoying the stability and other benefits the hierarchical order bestowed. Such an alternative foreign relations paradigm would provide the key to understanding how a rejuvenated China would behave.[33]

Some Chinese scholars have taken a lead in the rediscovery of the benevolent Chinese world order. Portraying the Chinese order as a self-centered tributary system (自我为中心的朝贡体系), one Chinese scholar found other Chinese terms to describe the Chinese world order, such as the canonized system (册封体系), vassal system (藩属体系) and the etiquette system of the heavenly dynasty (天朝礼治体系). Imperial China was the heavenly dynasty of a superior-country (天朝上国) and produced an open hierarchy, which became the foundation of the East Asian international system (东亚国际体系的原始形态).[34] A traditional Chinese term, Tianxia (all-under-heaven 天下) based on 王道 (the royal ethics), has emerged as a popular term to convey the uniquely 'Chinese normative principle of international relations in contrast with the principles of sovereignty and the structure of international anarchy which form the core of the contemporary international system'.[35]

Zhao Tingyang, a Chinese philosopher, made his name with the publication of his book, *All-under-Heaven System* (天下体制) and many articles on the subject. He describes Tianxia as a universal system inherited from the Zhou dynasty about 3,000 years ago.[36] Designed to create the compatibility of all peoples of all nations, Tianxia presupposes the Oneness of the universe (天下归一) as the political principle of 'inclusion of all' in the world. Tianxia commits to the Oneness as the intact wholeness that implies the acceptance of the diversities in the world where nothing is left out and no one is treated as an outsider.[37] This is a world order with the emphasis on harmony defined as reciprocal dependence, reciprocal improvement or

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33. Paul Evans, 'Historians and Chinese world order: Fairbank, Wang and the matter of "indeterminate relevance"', in Zheng Yongnian, ed., *China and International Relations, the Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 42–55; Brantly Womack, 'Traditional China and the globalization of international relations thinking', in Zheng Yongnian, ed., *China and International Relations*, pp. 117–133; James C. Hsiung, 'A re-appraisal of Abrahamic values and neorealist IR theory: from a Confucian-Asian perspective', in Zheng Yongnian, ed., *China and International Relations*, pp. 17–37.

34. 郭伟华 [Guo Weihua], '甲午战争缘何让'天朝礼治体系'彻底坍塌？' ['How did the Sino–Japanese war collapse the etiquette system of the heavenly dynasty'], 人民网 [*The China News Net*], (9 June 2014), available at: http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2014/06-09/6260301.shtml.

35. Allen Carlson, 'Moving beyond sovereignty? A brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the *Tianxia* concept', *Journal of Contemporary China* 20(68), (2011), p. 89.

36. 赵汀阳 [Zhao Tingyang], 天下体制：世界制度哲学导论 [*The All-under-Heaven System: A Philosophy for the World System*] (Jiangsu Education Press, 2005).

37. Tingyang Zhao, 'Rethinking empire from a Chinese concept "all-under-heaven"', *Social Identities* 12(1), (2006), pp. 29–41.

the perfect fitting for different things. Guanxi (reciprocal relationship) thus became the organizational principle of the Tianxia system.[38] The Tianxia system, maintained by cultural attraction and ruling by virtue, is embodied in the Chinese ideal of perpetual peace. Notably different from the aggressive empires that existed in other places, imperial China was more concerned with establishing itself as an everlasting power than with the plight of endless expansion because of the unaggressive and adaptable characteristics of the Chinese culture.[39] Qin Yaqing of Beijing Foreign Affairs University also states that

> the core of the notion of Tianxia revolves around the idea of a 'Chinese system' ...
> Tianxia is where nature and humanity intersect, a space where political authority and
> social order interact ... Order is always intrinsic in the system envisioned by the notion
> of Tianxia. Within the Tianxia system, structure is hierarchical because only such an
> arrangement could sustain its stability and harmonious order. Order could only be
> achieved when there is a clear stratification of classes and there is likewise an orderly
> relationship between them.[40]

