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**Realpolitik with Chinese Characteristics:
Chinese Strategic Culture and the Modern
Communist Party-State**

Christopher A. Ford

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the official narrative and ongoing scholarly debates about Chinese strategic culture and assesses the influence of this strategic culture on China's international behavior.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Though officials in Beijing depict Chinese strategic culture as being shaped by traditional cultural values disinclining it to force and coercion, this culture's key characteristic is actually its realism: calculations of cost and opportunity tied to the balance of power and devoted to the maximization of national power within the international system. Nonrealist factors rooted in Chinese political culture do condition aspects of behavior, such as in creating an obsession with virtue narratives and image as a component of the Chinese Communist Party's political legitimacy. Realpolitik calculation, however—and a notable willingness to use violence when the balance of forces permits—represents the “bones” that underlie the ideational “flesh” of China's strategic culture. This “realpolitik with Chinese characteristics” is more problematic than classical realpolitik because of its soaring ambition for global status, prickly and insecure moralism, inflexible fear of admitting error, and tendency to rationalize and valorize the use of force in self-defense.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- A grasp of the idiosyncratic “Chineseness” of China's strategic culture and the party's legitimacy discourse can help foreign leaders pressure the regime more effectively and avoid adopting postures that are inflammatory in unwanted ways.
- Contrary to the official narrative, quasi-Confucian “virtuocratic” traditions may not pull China in the direction of benevolently pacific policy but may instead actually worsen realism's coercive and violence-prone tendencies.
- Some of the worrying effects of this “exacerbated realism” may be attenuated if the parochial interests of the party itself could be played off against the incentives of maximizing realist power in the international arena.

Realpolitik with Chinese Characteristics: Chinese Strategic Culture and the Modern Communist Party-State

Christopher A. Ford

In the official narrative propounded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the People's Republic of China (PRC) has a strategic culture rooted in a uniquely ancient history and political-cultural continuity that legitimates a special and privileged role for Beijing in world affairs as a peace-loving power at the civilizational center of mankind. This role is purportedly sustained by the sophistication of Chinese culture and the benevolence of its rulers. The official narrative continues this “virtuocratic” storyline into the present day, with the CCP as the natural heir to this tradition and China's modern rise as inherently beneficial to all. But this account has problems. The essentialism inherent in its descriptions of Chinese political continuity and its focus on the allegedly unprecedented humiliations of the nineteenth century, for instance, stand up poorly to historical analysis. More importantly, the depiction of Chinese strategic culture as both uniquely Chinese and uniquely focused on harmonious, civilizational “soft power” is also tendentious.

Scholars have debated the role and importance of violence-friendly realpolitik versus pacific- and virtue-focused Confucian elements in Chinese strategic culture. The available evidence indicates that the latter elements

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can play an important role in conditioning the views of PRC leaders and their reactions to their environment. Nevertheless, contrary to the official narrative, realist aspects predominate, forming realpolitik “bones” that lie beneath the Confucian-pacifist “flesh” of Chinese strategic culture. On the whole, this culture is notably oriented toward force and coercion, though it accompanies this realism with self-justificatory posturing that stresses the regime’s disinterested and violence-averse benevolence.

Despite the predominant role of realpolitik calculation in PRC behavior, distinctively Chinese elements in China’s strategic culture do seem to have played some role in making the PRC more sensitive to issues of image, reputation, status-hierarchical national rank, and ideological posturing than one might expect of classic realism. However, most of the PRC’s deviations from stereotypical realism do not support the official narrative of “peace-loving” and “harmony-seeking” Chinese strategic culture. Instead, these variations suggest that “realpolitik with Chinese characteristics” can become an “exacerbated realism” of moralistic coercion, more prone to use force and less willing to show flexibility than might otherwise be the case:

- Idiosyncratic elements in Chinese strategic culture have added what are in effect ideological grievances (e.g., Taiwan’s mere pronouncement of independence) to the list of more conventionally realpolitik reasons for war.
- Such elements have also encouraged China’s fixation on reclaiming its perceived birthright and expunging past humiliation at foreign hands by returning itself to first-rank global status, which may encourage self-assertion driven more by prideful ambition than by careful realist calculation and may make capability-sensitive realpolitik bargaining and compromise more difficult.
- The moralism inherent in the quasi-Confucian virtuocratic conceits that the CCP has inherited from the Chinese imperial tradition may predispose Beijing toward inflammatory positions that highlight China’s virtue and its opponents’ depravity.
- The Confucian-Mencian tradition has helped nurture a self-justificatory political narrative in which Beijing can rationalize almost any use of force as defensive in nature. This, too, may make conflict easier to contemplate, and compromise harder to justify, than one might expect of a more calmly calculating realist.

Some of the worrying implications of this exacerbated realism might be attenuated if the parochial interests of the CCP itself could be played off against the incentives of maximizing realist power in the international arena.

Sinological awareness may also suggest advantages in soft-power engagement with the PRC. On the whole, however—and very much contrary to the claims of the official narrative—traditionally rooted ideational elements in Chinese strategic culture may make the PRC’s international behavior more problematic rather than less.

To explore Chinese strategic culture and its salience in the behavior of the PRC, this chapter begins by examining how the CCP uses narratives about China’s strategic culture in a complex process of appropriation, manipulation, and selective remembering. Subsequent sections will assess ongoing scholarly debates between realist and constructivist interpretations of Chinese strategic culture—whether it is principally characterized by power-maximizing calculation and openness to the use of force or governed instead by more culturally idiosyncratic dynamics rooted in China’s Confucian and Mencian philosophical and political traditions stereotypically focused on virtue ethics and disinclined toward violent coercion—and explore the influence that strategic culture actually has on the PRC’s aims and behavior.

China’s Official Narrative

The CCP regime routinely manipulates historical memory for political purposes, devoting considerable time and energy to the systematic reinterpretation, distortion, erasure, or even invention of historical information in order to legitimize and advance regime power. These methods stem from two inherited traditions. First, the Marxist-Leninist tradition has never scrupled to manipulate historical memory to serve present-day ends. Second, the PRC inherited an even older tradition in which each successive Chinese dynasty would write an official history of its predecessor in order to impugn the virtue of that predecessor and justify its own power through the prism of “mandate of heaven” thinking: the ancient notion that authority accrues to those who deserve it and that loss of virtue naturally equates to loss of power.¹

As indicated backhandedly by Beijing’s modern-day fixation on how other countries (e.g., Japan) characterize historical events, and by its prickliness about how others describe Chinese history,² the CCP regime devotes considerable effort to trying to control both domestic and

¹ Christopher A. Ford, *The Mind of Empire: China’s History and Modern Foreign Relations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 236.

