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China's Relationship to Its History Is the Key to Understanding Its Behaviour Today

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the decades of pain and humiliation that followed for the Middle Kingdom continue to shape Xi Jinping's governance.

Americans are accustomed to looking to our history for guidance in handling external and internal threats. We are not the only ones. Beijing's approach to international trade is deeply informed by the history of China in the mid-19th century. So is its attitude toward the country's domestic Christian and Muslim religious minorities, and toward Hong Kong. The great crisis of the Qing Dynasty, which came to a head in the 1860s, is every bit as traumatic and still relevant to modern-day China as the American Civil War is to us. More so, in fact: Xi Jinping's regime is deeply invested in historical narratives that give a central place to those turbulent and bloody years.

Growing tensions between the United States and China have been one of the dominant themes of the late 2010s. There is every reason to believe that they will play a leading role in the international landscape of the 2020s. Consider just some of the developments of the past few months:
American criticism of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan
Ongoing Trump administration tariff battles with China
Democrats' saber-rattling at the last debate about getting China to reduce carbon emissions
Widespread Western horror at the newly revealed extent of China's concentration camps for Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang and at Chinese crackdowns on Christians
The NBA's efforts to silence proHong Kong fan demonstrations to protect its business interests in China
Wall Street Journal reporters inside China protesting the headline of an op-ed column in their own newspaper for offending the Chinese government
Federal warnings, investigations, and indictments relating to People's Liberation Army involvement in the Equifax data hack, the Office of Personnel Management records hack, alleged trade-secrets theft by telecom giant Huawei, Chinese agricultural espionage, and Chinese penetration of federally funded university research
The looming global-technology showdown over who will control the next-generation 5G network.

Modern China and Its Ancestors
The People's Republic of China is the heir to one of the world's great ancient empires, dating back to the third century B.C. That empire existed for more than two millennia, and its end has just faded off the edge of living memory. Its last emperor was deposed in 1912; Xi Jinping's father was born the following year. Imperial Chinese dynasties came and went, and borders expanded and contracted, but the empire always maintained its fundamental continuity as a vast nation-state with a core ethnic majority of Han Chinese. Its emperors, from the time of the seventh-century Tang Dynasty, governed through an elite Confucian-educated bureaucracy that spread a single, national values system throughout the empire.

The successor Chinese states of the past 108 years have remade China economically and ideologically, often at terrible cost. But Xi still reigns very much in the cultural and geographic footprints of a proudly continuous Imperial Chinese civilisation. Like Vladimir Putin, he draws increasingly from the deep well of nationalism in his country's pre-Communist history. He "peppers his speeches with references to classical Chinese literature and mythology," and his government is currently engaged in one of the traditional methods of transmitting legitimacy from one imperial

dynasty to the next: a massive effort to commemorate the previous dynasty and shape the writing of its history. In this case, that means the Qing Dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1912.

The death of a dynasty every few hundred years was long accepted as a standard part of the national life cycle in China. Confucian philosophy developed the idea of the “Mandate of Heaven” to infuse with religious significance the practical reality that a dynasty that no longer gave the people internal order and external security from invasion had lost divine favour and the accompanying right to obedience. Unlike in the West, the loss of imperial legitimacy in China did not derive primarily from violations of the liberties of the people, although “foreign” dynasties such as the Qing were sometimes charged by internal critics with trampling on Chinese traditions. Only the loss of guarantees of social order signaled the withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven, making it, at times, a self-fulfilling prophecy.
The ideological importance of the Mandate of Heaven was that it ensured that the successor dynasty would be received as legitimate once it restored order. The overriding imperative for every Chinese dynasty, and for every Chinese government since, has been to demonstrate to the people that it was in sufficient control to guarantee internal order and external security. The secondary goal was to demonstrate its fidelity to traditional Chinese ways. Only by the application of brute force on a colossal scale was Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution able to temporarily repress the deep-rooted Chinese reverence for those traditions.

The Mandate of Heaven survived dynasties imposed on China by external invaders: the Mongols who established the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century and the Manchus who established the Qing Dynasty in the 17th. Despite lingering popular resentment of these dynasties as foreign in origin, they came from China’s neighbours, and they ruled through the traditional mechanisms of the Chinese state. The Yuan Dynasty held the Mandate of Heaven for roughly a century, the Qing for almost three. To do so, their rulers made a show of assimilating to the mores of those they ruled.

The dignity of the emperor was, moreover, never officially acknowledged to be merely equal to that of other sovereigns. The emperor was, instead, considered the superior of all other rulers and realms, and he expected their representatives to pay him obeisance. An inflated self-image of national exceptionalism is hardly unique to China, and official ideology did not prevent China from interacting with other neighbouring nations in practice. Neighbouring monarchs consciously styled themselves as emperors in order to place themselves on par with the Chinese emperor. But the size and customary dominance of China over its region from ancient times through the end of the 18th century gave substance to the empire’s view of itself as the “Middle Kingdom.”