Tianxia is thus presented as a world system in contrast to the anarchic Westphalian system, which is regarded as conducive to discord and war. *Chinese Social Sciences News* published a special section in 2014 to discuss the differences between the Tianxia system and the contemporary international system dominated by Western powers. Zhang Chi-hsiung of Taiwan's Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica suggests that Tianxia was a harmonious world system expressed by the following equations: all-under-the-heaven = the Chinese world = center + periphery = Chinese + barbarians = we race + they race = kingdom + tributary = China + tributary = suzzanine + tributary states = Chinese world empire = tributary common community = ring China common community > East Asian common community (天下 ≈ 中华世界 = 中心 + 周边 = 华 + 夷 = 我族 + 他族 = 王畿 + 封邦 = 中国 + 外藩 = 宗主国 + 藩属国 = 中华世界帝国 = 宗藩共同体 = 环中国共同体 > 东亚共同体). The China-centered hierarchical order was a Tianxia common community (天下共同体), in which the center protected the periphery and the periphery subordinated to the center (中心保护周边，周边藩屏中心), forming a pattern of interdependence, co-existence and co-prosperity between China and its four frontiers of neighbors (形成中国与四邻互相依赖、共存共荣的格局). China never interfered in the internal affairs of tributary states. Nationality, autonomy and kingdom self-governance were developed. The traditional East Asian international system, therefore, maintained stability for more than 2,000 years.[41]

Royal ethics (王道) is used as a key factor to explain why the perpetual peace of Tianxia was created and maintained. Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University led a

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38. Tingyang Zhao, 'A political world philosophy in terms of all-under-heaven (Tian-xia)', *Diogenes* no. 56, (2009), pp. 5–18.

39. Tingyang Zhao, 'The "China dream" in question', *Economic and Political Studies* 2(1), (2014), p. 128.

40. Qin Yaqing, 'Chinese school of international relations theory', in Callahan and Barabantseva, eds, *China Orders the World*, pp. 42–43.

41. 张启雄 [Chang Chi-hsiung], '近代东亚国际体系的崩解与再生' ['The collapse and rebirth of modern East Asian international system'], 中国社会科学报 [*Chinese Social Science News*] no. 613, (27 June 2014), available at: http://ex.cssn.cn/djch/djch_djchhg/guojishijiaoxiadeguojitixibianqian/201406/t20140627_1230778.shtml.

project on China's pre-Qin political thoughts. Their study determined that ancient Chinese thinkers advised rulers to rely on ethics (道), benevolence (仁) and morality (德) to win the world (取天下), and to take a defensive posture (非攻) using benevolent government (仁政) to rule the world (治天下).[42] Citing ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi, Yan distinguishes three types of ethics in ancient China: royal ethics (王道), hegemonic ethics (霸道) and tyranny (强道). Royal ethics focused on peaceful means to win the hearts and minds of the people at home and abroad. Tyranny—based on military force—inevitably created enemies. Hegemonic ethics lay in between: frequently indifferent to moral concerns, it often involved violence against non-allies but did not cheat the people at home or allies abroad. Royal ethics would win in any competition with hegemony or tyranny.[43] Xing Qi, Vice President of the Chinese Cultural Promotion Society, claimed that royal ethics played an invaluable role in the stabilization and prosperity of the Chinese cultural ring (中华文化圈) because the starting point of royal ethics was an internal holy process (内圣) rather than an external imposition to reach a harmony between human and nature. The highest level of royal ethics is to achieve external royalty (外王), in which the emphasis is to avoid hegemony in handling relations and reach harmony among different peoples, nations and civilizations. Harmony, in this case, is not uniformity but rather seeking common ground while preserving differences (和而不同).[44] Wei Zhijiang of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou even argues that the Chinese world order created an East Asian security system guided by royal ethics and etiquette (礼制), which was widely shared by the vassal states.[45]

Many Chinese scholars give a similar argument that imperial China was a peaceful state because it worked within the premise of royal ethics. What sustained the political centripetal forces of the surrounding regions was morality, not coercion. The ancient Chinese rulers developed a very prudent and defensive strategic culture and tried hard to arrive at their objectives without using force (不战而屈人之兵). Rulers were very cautious to wage just wars (义战) based on moral rather than material interests. The clear difference between just and unjust wars was the motivation of the war and its effect on civilians. People's support was the most important standard to measure whether or not a war was just. The ultimate goal of just wars was not only to punish the war criminals but also to reestablish the universal moral ethics of 'unity and harmony of heaven and human beings'.[46] Two Chinese military scholars, therefore, generalize the following three paradigm differences between the imperial

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42. 阎学通, 徐进, 等著 [Yan Xuetong, Xu Jing *et al.*], *王霸天下思想及启迪* [*The Thoughts of World Leadership and Implications*] (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2009).