² Christopher A. Ford, “Sinocentrism for the Information Age: Comments on the 4th Xiangshan Forum,” *New Paradigms Forum*, January 13, 2013, <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=1498>; and Christopher A. Ford, *China Looks at the West: Identity, Global Ambitions, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 455–58.

international interpretations of China's history, culture, and trajectory in the modern world, employing such manipulations to legitimize party power at home and advance PRC interests abroad. An important element of this approach is control over the nature and content of whatever distinctively Chinese strategic culture China is understood to have.

The Narrative of “Chineseness” and Virtue

In recent decades, the PRC leadership has increasingly stressed “Chineseness” as a touchstone of propriety in the sociopolitical arena. This discourse may have begun with circumlocutions designed to obscure early deviations from Marxist orthodoxy—e.g., Deng Xiaoping's description of his market-focused, quasi-capitalist economic program as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”—but what might be described as self-Orientalizing essentialism has now become a crucial component of the CCP's legitimacy narrative. Today, concepts of Chineseness are frequently invoked in contexts ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. They emerge in such things as the articulation of increasingly Sinocentric political-philosophical themes and the encouragement of Confucian studies beginning in the 1980s,³ as well as in President Xi Jinping's recent call for the development of a new “system of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics.”⁴ Almost nothing, in fact, seems to escape the embrace of virtuous Sinification, with the CCP having recently stepped up efforts to suppress the use of foreign-originating names for property, which are said to damage China's “national sovereignty and dignity.”⁵

Such invocations of special Chinese values justify CCP autocracy, demonstrate the virtue of the party's leadership, articulate civilizational foundations and precedents for the regime's dreams of status and glory in the international arena, and discredit alien Western values that the regime finds distasteful or threatening (i.e., civil and political rights, political pluralism, and electorally accountable governance). Depictions of China as having a unique—and uniquely virtuous—strategic culture are part of this campaign, playing a particularly important role in CCP efforts to convince decision-makers in other countries not to worry about, or attempt to impede, China's rise. No less a figure than President Xi has made clear that “several thousand years ago, the Chinese nation trod a path that was different from

³ Valérie Niquet, “Confu-Talk: The Use of Confucian Concepts in Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy,” in *China's Thought Management*, ed. Anne-Marie Brady (New York: Routledge, 2012), 76.

⁴ “Xi Stresses Chinese Characteristics in Philosophy, Social Sciences,” *Xinhua*, May 17, 2016.

⁵ “China to Clear Out Foreign, Bizarre Geographical Names,” *Xinhua*, March 22, 2016; and Austin Ramzy, “China Aims to Tighten Borders against Foreign Place Names,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/world/asia/china-housing-foreign-names.html>.

other nations' culture and development," and that this unique path is the basis for the Chinese characteristics that have manifested themselves in modern PRC governance as a result of "our country's historical inheritance and cultural traditions."⁶ As Andrew Scobell has summarized, many Chinese today display a "religious-like fervor" about the uniqueness of their own strategic traditions and are "particularly smitten with what they view as China's special gifts to the theory and practice of statecraft and international relations."⁷

So what is the official CCP narrative of China's strategic culture? As it can be discerned not only from official mouthpiece organs but also across a broad range of ostensibly nonofficial media and scholarly sources, this narrative has a number of elements. To begin with, one recurring theme in the PRC's narrative of its own strategic culture is what might be called its essentialist eternalism: the conceit that China, and its strategic culture, has basically always been the same. In conceptual terms, it is assumed not just that there is something special about Chinese thinking but that its distinctiveness has persisted, and in a consistent form, since time immemorial. In geographic terms, territories that are currently part of the PRC—or that the regime declares to be so, even if it does not actually control them (e.g., Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and whatever shrinking residua of the South China Sea Beijing has not already seized)—have always been part of China.⁸

This approach implies that a great many things have happened in Chinese history, but in effect remarkably little has actually changed. China is depicted as the embodiment of traditional notions of virtue on the geopolitical stage: a discrete and distinctive civilization that has preserved its brilliant essence and basic geographic contours for "5,000 years of continuous Chinese culture" and that naturally has a unique and privileged role in the world as a result.⁹ As if to underline this point, under President Xi's slogan of "revive China," party officials have in recent years even encouraged the revival of the ancient cult of China's mythological "yellow emperor"—the legendary figure said to have begun Chinese civilization 5,000 years ago and who is traditionally thought of as the literal biological forefather of all Chinese people.¹⁰

⁶ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Xi Jinping on Exceptionalism with Chinese Characteristics," *New York Times*, October 14, 2014.

⁷ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27.

⁸ As State Councilor Yang Jiechi told U.S. secretary of state John Kerry in June 2016, for instance, the islands of the South China Sea "have been Chinese territory since antiquity." Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, "U.S. and Beijing Offer Competing Views on South China Sea," *New York Times*, June 7, 2016.

⁹ Tom Hancock, "From Legend to History: China Turns to a Mythical Emperor," Agence-France Presse, May 19, 2016.

¹⁰ Tatlow, "Xi Jinping on Exceptionalism with Chinese Characteristics."

More importantly, it is axiomatic in the official narrative that there is something not just distinctive and different but actually special about Chinese strategic culture. It is often suggested, for instance, that the country's Confucian past—bound up with a system of sociofamilial virtue ethics that prizes rituals of proper behavior and that historically tended to valorize the gentleman-scholar over the warrior—has given China a generally morality-based and pacifist strategic culture that lacks the “imperialist” or “hegemonic” tendencies found in Western history. (President Xi Jinping himself at one point even suggested that Chinese of ethnic Han origin lack the “invasion gene” that leads to aggression and imperialism in other peoples.)¹¹

China's historical predominance in its region, it is thus alleged, was rooted not in intimidation and conquest but rather in civilizational attraction—the gravitational force of a wise and superior civilization that naturally dominated East Asia because it deserved this status. Selective references to the voluminous and sophisticated canon of Chinese strategic writings from the periods that preceded China's first imperial unification reinforce this message and are often used to support the point that traditional Chinese culture disdained the naked use of force and prioritized “winning without fighting” through subtle cleverness.