The Agony of the Qing
The 19th century changed all that. Explosive population growth over the preceding four centuries China had six times as many people by 1800 as it had had in 1400 strained the empire’s supply of arable farmland, increasing the frequency of peasant revolts. In another era, that might have set the stage for an ordinary change of dynasties. Instead, what followed was a traumatic external shock: the defeat of China by Britain in the First Opium War of 183942. China had long been open to European trade, and European commerce was a regular presence for four centuries before 1839 but always on China’s own terms.

This was different. The Industrial Revolution, and in particular the ability of steamboats to project naval firepower upriver, led to a massive and destabilising growth in Western military superiority by the late 1830s. A comparatively small military force from an island halfway around the world proved more than equal to defeating the vast Qing Empire and imposing on it both unequal trade terms and territorial concessions, including the loss of Hong Kong. As Xi framed the Chinese perspective on this defeat in a 2017 speech commemorating the 20th anniversary of the return of Hong Kong from British rule:

In the early 1840s, the invasion of merely a 10,000-person British expedition forced the Qing government, having 800,000 in troops, to cede territory and pay indemnities, to cede Hong Kong island…. China was again and again beaten by countries having far smaller territories and populations than itself…. The history of China at that time was filled with the nation’s humiliation and its people’s grief. The unexpected outcome sent shock waves through the neighbouring states of Japan and Korea, stiffening their elites’ resolve to remain secluded from the West. The treaty-port system established by the war forced China to accept, among other things, both a booming import trade in

Indian-grown opium and an expanded presence of Christian missionaries. Both the drugs and the Bibles were seen by Chinese elites as weakening the moral supports of traditional, Confucian China.

The British trading presence led to further hostilities when Chinese authorities attempted to punish suspected pirates running a British-flagged vessel in Chinese waters. Emperor Xianfeng, thinking himself secure in his traditional dignity, refused to meet with European representatives, who in turn would not bow to him. In the Second Opium War, between 1856 and 1860, British and French forces burned the emperor's Summer Palace in Beijing and forced the imperial court to flee the capital. The young emperor, himself addled by opium, died in exile. Russia and the United States got in on the act as well, with American Marines landing on Chinese soil and Russia squeezing out of China the territory on which its Pacific port of Vladivostok was founded in 1861.

Worse was already afoot at home. Between 1851 and 1864, the entire Yangtze River region was convulsed by the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war that claimed tens of millions of lives by some estimates, more than the entire global death toll of the First World War. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, like other charismatic Christian movements of the era in the United States, New Zealand, and the Yucatan, was led by a prophet who claimed direct revelations from God, Hong Xiquan. Hong, an ethnic-minority Hakka who began having visions after failing the Confucian civil-service examinations, declared himself the brother of Jesus after reading Christian texts that had their origins in Western missionary activity. He studied with a Baptist minister from Tennessee. And he went on to proclaim his "Heavenly Kingdom" while denouncing the Qing as foreign devils who imposed un-Chinese ways on the country. Hong's Western-influenced cousin, as the Heavenly Kingdom's chief minister, proposed an ambitious programme to bring railroads and other modern industry to China.

It was only by a pincer movement of provincial Chinese armies in the west (led by the methodical Confucian loyalist Zeng Guofan, the Ulysses S. Grant of China) and a coalition in the east assisted by American, British, and French mercenaries and advisers (including the devoutly Christian British military hero Charles "Chinese" Gordon) that the Qing barely survived the rebellion. When it was over, the Taiping were eradicated virtually to the last man, and efforts were made to expunge all memory of their idiosyncratic Christian movement.

The Taiping were not the only Chinese religious minority of the 19th century to take a rebellion against the Qing as far as setting up a separate state. As the century progressed, the southwestern province of Yunnan, situated between Tibet and Burma, faced mounting tensions between Han immigrants and the native Hui population, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group. Han-led massacres killed thousands of Hui in 1839 and 1845, and Hui appeals to Beijing were ignored. A third such massacre in 1856, openly backed by provincial Qing authorities proclaiming "kill them one and all," led the Hui to raise the banner of separation in what became known in the West as the Panthay Rebellion.