43. Yan Xuetong, 'How China can defeat America', *New York Times*, (20 November 2011), available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

44. 辛旗 [Xin Qi], '在弘扬中华文化：探讨王道理念，构建和谐世界—王道思想的当代意义研讨会上的致辞' ['Remarks at the Symposium on Royal Ethics and Construction of Harmonious World—royal ethics and its contemporary significance'], *中国新闻网* [*China News Net*], (22 April 2011), available at: http://www.chinanews.com/tw/2011/04-22/2992337.shtml.

45. 魏志江 [Wei Zhijiang], '论东亚传统国际安全体系与所谓华夷次序' ['Traditional East Asian international security system and the so-called Chinese-barbarian order'].

46. Tiewa Liu, 'Chinese strategic culture and the use of force: moral and political perspectives', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(87), (2014), p. 562.

Chinese and the Western statecrafts: 'justice' vs 'interests', 'human factors' vs 'weapon factors', and 'stratagem' vs 'strength'.[47]

In comparison with Western imperialist countries that used coercive power to build colonies, the Chinese world order was thus more civil because it caused the tributary states to admire China without using force. In the traditional Chinese world, the relations among countries were in harmony based on benevolent governance (仁治). East Asian countries shared the Chinese cultural ideals and values that emphasized 'peace' (和), 'harmony' (合) and a 'middle way' (中庸).[48] Quoting Tang Emperor Li Shiming who said that 'although China has been regarded as superior and barbarians inferior since ancient time(s), I love them all the same' (自故皆贵中华，贱夷狄，朕独爱之如一), one Chinese scholar even went so far as to claim that 'Emperor Li emphasized equality among all nationalities more than one thousand years ago, showing the open-minded Tang ruler in foreign relations'.[49] With the emphasis on etiquette and trade, the tributary system 'forged the common ground for Imperial China and its surrounding regions, and served as the foundation for exchange and coordination between the two sides'. Emphasizing benevolent governance, etiquette, peace and denying the imperialistic nature, imperial China and its relations with surrounding regions were far more advanced than the colonialism of Western countries. Some Chinese scholars have gone so far as to argue that the root of all troubles in Chinese diplomacy today is China's lost opportunities for expansion because of being pedantic and caring too much about morality and principles: 'The surrounding countries should be grateful for China's benevolent governance, and that the imperial order should be re-established, yet they don't like moderation and self-restraint as part of the imperial tradition'.[50]

Insisting that imperial China was a uniquely benevolent and peaceful empire with war employed only as a last resort for defensive purposes, many Chinese scholars have rejected the comparability of the Chinese empire with other empires. In particular, they criticize Western historians such as Peter Perdue and Odd Arne Westad who wrote a 'new Qing history' (新清史) that describes the Qing dynasty as having an expansion tendency similar to other empires at the time (具有与同时代的其他帝国类似的扩张倾向). Their works are not welcome in China because their 'findings' violate (有悖于) the Chinese position that the Kongxi Emperor's Western expedition (康熙西征) was aimed at maintaining the unity of the multi-nationalities. Chinese scholars have regarded Perdue, and some other Western historians who endorse the China threat theories, as having tried to discover the aggressive and

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47. Zhang Junbo and Yao Yunzhu, 'Traditional Chinese military thinking: a comparative perspective', *Journal of Contemporary China* 5(12), (1996), pp. 209–221.

48. 熊光清 [Xiong Guangqing], '东亚国家未反省战争 崇尚武力风习阴魂不散' ['East Asian countries have not reflected on wars: militancy ethos lingers'], *Global Times*, (1 April 2013), available at: http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2013/04-01/4692110.shtml.

49. 李恩柱 [Li Enzhu], '两位皇帝对觐见礼仪的处理' ['The handling of meeting etiquette by two emperors'], *华文报摘* [*The Chinese Newspapers Collections*], (28 December 2012), available at: http://www.chinanews.com/hb/2010/12-28/2752435.shtml.

50. Haiyang Yu, 'Glorious memories of imperial China and the rise of Chinese populist nationalism', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(90), (2014), p. 1183.

imperialist characters of ancient Chinese history to demonstrate the unavoidable connection between today's China and its imperial characters in history.[51]

## The collapse of the Chinese empire: clash of civilizations?

Whether or not agreeing that imperial China was uniquely benign and the Chinese world order was stable and peaceful, many scholars have seen the collapse of the Chinese empire after its defeat by the British in the nineteenth century as a result of the clash of civilizations, leading to the century of humiliation. China was not only forced into the international system dominated by European powers where it lost its tributary states, but also treated unequally and suffered in the hands of imperialist powers.