These notions are consonant with ancient Confucian conceptions in which political authority in effect self-assembles around the virtuous and benevolent leader precisely because of his virtue—rather than as a result of coercion or any actual desire to control—and resonate through modern Chinese tropes about how the country's “peaceful rise” and ambitions for a “harmonious world” offer the planet a “new type of great-power relations” with which to build a strategic environment devoid of hostile competitiveness.¹²

The official narrative gently tiptoes around the idea that these concepts imply a Sinocentric system of global order. Instead, it is emphatic that Chinese strategic culture is qualitatively different from—and notably superior to—the militarized thought that characterizes the strategic culture of the West. It is the very Chineseness of China's strategic culture, in other words, that helps make possible Beijing's selfless leadership in the international community. China's ability to offer the world a locus of “humane authority”

¹¹ Philip Bowring, “A Sense of Destiny Inspires China's Maritime Claims,” *Financial Times*, August 20, 2014.

¹² Guo Xinyu and Zhang Lu, “A Nuclear-Free World: An Ideal or a Reality?” *Dangdai shijie*, 2009; and Jane Perlez, “Chinese President to Seek New ‘Power Relationship’ in Talks with Obama,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2013.

inspired by ancient Chinese philosophy will help ensure that the new order makes win-win solutions available for everyone.¹³

A recurring theme is the moralistic nature of the CCP's narratives about itself, China, and the rest of the world. It is not just that China must be depicted in virtocratic terms, offering the world a qualitatively different and better approach to geopolitics, but also that its leadership—that is, the CCP—needs to be seen as superlatively virtuous at home and abroad. Governments in the West tend to ground their authority in the consent of a sovereign people expressed through periodic elections and protected by the enforcement of political rights against the government. Rejecting this approach, however, but nowadays also unable to take advantage even of the now-obsolete alternative legitimacy discourse of Marxist-Leninism, the CCP has come increasingly to invoke what purports to be an ancient Chinese model of political authority. This model is tied to the benevolence and superlative competence of a self-selected and self-regulating elite, purportedly chosen on the basis of its intellectual and technocratic merits. In effect, the party deserves to rule for the same reason that China deserves to achieve the dream of returning to its ancient position of civilizational and geopolitical centrality: because it is better suited for this role than any other and because its preeminence offers a unique opportunity for all to benefit from a political order of prosperity and harmony.

Moralism and Humiliation

Just as ancient Chinese dynasties once constructed dynastic histories of their predecessors in order to highlight those regimes' moral failures and thereby legitimate their own succession, PRC moralism also involves powerful demonization narratives. Because Chinese status and CCP rule are, in effect, rooted in their virtue, it is imperative that those who disagree with or oppose their dominance be depicted as morally deficient.

This model of authority is conceptually monist, for virtocratic power cannot concede real pluralism and fears alternative loci of virtue. If their appeal to ordinary Chinese people is to be thwarted, Western conceptions of political rights and democratic process must be decried as decadent, corrupt, intemperate, polarizing, and conducive to either paralysis or instability. Those who resist CCP hegemony within China are tools of “foreign forces” that

¹³ Samuel S. Kim, “China and the Third World in the Changing World Order,” in *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 128, 142, 161; Michael B. Yahuda, *China's Role in World Affairs* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 281; Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, trans. Sun Zhe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Cai Tuo, “China Should Have a Part in the International Order's Transition,” *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, 2009.

wish China ill and threaten chaos.¹⁴ Those who oppose Chinese designs in East Asia are acting out of hegemonic intentions, militarizing the region, and setting the stage for an unnecessary and catastrophic confrontation. (Japan, for example, does not merely control islands that China wishes to control but denies the evil demons of its own history and flirts with a revived militaristic revanchism that threatens the stability of Asia.) The demonization of foreign and nonconformist domestic others is an essential part of the narrative.

In the Chinese context, the storylines of indigenous virtue and foreign malevolence are tied together in the idea that China suffered a “century of humiliation” at foreign hands from the period of the First Opium War (1839–42) at least until the CCP’s triumphant arrival in power in 1949—a discourse encouraged by successive Chinese governments from 1915 to the present day. (There was, for instance, National Humiliation Day in Republican China from 1927 to 1940, and the PRC’s National People’s Congress readopted the idea in 2001.)¹⁵ This persistent narrative of humiliation, which received renewed emphasis in official propaganda as part of the patriotic education campaign organized by party officials in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, ties together a number of key elements. It invokes and validates the idea of virtuous China’s natural and destined position as the “middle kingdom” at the center of global affairs, while at the same time excusing the country’s lack of such status at present as the result of unfair and undeserved foreign depredations. Carefully nursed memories of humiliation also provide the regime with a claim to political legitimacy rooted in the stewardship of China’s return to glory, as well as a locus of nationalistic grievance with which to fuel political mobilization against whatever the government declares to stand in the way of such progress, either at home or abroad.

The century of humiliation narrative invokes, perpetuates, and takes advantage of the psychic shock created in the nineteenth century when China encountered a more vibrant and powerful foreign “other”—in the form of European power, then in the full flower of its Industrial Revolution exuberance—that had conceptions of political authority and global order very different from Chinese imperial thinking and that seemed, as a sociopolitical system, to have physical, economic, intellectual, and spiritual resources superior to those China could then claim for itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cary Huang, “Chill Wind Blows through Chinese Academy of Social Sciences,” *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2014; and “Conscientiously Preserving Social Harmony and Stability,” *Beijing Daily*, March 5, 2011.

¹⁵ William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199, 202–3, 201–11.

¹⁶ Christopher A. Ford, “The Past as Prism: China and the Shock of Plural Sovereignty,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 47 (2007): 14.