Du Wenxiu, an educated Hui who had passed the Confucian examinations, led a separate Pingnan state covering western Yunnan for 18 years from 185673. The Pingnan government, while not exclusively Muslim, adopted Arabic as its official language and built mosques and madrassas. Yet, it also, like the Taiping, denounced the Qing for departing from the traditions of the Han-led Ming Dynasty. Du opened relations with the British, who had recently conquered neighbouring Burma. After nearly two decades of war that claimed over a million lives, the Pingnan state was eventually undone with the help of the betrayal of a key Pingnan general. At least 10,000 holdouts including women, children, and the elderly were massacred by Qing troops, who sent 24 baskets of their severed ears to Beijing along with Du's head as trophies for the emperor.

A third rebellion, the predominantly Muslim Dungan Revolt in northwestern Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, lasted from 1862 to 1877, again costing millions of lives and sending hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to Russia. A fourth saw the northwestern border province of Xinjiang, the homeland of today's Uighur population, break off between 1865 and 1877 under Yaqub Beg, a Central Asian Muslim adventurer. Russia and Britain, then heavily engaged in "the Great Game" for control of Central Asia, supported both the northwestern rebellions.
To put these conflicts in American geographic terms, picture the Taiping holding the states of the American Confederacy, with the Pingnan state in Arizona, the Dungan state in the northern Great Plains, and Beg's state in the Pacific Northwest. The collective bloodletting was likely fifty times that of

the American Civil War. And amazingly, those four don't even constitute an exhaustive list of major rebellions ongoing in Qing China between 1851 and 1877. The Qing Dynasty survived the crucible of this era, but despite a vigorous programme of internal reforms including brutally suppressing the domestic demand for opium it never truly recovered. In fact, Western assistance in defeating the Taiping may have prevented the Mandate of Heaven from moving on to a new dynasty more capable of standing on its own. The Western powers had to send in a joint military force to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

Further humiliations and breathtaking suffering were inflicted in wars with Japan from 1894-95 and 1937-45, including the loss of Taiwan to Japan. The Soviet Union intervened militarily in Xinjiang in 1934. After the 1949 Communist Revolution, Mao rebuilt China's military, ejected foreign influence, reclaimed its sovereign pride, and reasserted control over Tibet. But he also killed more of his own subjects than any ruler in world history and left China miserably poor. In the four and a half decades since his death, China has reengaged with the world economy and rebuilt its own. But the scars of history remain.

Living History
Xi's frequent evocations of Qing Dynasty history serve two purposes beyond the traditional legitimating function of dynastic history in elevating him to the same unparalleled dignity of a Qing emperor.

On the one hand, it was during the Qing Dynasty's 18th century heyday that Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang were claimed by China, so embracing the Qing legacy is intertwined with justifying the PRC's current rule over Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as its never-relinquished claim to Taiwan. On the other hand, China's "century of humiliation" before Mao's revolution is a key, longstanding element of the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of Chinese restoration. It formed a centerpiece of Xi's commemoration in October of the 70th anniversary of the revolution. It is also an all-purpose scapegoat. Xi's regime reaches for the specter of foreign imperialism to explain internal dissension (e.g. its response to unrest in Hong Kong) and deflect external criticism. Consider the aforementioned Wall Street Journal controversy: The regime claims offense at a column on its handling of the coronavirus titled "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia," on theory that it is an insensitive reference to 19th century Western rhetoric about Chinese weakness. The original "sick man" phrase was coined by Tsar Nicholas I of Russia in the 1840s to refer to the Ottoman Empire, but the same mindset animated Western views of China as a playground for Western rivalries with no say of its own in the matter. However absurd it may seem, wielding the specter of Western imperialism is partly a way of weaponising Western guilt and partly a way of justifying unequal present-day power relationships that favour the PRC.

Not everything is pure propaganda, however. There is little doubt that the history of the Qing Dynasty's times of trouble also genuinely informs Xi's own worldview and that of the PRC's ruling elite. Americans may see free trade as a two-way street that can benefit everyone; Chinese leaders are more apt to see it as a zero-sum competition cloaked in hypocritical Western rhetoric, and to set Chinese trade policy accordingly. Americans may see religious liberty as an important source of social stability that prevents sectarian conflict; the PRC sees Christians and Muslims as potentially destabilising agents capable of attracting foreign meddlers and breaking its grip on power, much like the Taiping, Panthay, and Dungan separatist movements before them. Hence its repression of Christians and its subjection of Muslims to concentration camps and cultural genocide. Americans may see Hong Kong as an economic success story that frightens the Chinese Communist Party only because it has freedom; the PRC is more apt to see behind that freedom the legacy of the British imperial footprint.

It's not necessary for Americans to buy into all the assumptions behind Xi Jinping's view of Chinese history. Nor should we oversimplify Xi's influences, which also include his own father's comparatively lenient and less successful career administering Xinjiang. But it is vital, in dealing with the government of China, to understand that history is always the ghost at the banquet table. In the words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."