Lowell Dittmer wrote in 1994 that 'The Sino–Western conflict in the nineteenth century was not so much an international conflict as it was a system-to-system conflict, a mismatch between Western nationalism and Chinese culturalism'.[52] Twenty years later, Chang Chi-hisung went further, arguing that 'the primary course for the collapse of the East Asian order was the clash of the principles of international orders between the East and the West' (东西方国际秩序原理的冲突). He lamented that as the tributary states managed by the Vassal Affairs Department (礼部藩属) were lost and became colonies of the Western powers, imperial China was downgraded from the Tianxia royal dynasty (天下皇朝) to a sovereign state (主权国家) and reluctantly to advocate (不得已乃改倡) the sovereign equality (主权平等). Imperialist powers defeated China by force and then repudiated the Chinese benevolent governance. A treaty system (条约体制) was formed through international law and unequal treaties while the Chinese world order principles and the status it knew were completely repudiated and eventually extinguished.[53]

The collapse of the Chinese empire resulted as much from the clash of civilizations as from the rivalry for power and economic interests between imperial China and European powers. It was a process of

> China's struggle to resist aggressive European expansion, to adjust itself to the changing international realities, to meet its problems without totally abandoning its imperial tradition, and finally to accept, slowly and gradually, though sometimes reluctantly, some of the European standards, institutions, rules and values.[54]

Imperial China yielded to no one except stronger foreign military forces before and after the arrival of Western powers. China resisted its incorporation into the global commercial and production system and even tried to block trade and

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51.  卢汉超 [Lu Hanchao], '中国从来就是 一 个开放的国家吗—再论西方'唱盛中国'' ['Has China always been a open country?: think about the praise of China by the West again'], 清华大学学报: 哲社版 [*Tsinghua University Journal: Philosophy and Social Science Edition* ] no. 3, (2012), available at: http://site.douban.com/125457/widget/notes/4971340/note/270982522/.

52.  Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, 'Conclusion', in Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, eds, *China's Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 249.

53.  张启雄 [Chang Chi-hsiung], '近代东亚国际体系的崩解与再生' ['The collapse and rebirth of modern East Asian international system'].

54.  Zhang Yongjin, *China in the International System, 1918–20, The Middle Kingdom at the Periphery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 16.

missionary contacts with Westerners. All these efforts, however, failed after European warships knocked at, and eventually opened the doors of China for trade in the nineteenth century.

The riches and grandeur of the Far East fascinated Europeans for ages. During Europe's medieval period, China boasted several cities of great size and wealth and the average living standard and scale of commerce were well above that in Europe at the time. Chinese goods, especially tea, silk and porcelain, were carried over the legendary silk routes winding through central Asia. These items were in great demand back to the time of the Roman Empire. Following the 'geographical revolution', Christopher Columbus was able to convince the Spanish crown to provide him with a small fleet to look for a sea route to China. His journey in 1492 gave him credit for discovering the New World. However, when he first landed on the American continent, he mistook it for India, which he believed to lie midway between Europe and China. The Portuguese were the first to establish a presence in East Asia due to its rule of Macao along China's south coast. They were followed by the Dutch in Taiwan and Japan and the Spaniards in the Philippines. Europeans began arriving in large numbers in East Asia by the sixteenth century when they successfully circumnavigated the globe and set up provisioning stations and trading posts in different parts of the world.

China was relatively successful in holding European traders and missionaries at bay before the nineteenth century. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Chinese had a very limited understanding of China's place in the world. James Legge, a noted Scottish sinologist and the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University, wrote an 1872 publication that bitterly criticized China's ministers and people for their failure to 'realize the fact that China is only one of many independent nations in the world'.[55] Perceiving Westerners as no different from their East Asian neighbors, the Chinese court held that the Western barbarians 'should observe the rules of the tributary system and fit themselves into the civilized Sinocentric world order in their pursuit of foreign trade'.[56] Restricting Europeans to the southern port city of Macao and later the city of Guangzhou, Chinese rulers, supremely confident in their position of self-sufficiency, professed little need for Western goods and ideas.