This encounter was a tremendously debilitating politico-moral blow for an ancient, proud, and vain empire with virtocratic pretensions within a Confucian political culture. China has yet to entirely recover from this blow.¹⁷ The official narrative of past national humiliation—with its corollary of a self-assertive collective destiny in “rejuvenating the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization”—remains an important part of modern China’s self-perception.¹⁸

Chinese Strategic Culture beneath the Cloak

Puncturing Conceits

Before getting to the more strategically central and policy-relevant parts of the official Chinese narrative, it is worth examining some of its lesser manifestations. What should one make, for instance, of the official PRC narrative of Chinese eternalism? In reality, of course, the Chinese state has not always existed for five thousand years. There has certainly been civilization in China for a very long time, and in many eras it was one of considerable complexity and sophistication. Similar things, however, could be said of other areas of the world. It is not immediately obvious why China’s claims of historical continuity and distinctiveness are inherently more compelling than those of other states and regions—including Europeans who invoke the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Greece, Rome, and Jerusalem; Indians who look back to Harappan culture and the Mauryan Dynasty; and Middle Easterners whose first empires and great monuments predate anything of significance anywhere else. China’s historical cultural core also constitutes only a small portion of modern-day China. The first real imperial unification of a feuding patchwork of rivalrous smaller states did not occur until 221 BCE under the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE), and China has oscillated between unification and a sometimes notably chaotic disunity ever since, with two significant periods of unification being the result of foreign conquest. Modern Chinese essentialism may make for fine rhetoric, but it is poor history.

Though a fixation on claims to possession rooted in the distant fog of history is perhaps unsurprising for a regime that can claim no foundation

¹⁷ As Charles Horner has observed, a key objective for every Chinese regime since the fall of the Qing Dynasty has been to escape this “Chinese predicament.” See Charles Horner, “Historical Perspectives upon Chinese Perceptions of the United States” (remarks at a Hudson Institute workshop, Washington, D.C., December 14, 2011).

¹⁸ Fei-Ling Wang, “Beijing’s Incentive Structure: The Pursuit of Preservation, Prosperity, and Power,” in *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy*, ed. Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 19, 32.

in democratic consent by a sovereign population, there is also some irony in the importance that the modern CCP narrative attaches to the idea of an indissoluble Chinese nation-state that occupies the frontiers that modern China inherited from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) and that has ancient historical claims to all of this territory. The two dynasties that give rise to the most sweeping of the PRC’s modern territorial claims, the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and the Qing Dynasty, were actually non-Chinese conquest dynasties, created when outside “barbarian” peoples—Mongols and Manchus, respectively—invaded and defeated China, thereafter ruling it as merely one component (albeit a very large and important one) of their sprawling empires. It is Yuan and Qing precedents, however, that are most often invoked to ground the claims to sovereignty over areas such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Manchuria. To many observers, this logic seems somewhat problematic—as if France were to claim Belgium because at some point they had both been conquered and ruled by Germany.

The eternalist and essentialist narrative of the modern-day PRC has, in other words, fixated on territorial frontiers associated with the military hegemony of China’s past conquerors and has entangled this border with a reification of the nation-state that seems to have been imported from nineteenth-century Europe but that would scarcely be recognizable to the ancient peoples about whom it is today asserted. Some modern scholarship based on Manchu archives from the Qing period, for example, has indicated that China’s Manchu rulers did not view themselves as Chinese, administered China as only one part of a multinational empire, and did not Sinicize their other territorial possessions.¹⁹ Such historical accounts are starkly inconsistent with the official narrative of Chinese political-cultural eternalism keyed to Qing-era boundaries. The modern PRC has tried to deal with such inconsistencies through vituperative denial or by depicting the Mongol and Manchu invaders as “Chinese peoples,”²⁰ but even this official narrative is—ironically—inconsistent with China’s own ancient Confucian tradition. This tradition tended to view Chineseness not in stark territorial-nationalist terms but instead along a graduated civilizational continuum according to each people’s degree of Sinicization, proceeding outward from populations

¹⁹ Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch’ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁰ “A Righteous View of History,” China Media Project, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2015/04/22/38664>; Frank Langfitt, “Why a Chinese Government Think Tank Attacked American Scholars,” National Public Radio, May 21, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/21/408291285/why-a-chinese-government-think-tank-attacked-american-scholars>; Ben Dooley, “U.S. Scholars in Crosshairs over Interpretation of China’s History,” Kyodo News, May 13, 2015; and Tang Zongli and Zuo Bing, *Maoism and Chinese Culture* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 38–39.

at the cultural core through concentric circles of ever-increasing barbarity.²¹ To point out these facts, of course, is not to gainsay the subjective experience of historical distinctiveness and ancient continuity as perceived by modern Chinese. But it does appear that the PRC's eternalist narrative has only an ambiguous relationship with historical reality.

The official Chinese narrative of national humiliation also does not stand up to scrutiny as well as its proponents might expect. China did, of course, suffer at foreign hands in its encounters first with European and then with Japanese imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much pain and indignity was unquestionably inflicted, and modern Chinese understandably remember the period with bitterness. Nevertheless, the centrality of humiliation narratives in modern Chinese political life seems extraordinary and stands out in disproportion to how such tropes have featured in the political culture of a number of other peoples who also suffered tremendously when they crossed swords with imperial states empowered by the Industrial Revolution.

Indeed, with the exception of the grim brutalities inflicted on China by Japan in the 1930s, China does not seem to have fared extraordinarily badly at imperial hands compared with other areas of the world that fell at various points under the imperialist yoke. Sub-Saharan Africa suffered slavery and all but complete colonization; the peoples of the Americas faced displacement, conquest, and depopulation; and most of the Middle East and South Asia endured conquest and foreign rule. By contrast, China retained political independence, albeit constrained within a framework of unequal treaties and foreign economic concessions. China even retained its traditional governance structures for decades after European imperial contact, shedding them only when internal Chinese revolution replaced these structures with more modern forms in the republican period after 1911.

In reality, the power of the narrative of China's national humiliation owes as much to the soaring nature of the old empire's self-regard—and to the peculiar sociocultural dynamics of interactions with European culture, which seem to have produced a much more acute psychological predicament for China than did the country's actual conquest on two occasions by more localized barbarians—as it does to the horrors inflicted on China during most of the period commencing when the First Opium War began in 1839. Successive Chinese regimes' emphasis on the concept of humiliation is itself telling, for the term suggests not so much concrete injury inflicted at someone else's hands as it does an abasement of pride: being forced from a state of grandeur into a position of being humbled and

²¹ Ford, *The Mind of Empire*, 33–38.

reduced to lowliness. The humiliation narrative long nourished by Chinese political leaders, therefore, is as much a construction of modern Chinese politics—an effort to structure and ascribe meaning to the past in light of perceived failures in the present day to live up to what China was meant to be, and a shifting of blame to others for this painful gap—as it is a historical account of actual events.