This pattern of trade relationship, known as the Guangzhou system, 'was built on a central theme of contempt for foreigners and disdain for merchants'.[57] Westerners, confined to a dozen groups of buildings called factories outside the walls of Guangzhou city, were forbidden to trade outside these factories and were not allowed to enter the city of Guangzhou. They could not even reside permanently in these buildings and had to leave China at the end of the trading season.[58] By mutual agreement during most of the nineteenth century, 'the old Canton (Guangzhou)

55. James Legge, translated, *The Chinese Classics, vol. 5, The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (London: Henry Frowned, 1872, reprinted by Hong Kong University Press, 1961), p. 52.

56. Alvin Y. So and Stephen W. K. Chiu, *East Asia and the World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 34.

57. Hsin-Pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 10.

58. T. R. Banister, *A History of the External Trade of China, 1834–1881* (Shanghai: Inspector General of Chinese Customs, 1931), p. 99.

system proved mutually profitable within the limits imposed by two, Chinese and foreign, systems of trade regulation'.[59]

As the British came to dominate world commerce by the late eighteenth century, they found the trade constraints under the Guangzhou system increasingly intolerable. It was against the principle of free trade if foreign traders had no direct access to markets, could not inquire about prices, and had to accept without objection the prices offered by Chinese merchants. As the British bought many Chinese products but had difficulties finding goods that the Chinese would buy from them, the gap in the balance of trade grew wider and had to be filled with silver. But silver was a scarce metal. The British were eager to find a new commodity that they could supply in large quantity and with which they could also find a massive market in China in order to open the Chinese market and balance their trade payment. Opium was discovered. For the British, it did not matter if the trade was in opium, cotton, sewing needles or any other product as long as there was demand that could help solve the balance of payment problem.

The flourishing opium trade had devastating consequences for China's society and national wealth and produced a policy debate among officials in the Qing court. One group advocated suppression, 'demanding that both opium dealers and addicts should be dealt with severely'. The other group wanted to legalize opium use because 'it would be wiser just to put a tax on opium to relieve the treasury's problem'.[60] While the debate was going on, large-scale opium imports became a menace to the Qing court. When the spread of opium addiction, and its consequent drain on the country's silver supply, reached alarming proportions, Lin Zexu, the newly appointed commissioner overseeing the Guangzhou trade in 1839, took firm action to break up the network of Chinese opium importers and suppliers and destroyed the opium stock of the British merchants without compensation.

In response, the British government demanded an indemnity from China for the loss. After the Beijing court refused their demands, tensions between the British and the imperial court in Beijing mounted. Both China and Britain were willing to back their positions with force. The Opium War broke out in 1840 as a result of China's resistance to the opium trade and the British insistence of its expansion into China. Although imperial China possessed an economy larger than that of the European countries and a technology at least as advanced as theirs when the Europeans arrived, it lagged behind and had declined by the nineteenth century. But the Qing court had little appreciation of its relative weakness when it sent a fleet of ships to defend itself against British ships in Hong Kong. The British easily destroyed the fleet and went on to blockade Guangzhou, bombarding it and other coastal cities. When Nanjing lay at the mercy of the British fleet in 1842, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanjing, ceding Hong Kong to the British as its colony. In addition, five ports (Shanghai, Ningbo, Guangzhou, Xiamen and Fouzhou) were to be opened to foreign trade. The Qing court could not regulate this trade, nor could it impose its own tariffs.

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59. John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 161–162.

60. The Compilation Group for the History of Modern China Series, *The Opium War* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1976), p. 19.

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Furthermore, it did not have any authority over British subjects residing in the 'concessions' on Chinese soil. To add insult to injury, China was required to pay Britain a large amount of silver as compensation for the opium destroyed by Chinese officials.

The Opium War was the first violent encounter between imperial China and a European power. The armed confrontation came primarily as a clash of economic interests and a power struggle but it also reflected a conflict between two diametrically opposed concepts of the Chinese cultural hierarchy and European diplomatic equality. European expansion challenged China's economic and political interests. But imperial China was condescending towards the uncivilized barbarians within and outside their spheres alike. The Sino-centric perception precluded the Chinese from accepting other powers as equals, making it intellectually difficult for them to adjust themselves to the new power reality. That was why Westerners were 'overwhelmingly impressed by the stubborn persistence' of the Sinocentric perception during the late nineteenth century when China faced the new and unprecedented challenge of Western powers with their own absolutistic claims.[61]

Defeat in the Opium War came as a terrible shock to the Chinese and a heavy blow to the Chinese sense of superiority. It was as if the world was suddenly turned upside down. Strange and inferior barbarians suddenly defeated the Chinese empire out of nowhere and broke their ramparts with superior firepower. What a shame and humiliation. 'China was besieged, and an easy target for any industrial power bent on war.'[62] In the 60 years after its humiliating defeat, the Qing government was forced to sign one treaty after another with foreign powers. One of the central issues in all these treaty negotiations was the acceptance by the Qing court of the Westphalian concept of diplomatic equality among sovereign states. The Qing court resisted, as much as it could, the idea of equality between the Chinese emperor and Western governments. The fact that China signed these treaties as a sovereign state, however, affirmed the principle of diplomatic equality between China and its treaty partners, shattering the fictive remnants of cultural superiority.

China's official recognition of legal equality with other states was, for the first time, found in an imperial edict issued by Emperor Xian Feng after the Second Opium War led to the invasion of Beijing by the joint Anglo–French Expedition and forced the emperor to flee to his summer residence in the north in 1860. The edict reluctantly decreed, 'England is an independent sovereign state, let it have equal status (with China)'.[63] This recognition was followed and partially borne out by two institutional changes in the 1860s: the compulsory acceptance of the diplomatic representation of Western powers in Beijing and the initiation of 总理衙门, a government office to handle diplomatic relations with Western powers. As 'barbarian affairs' became foreign affairs, China was brought into line with the principle of the nation-state system.

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61. Benjamin I. Schwartz, 'The Chinese perception of world order, past and present', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, p. 284.

62. Arthur Cotterell, *East Asia: From Chinese Predominance to the Rise of the Pacific Rim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 113.

63. 钟述和 [Zhong Shuhe], 走向世界 [*Strive toward the World*] (Beijing: Zhounghua Shujiu, 1985), p. 78.

But China came to the modern international system 'not at the center as arbiter but at the center as a target of European imperialist power politics in East Asia'.[64] When China began to accept the idea of equality among nation-states and struggled to defend its sovereignty, the world had come under the domination of imperialist powers that did not treat weak nations as equals. China was, therefore, not treated equally by the more powerful imperialist states. The treaties that China signed with Western powers were soon labeled by the Chinese as 'unequal treaties' because 'the formal diplomatic equality embodied in the treaties masked a host of provisions that disadvantaged China ... There were also a number of provisions in these treaties where the utter lack of reciprocity left them unequal even in a formal sense'.[65] It was indeed humiliating that, with these unequal provisions, China had to grant extraterritorial rights to foreigners living in China and to place its economic interests under foreign control.

In addition, all major imperial powers established their spheres of influence in Chinese territories. Britain carved out a sphere of influence in the Yangtze Valley, France in Guangzhou, Germany in Shandong, Japan in southern Manchuria, and Russia in northern Manchuria and Outer Mongolia. The United States, as a newly arrived imperial power, demanded equal treatment. In September 1899, John Hay, Secretary of State in the William McKinley administration, dispatched the famous Open Door notes to Germany, Russia, England, Japan, Italy and France, requesting formal assurances that they would refrain from interfering with any treaty port, vested interest or the Chinese treaty tariff within their spheres of interest and that they would grant traders of all countries equal treatment with respect to harbor dues and railroad charges.[66] In July 1900, he sent a circular to these powers, stating the US intention to seek a solution that on the one hand 'may bring about permanent safety and peace to China, preserve China's territorial and administrative entity' and, on the other hand, 'protect all rights guaranteed to friendly powers by treaty and international law, and safeguard for the world, the principle of equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese Empire'.[67] As a result, a legal provision, known as the most-favored-nation clause, was inserted into every treaty signed by China with the foreign powers. Concessions granted to one foreign country by China would automatically be extended to the others.

The death knell of the traditional East Asian order was loudly sounded by the Chinese empire's loss of its tributary/vassal states to Western imperialist powers. By the early 1860s, nearly all East Asian countries had been opened to Western trade and diplomacy and some became their colonies. The expansion of European imperialism and later Japanese imperialism reached to every corner of East Asia. Whereas imperial China had previously existed in relative isolation from the rest of the world, it now became part of the Western-dominated international system. China

64. Zhang Yongjin, *China in the International System*, p. 20.

65. Joseph W. Esherick, 'China and the world: from tribute to treaties', in Brantly Womack, ed., *China's Rise in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), p. 27.