Debating the Nature and Extent of Chinese Realpolitik

In scholarly circles outside China, experts have debated the degree to which the country can indeed be said to have a distinctive strategic culture and what its contours might be. Some scholars have argued that far from China having traditionally taken only a pacifist, selfless, and civilizational approach to its neighbors, the record of its many imperial dynasties and thousands of wars is replete with self-aggrandizing conflict.²² Alastair Iain Johnston, Michael Swaine, and Ashley Tellis have contended, for instance, that much of Chinese history demonstrates not so much a Confucian approach to issues of war and peace but in fact a realism that actually preferred military force as a means of resolving disputes when that option was available, and that pursued what today might be known as soft-power competition only when the balance of forces left the empire no other choice.²³

Peter Perdue, for one, has pointed out that “Chinese dynasties never shrank from the use of force.”²⁴ He argues that the “civilizing force” model of ancient Chinese imperium—in which China acquired expansive dominions as the result of benign “cultural influence” rather than force—is not in fact an ancient verity. Instead, this concept originated among nationalist Chinese thinkers in the 1920s and 1930s as anti-Japanese propaganda discourse designed to whip up patriotic feelings of support for reclaiming an imagined ancient unity of harmonious Chinese peoples. According to Perdue, the “ideological view of Chinese history” created by such apologetics was transmitted to early Western scholars trained in nationalist China, among them John King Fairbank, and hence moved into the Western mainstream.²⁵ According to Scobell, it was only in the 1990s that historians began to peer

²² There are claims that China has been involved in 6,539 conflicts over the course of its long history. For more on this, see Wang Zhenmin, “Different U.S.-China Conceptions of the Role of Law: Chinese Views,” in *The United States and China: Mutual Public Perceptions*, ed. Douglas G. Spelman (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011).

²³ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2000).

²⁴ Peter C. Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 1,002–14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1,002, 1,011–14.

behind such assumptions and recognize that a more “assertive, aggressive China” may in fact have existed.²⁶

Taking an approach that might seem to split the difference between the archetypes of “parabellum realism” and Confucian-pacifist, “civilizational force” models,²⁷ Huiyun Feng has argued that structural realism provides only a “partial explanation” for Chinese behavior. According to Feng, Chinese strategic culture is influenced by both the realpolitik statecraft literature of China’s pre-unification Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and Confucian ethical-moral traditions. Accordingly, she argues for a “realism-plus-beliefs framework” of analysis in which such Confucian traditions qualify what realism exists in China’s strategic culture. In this analysis, Chinese behavior shows a “balance between Parabellum and Confucian propensities,” with individual leaders each exhibiting different admixtures of realist and Confucian inclinations. (Feng argues that Mao Zedong exemplified realism, for example, while Deng Xiaoping tended more toward Confucianism.)²⁸

In Feng’s view, the net result of this balance is to make China not an “offensive” realist but instead a “defensive” one. Yet beyond simply her use of the term realist, Feng’s account differs little from the PRC’s own self-justificatory and ostensibly Confucian-pacifist interpretation. According to Feng, for instance, although it is realist, China does not orient its foreign policy behavior around power or against threat but instead focuses on building constructive partnerships with other major powers. “Peace-loving” and “nonviolence,” she contends, are also “key characteristics of China’s strategic culture.”²⁹

A third approach might be found in the work of Scobell. He agrees with Feng that Chinese strategic culture is dualistic, in that both conflict-averse and defensively minded Confucian elements and more military-focused and offensively oriented realpolitik elements coexist, ensuring that China is neither inherently pacifist nor inherently warlike. For Scobell, however, the realist elements seem more important, for these layers of strategic culture result in a Chinese “cult of defense” in which “realist behavior dominates but is justified as defensive on the basis of a pacifist self-perception.” In practice,

²⁶ Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, 16–17.

²⁷ Johnston explains the term “parabellum realism” as deriving from “the realpolitician’s axiom ‘si pacem, parabellum’ (if you want peace, then prepare for war). This parallels a Chinese idiom, ‘ju an si wei, wu bei you huan’ (while residing in peace, think about dangers; without military preparations there will be calamity).” Alastair Iain Johnston, “Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 217, note 2.

²⁸ Huiyun Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4–6, 15, 17, 25, 67, 78.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4, 26.

he notes, while Chinese elites view China as being a defensive power and “deliberate in calculating” the use of force, it is nonetheless “prone to resort to force in a crisis.” For Scobell, the “shared myth” of China’s fundamentally defensive orientation allows leaders “to rationalize virtually any military operation as a defensive action.”³⁰

Just as Feng’s account ends up being more or less congruent with constructivist Confucian-pacifism, so also does Scobell’s analysis thus end up being fairly congruent with Johnston’s account of Chinese strategic culture. According to Johnston, for instance, while China has exhibited fairly consistent “hard realpolitik or *parabellum* strategic culture,” even into the Maoist period—including “a preference for offensive uses of force, mediated by a keen sensitivity to relative capabilities”—this is not an abstract, structural realism but rather an “ideationally based hard realpolitik” in which a Confucian-Mencian strand and a zero-sum, coercion-oriented *parabellum* strand coexist. Yet for Johnston, the Confucian-Mencian element is simply an “idealized discourse” important in Chinese rhetoric and self-image, whereas the hard realpolitik elements persist in actual Chinese practices.³¹ Scobell, one suspects, would broadly agree, as would Perdue, who observes that Chinese imperial rulers “waged war constantly against rival powers, although they often masked their campaigns as defensive actions against ‘pirates’ or ‘rebels.’”³²

Confucian Flesh, Realist Bones

How, then, should one assess the relationship between realpolitik and more culturally idiosyncratic Sinic elements in Chinese strategic culture? To begin with, it is hard to deny that there is a powerful realism even in some of the most self-consciously Chinese elements of China’s strategic culture. As Michael Pillsbury and others have noted—and as we have seen even Huiyun Feng freely concede—metaphors and statecraft concepts from China’s Warring States period have recurred frequently in the writings of Chinese scholars attempting to understand the modern international arena.³³ Extensive references to classics from that period are embedded throughout modern Chinese strategic writing and are used to provide lessons or metaphors with

³⁰ Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, 15, 38, 192–93, 197–98.

³¹ Johnston, “Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China,” 216, 217, 219–20. Emphasis is in the original.

³² Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” 1,008.

³³ Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2000), 4–5, 315.

which to assess the future, making Warring States–era concepts “the prism through which Chinese thinkers have viewed the post-Westphalia world.”³⁴

While this connection to and continuing invocation of ancient canonical sources may seem to add weight to the notion that Chinese strategic culture is indeed, in some sense, deeply and historically Chinese, it is important to remember just what a stereotypically realist strategic discourse much of this literature provides. It seems to have been all but unquestioned in Warring States–era texts, for example, that any system of plural state sovereignties is naturally a zero-sum, Hobbesian rivalry for position and status in which the goal of statecraft is to achieve not just hegemony but in fact political unification.³⁵

To be sure, China’s venerable canon of Warring States–era texts also contains ethical-moral works, including works in the Confucian tradition. The PRC’s modern narrative of itself often draws on them, such as by using Warring States–era concepts and language in suggesting that China’s “humane authority” can lead and bring to fruition a new era of “harmonious” international relationships. Indeed, some of the PRC’s modern cheerleaders expressly invoke ancient authors as sources of inspiration, purporting to ground their views in inspiration drawn from pre-Qin thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, Guanzi, and Xunzi.³⁶ Nevertheless, the moral ambitiousness of the Confucian-Mencian tradition was itself heavily laden with power-maximizing geopolitical implications, insofar as even this strand of Chinese thinking took it as a given that possessing virtue equated to acquiring political power, that supreme virtue would lead inexorably to the unification of “all under heaven,” and that the state rivalries of the Warring States era were thus fundamentally about the question of which ruler would come to dominate the Sinic world system.³⁷

These ethical traditions also did not shy away from using force against those who resisted the all-unifying prerogatives of virtue. No less a figure than Confucius himself, in fact, advocated the use of punitive military expeditions against barbarians who refused to accept guidance from their Chinese geopolitical betters.³⁸ China’s ancient ethical-moral discourses may not have

³⁴ Ford, *The Mind of Empire*, 245–47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53–57.

³⁶ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, 35, 41, 45, 48, 92, 84.

³⁷ Confucius himself, in fact, made his livelihood as a purveyor of statecraft advice to the princes of China’s rival states, on the grounds that if only a properly wise (or wisely counseled) ruler were to arise, the entire system would orient itself around him. “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it.” Confucius, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1893), 145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

used the language of cynical *realpolitik*, therefore, but as Scobell has suggested in discussing the “cult of defense” he sees in Chinese strategic culture, they offer intellectual resources that appear quite capable of rationalizing almost any sort of power-maximizing conduct. Indeed, in Beijing’s modern penchant for demonizing foreign powers such as the Soviet Union and the United States for seeking self-serving hegemony of a sort China itself naturally eschews, one can discern a self-reinforcing fusion of realist power-balancing and quasi-Confucian moralism.

A clearer window into the importance of the realist strain within Chinese strategic culture, however, can be found in actual Chinese practice, and here some historical perspective is in order. One of the key examples cited by PRC officials in explaining how their country would never threaten another state, even if it were to possess military power with global reach, is the remarkable oceanic voyages of the Muslim eunuch Admiral Zheng He at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty in the early fifteenth century. Yet these officials disingenuously rely on foreign audiences’ unfamiliarity with the historical record. Far from being a romantic model of peaceably awe-inspiring engagement, Zheng’s voyages included notable episodes of gunboat diplomacy, such as sending marines to intervene in favor of the pro-Chinese faction in a Sumatran civil war and taking a local Sri Lankan ruler back to China in chains.³⁹ On the whole, Chinese imperial history provides remarkably little support for the notion that there is anything particularly unique or pacifist about China’s interactions with the rest of the world.

Nor does China’s modern history easily support the narrative of harmonious Confucian pacifism. Where opportunities presented themselves to use force, it would appear, the PRC has not hesitated to do so. This was the case against India, which China invaded in 1962 in connection with a territorial dispute. It was the case against Vietnam as well, which China invaded in 1979. Beijing also used attacks with tactical aviation and amphibious units to compel the surrender of a Vietnamese garrison in the Paracel Islands in 1974, thereby seizing control of that island chain, and captured a reef in the Spratly Islands from Vietnam by force in 1988, taking a handful of prisoners and killing several dozen Vietnamese soldiers. The official narrative is also not particularly consistent with the PRC’s present-day behavior in the South China Sea, where in order to justify its tendentious claims to enormous expanses of ocean—claims that have now been authoritatively rejected by an arbitral tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration convened under the UN Convention on the Law of

³⁹ Geoffrey Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” Asia Research Institute, Working Paper, no. 31, October 2004, 11, 16, 18.

the Sea—Beijing has been constructing new islands out of almost nothing in areas claimed by other countries, and then garrisoning these new bastions.⁴⁰ Even if one were to quibble with the exact calculations of scholars such as Jonathan Brecher, Michael Wilkenfeld, and Sheila Rosen—who found the PRC to have used force more frequently in foreign policy crises during 1949–85 than did the United States, the Soviet Union, or the United Kingdom between 1927 and 1985—it is hard not to agree with Johnston that the PRC has, in practice, been “quite prone to use force.”⁴¹

The PRC’s relative weakness during most of the CCP’s tenure may often have encouraged leaders in Beijing to take strategically nonconfrontational positions for fear of provoking reactions for which China was unprepared—as indeed Deng Xiaoping himself urged in his famous exhortation to his countrymen to “bide our time and build up our capabilities.”⁴² This hardly implies, however, that one should expect any such allegedly Confucian pacifism to continue as Beijing’s power grows. Given the “tradition of exceptional tactical flexibility” that Mao Zedong is said to have bequeathed to his successors,⁴³ early nonprovocation under Deng is not surprising, but one might also expect the PRC’s growing power to result in more aggressive behavior. Deng’s aphorism about biding time clearly implies that China was merely awaiting a point when it would be able to assert itself. Far from being an enduring element of Chinese strategic culture, therefore, nonconfrontational postures appear through this prism to be simply a tactical expedient: a prudential choice to be abandoned when favorable changes in the balance of power make confrontation feasible and success likely, and thus a fundamentally realist approach.