66. US State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1899* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1901), pp. 132–133.

67. US State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1900* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1902), p. 299.

no longer held preeminence in East Asia and no longer constituted a world unto itself, but was part of the international system dominated by Western powers, struggling to defend its survival and find what it regarded as the rightful place.

The crushing defeats that imperial China suffered in a series of military confrontations with Western powers led to the collapse of imperial China. While the wars, unequal treaties, humiliations and territorial losses suffered by China during the century of humiliation were the painful road that the Middle Kingdom walked into the modern nation-state system, China quickly embraced the concepts of territorial sovereignty and became a zealous defender of its sovereign rights in what the Chinese perceived to be a social Darwinian world, in which the status of a nation-state was determined by its economic and military strength. European diplomatic institutions and practices were adopted to combat the West. Chinese intellectuals and political leaders have become die-hard realists. Believing international politics is a struggle for power, they have sought to maximize China's security by expanding influence and control over its neighborhoods, and in some cases, far beyond. The world is unjust and unfair only in the sense that China was stagnant and weak and therefore had to suffer and be humiliated in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

## Conclusion

An ancient empire with a recorded history of more than 2,000 years, imperial China began a steady decline, plunging into chaos, involving war, famine, isolation and revolution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After more than a century of struggle for national rejuvenation, China has resurged in the twenty-first century to regain the power it enjoyed two centuries ago. While globally, people have talked about China's rise, the Chinese have used the rejuvenation of China (复兴中华) to emphasize their current status as a return to a state of past glory rather than a rise from nothing. Scholars have, therefore, tried to look back at how the imperial cycle is remembered to predict how a powerful China will behave in the twenty-first century.

There is nothing wrong with looking to China's past to help understand China's future. As an ancient civilization, history is inscribed in China's mental terrain. But Chinese intellectuals and political leaders not only selectively remembered but also often reconstructed history to advance the current political agenda of the Chinese government and justify their concept of justice and their view of China's rightful place in the world. Historical discourse has, therefore, become extremely politicized in China. One Chinese scholar attending a history conference in the US during the 1980s was surprised to find that the study of history was of personal interest for Americans while the Chinese study of history was to save the nation (救国) and redeem the century of humiliation.[68]

While the memory of historical humiliation was propelled forward by Chinese elites to help save China in the twentieth century, Chinese historical discourse in the

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68. 资中筠 [Zi Zhongyun], '革新中国传统历史观' ['Reform of Chinese traditional history thoughts'], 炎黄春秋杂志 [*Yanhuang Chunqiu Journal*] no. 7, (2014), available at: http://www.yhcqw.com/html/wenzjc/2014/77/14771636406535J9539B0I3C3I10E7E9JA.html.

twenty-first century has refocused on imperial China and its continuous glory, interrupted only by Western imperialist powers, to advance the claims of China's peaceful rise. This type of connection between imperial China and China's peaceful rise is obviously to serve the political objectives of the Chinese government rather than a reflection of historical facts. It is from this perspective that June Teufel Dreyer writes that 'Supporters of the revival of tianxia as a model for today's world are essentially misrepresenting the past to reconfigure the future, distorting it to advance a political agenda that is at best disingenuous and at worst dangerous'.[69]

The Chinese elites have, therefore, often drawn contradictory policy agendas from the study of history. As this article has revealed, on the one hand, Chinese leaders have presented an idealized version of imperial China to support the claims of China's peaceful rise. On the other hand, taking the lesson that the collapse of imperial China was because its strength (实力) was not strong enough to defend its existence, Chinese elites have called for China to follow the iron law (铁则) of the strongest survival (强者生存) and the weakest eliminated (弱者淘汰) to become the strongest again.[70] Reconstructing the benevolent Chinese world order but following social Darwinist logic in the twenty-first century, how a powerful China would seek to regain its historical preeminence in the region and behave on the world stage is anyone's guess.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

69. June Teufel Dreyer, 'The "tianxia trope": will China change the international system?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030951.
70. 张启雄 [Chang Chi-hsiung], '近代东亚国际体系的崩解与再生' ['The collapse and rebirth of modern East Asian international system'].

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