Additional evidence for this tactical expediency can be found in the CCP’s turn from congenial relations with Japan in the 1970s and 1980s to shrill Japanophobic demonization in the 1990s as Chinese perceptions of that country’s relative position and trajectory on the geopolitical stage shifted. At a time when Japan was regarded by Chinese (and Americans) as a rising superpower that would lead the economic future of Asia—and when Beijing clearly had much to learn from Japan as the PRC began to open its economy to the outside world—the Chinese party-state engaged in friendly and cooperative relations. In the 1990s, however, as Japan slipped into a long

⁴⁰ Derek Watkins, “What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/30/world/asia/what-china-has-been-building-in-the-south-china-sea.html>. The arbitral tribunal’s ruling is available at <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf>.

⁴¹ Johnston, “Cultural Realism and Strategy,” 252.

⁴² Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 105.

⁴³ Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March into the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2013), 255.

period of debt-ridden stagnation and political dysfunction, the PRC felt free to mobilize a harshly anti-Japanese “patriotic education campaign” and today continues to indulge in all manner of condemnatory rhetoric.⁴⁴

China’s current spasm of territorial seizure in the South China Sea, moreover, has only been mounted at a point when no other player appears able or willing to challenge China’s growing military strength. It is no coincidence that this upsurge coincided with the U.S. financial crisis of 2008—and the period of U.S. indebtedness, budgetary impasse, paralyzing political polarization, and geopolitical retrenchment that the crisis helped engender—and with China’s acquisition of increasingly robust naval power-projection capabilities. In short, little in the PRC’s behavior suggests that there is anything distinctively or inherently peaceable about China’s strategic culture, at least beyond tactical prudence.

Deng Xiaoping’s exhortation for China to “bide our time and build up our capabilities” may sound distinctive when expressed in a tersely portentous form reminiscent of ancient strategists such as Sun Zi. It is less clear, however, that there is anything distinctively Chinese in the concept apart from this phrasing. Much of Deng’s meaning, for instance, might alternatively be conveyed as either the recommendation of a technocratic modern think tank (“engage in strategic misdirection”) or a pithy homily worthy of an American cowboy (“don’t kick ‘em ‘til you can lick ‘em”). The tactics and strategy of Chinese statecraft may be developed, expressed, and implemented in idiosyncratically Sinified ways, in other words, but one should not mistake them for something more unique than they are.⁴⁵ Beneath its self-consciously Orientalized flesh, a skeleton of classically realist calculation runs through Chinese strategic culture.

The Weight of Culture

However, one should not simply dismiss the PRC’s historically tenuous official narrative—or the less propagandized idea that Chinese strategic culture is shaped in important ways by distinctively Chinese elements—as irrelevant, for it is not. If there is a story to be told about strategic culture in China today, it is more complicated than simply a tale in which a classically cynical realism disguises itself in the garments of virtue. For one thing, even

⁴⁴ Ford, *China Looks at the West*, 227–33.

⁴⁵ Huiyun Feng, one fears, committed the methodological error of judging modern Chinese leaders entirely based on their utterances, mistaking PRC officials for “Confucian leaders with very cooperative orientations” simply because they expressed themselves and defended their actions in such terms. Compare Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture*, 87, 98, 106, 121, 124, with Ford, *China Looks at the West*, 124. Feng judges only Mao himself as a truly realist leader, a specific conclusion with which Johnston would agree, for Mao’s writings are suffused with the language of violence and struggle. For more on this, see Johnston, “Cultural Realism and Strategy,” 229, 234–48.

if it is factually problematic and in large part politically engineered, the self-Orientalizing official narrative may help shape and constrain otherwise realist PRC behavior by making some policy conclusions or courses of action more difficult to explain or justify than others.⁴⁶ Countries dealing with modern China should pay more attention to how CCP narratives constrain Beijing's behavior, and might even constitute exploitable vulnerabilities. Even within the realm of essentially realpolitik interactions, moreover, Sinic idiosyncrasies in strategic culture might also affect the dynamics of crisis stability—e.g., influencing what sorts of posture or rhetorical positions are particularly likely either to provoke or to mollify Chinese elites (or the public) in a tense situation—and help condition how Beijing views or prioritizes its objectives. It might also be that culturally idiosyncratic elements in Chinese thinking accentuate certain behaviors to which more conventional realpolitik power maximization may already predispose the PRC.

There do seem to be some elements of long-term continuity in Chinese strategic culture that are rooted in distinctively Chinese traditions and are analytically separable from the more abstract impulses of structural realism. Though it is in key ways historically problematic, the PRC's official narrative overlies a set of old cultural norms and assumptions that establish aspirational values that each Chinese regime—including the modern party-state—tends to accept as the necessary foundations for legitimate authority, and to which, whatever its actual practice, each regime needs to make its approaches appear to conform. The Confucian assumption that political authority grows out of virtue, for instance, has already been noted, but it is worth emphasizing the degree to which the actual realism of Chinese behavior has for a long time been compelled to exist within a justificatory framework of moralistic virtuocracy, helping create some of the more distinctive aspects of Chinese international behavior.

Because in this context any lack of virtue on the part of China's ruling elite would tend to undermine its claims on power, the CCP has continued an ancient Chinese dynastic tradition of needing its actions to be portrayed—and, at least rhetorically, accepted and validated (or at a minimum not challenged)

⁴⁶ At least at the margins, it may be that the PRC's behavior can sometimes be constrained by the contours of what its propaganda narrative has decreed must be the case about China. Some have suggested, for instance, that the PRC felt it necessary to pull out of its invasion of Vietnam as rapidly as possible in order to prevent the appearance that China was engaging in imperialism or hegemonism of the sort that it decried in other states but to which party officials made clear that their country was entirely immune. Compare, for example, the accounts given of the Vietnam invasion in Chün-tu Hsüeh, ed., *China's Foreign Relations: New Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 7; Shee Poon Kim, "China and the ASEAN States: From Hostility to Rapprochement," in Hsüeh, *China's Foreign Relations*, 72, 80; John W. Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993), 314; and "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress," Xinhua, October 24, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749.htm.

by others—as benevolent and virtuous.⁴⁷ These imperatives have helped accentuate the ideological totalitarian state’s natural instinct for propaganda message control and the manipulation of historical memory, adding to them a remarkable obsession with controlling narratives about China and the CCP not just domestically but overseas as well.

Virtuocracy is also not a concept of political authority that tends naturally to accept territorial frontiers, and it has proved difficult for Chinese leaders to defend their rule at home without asserting some special claim to status and prominence on the world stage—first as the ancient civilizational monopole of humanity (under multiple dynasties) and later as the revolutionary standard bearer for the dawning of a brilliant new age (under Mao). Today, the CCP regime projects itself as the translator of traditional Chinese virtues into the global arena, in leading the construction of a new system of interstate relations characterized by harmony and prosperity for all (under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping). Grippled by this political imperative of defending its rule by advancing such a discourse of special destiny, the CCP appears to feel that other countries’ narratives of China are very much China’s business, making it common for PRC leaders to demand that other states refrain from “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people” by expressing thoughts about China that are not congruent with the PRC’s virtocratic narrative of itself. These virtue themes, connecting the regime’s domestic insecurities to how the CCP and China are perceived and described even in the outside world, also help explain apparent quirks of PRC behavior, such as Beijing’s fixation on securing “apologies” from any who are deemed to have wronged China.⁴⁸

Allayed with traditional Confucianism’s emphasis on the “rectification of names”—the assumption that societal order can be understood, and is in a sense actually constituted, by the articulated ascription of social identities into which particular roles are encoded—these themes also help explain the modern party-state’s fascination with calculations and rankings of comprehensive national power (CNP). To be sure, part of CNP theory derives from notions inherited from the Soviet Union about the “correlation of forces”—concepts with which Marxist dialecticians, understanding historical events as the epiphenomenal manifestation of changes at the level of substructures in political economy, sought to assess what the gradual unfolding of socialism in world history meant for the global balance of power at any given moment. This Communist heritage was powerfully reinforced,

⁴⁷ For an example, see *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Song-t’ao, Liu His-Hung, and Chang Te-yi*, trans. J.D. Frodsham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 24.

⁴⁸ For examples, see “China Court Tells Writer to Apologise for Challenging Propaganda,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/06/28/china-court-tells-writer-apologise-challenging-propaganda>; and Ford, *China Looks at the West*, 456.

however, by the ancient Confucian emphasis on the rectification of names, which held it to be critical that participants in the social order be properly described and that all concur with these labels and the roles they signified. Just as Confucius believed that simply describing a son as a son and a father as a father ensured proper governance by establishing respective duties and responsibilities in the family and the Confucian social system, so also could one understand the operation of the international system by correctly describing the hierarchy of its participants.⁴⁹ Since around 1984, theorists of CNP have tracked the shifting rank ordering of states in the international system as if calculating league standings in professional sports.⁵⁰ Encouraged by such tabulations, Chinese thinkers have looked forward to the day when their country will reach the rank they feel it deserves—and from which China will be able to play the principal guiding and norm-shaping role in the geopolitical arena.⁵¹

In this regard, it is also worth emphasizing how important to modern Chinese strategic culture—and how closely linked to the country's ancient conceits of self-image and civilizational primacy—is the idea of China being restored to the position of global status the country feels it deserves, and of which it assumes it was robbed by European and Japanese imperial power. This leitmotif of returning to preeminent global status—what I have elsewhere called the “great telos of return”⁵²—is a powerful locus of continuity in long-term attitudes and policy agendas, serving both as a strategic objective and as a justification for all manner of choices in domestic and international policymaking since the late nineteenth century.

The first generation of such thinking can be found in the work of the late nineteenth-century political thinker Kang Youwei, who at a time of obvious Qing Dynasty weakness vis-à-vis foreign barbarians wrote about the importance of “increasing the country's power” and advocated a “self-strengthening program” that would help China regain its lost power and prestige.⁵³ It also forms the basis for the suggestion by early twentieth-century political theorist Liang Qichao, for example, that, notwithstanding China's debilitating international weakness of that era, the United States and China would ultimately have to confront each other

⁴⁹ Confucius, *Confucian Analects*, 256.

⁵⁰ Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, 9–11, 256.

⁵¹ Tuo, “China Should Have a Part in the International Order's Transition.”

⁵² Christopher A. Ford, “China Views America: Aspiration, Opposition, and the Telos of China's Return,” Hudson Institute, Security and Foreign Affairs Briefing Paper, August 2012, 2, <http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1062/chinaviewsamerica--ford0812.pdf>.

⁵³ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895–1980* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 8–9, 13, 67.

for mastery of the Pacific.⁵⁴ Similarly, the writer Lin Yutang projected that China would in time be so strong that “nothing the western nations can do can stop her or keep her down.”⁵⁵

The founder of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, similarly lamented in 1924 that whereas once China had “called herself ‘the majestic nation,’ [and] thought that she was situated at the center of the world,” she had now become weak, with her “old national spirit... asleep.” Sun’s aim, he proclaimed, was to awaken that spirit and “restore our national standing.” This was an objective echoed by nationalist president Chiang Kai-shek, who announced in his 1943 manifesto *China’s Destiny* that it was “the unanimous demand of the people... to avenge the national humiliation and make the country strong.”⁵⁶

Concepts of the great telos of return also formed the conceptual predicate for Mao’s triumphant proclamation in 1949 that China had once again “stood up” and would no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation.⁵⁷ Achieving China’s “return” was likewise an unspoken objective animating Deng’s exhortation for China to “bide its time” until some future turning point, and even underlay the agenda of some of Deng’s critics during the Democracy Wall movement of the early 1980s. Some of these critics, for example, saw autocracy as a limiting factor on China’s progression of national ascendancy and assumed that China could only achieve its longed-for return through democratization.⁵⁸

More recently, such thinking seemed to underlie Hu Jintao’s imaginings of a “harmonious world” modeled on the CCP’s own domestic politics.⁵⁹ According to Hu, because “history and reality tell us that ‘backwardness incurs beatings by others,’” it was “the unswerving goal that each Chinese generation has striven to realize” to bring about “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”⁶⁰ Today, the quest for *fuqiang* (wealth and power)—a term that is a modern shorthand for the Warring States-era phrase *fuguo qiangbing* (to enrich the state and strengthen its military power)—lies at the conceptual and emotional core of President Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream” of a “strong nation,”⁶¹ his use of modern endeavors such as the One Belt, One Road initiative to invoke and recreate

⁵⁴ R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, eds., *Land without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 89.

⁵⁵ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 131, 189.

⁵⁷ Yongjin Zhang, *China in International Society since 1949* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 18.

⁵⁸ Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 4–6, 10, 37, 94.

⁵⁹ Yu Keping, *Democracy Is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 169, 171.

⁶⁰ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 386.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5–6; and “Reaching for the Moon,” *Economist*, December 21, 2013, 68.

the glory days of Chinese political-economic centrality in Eurasia, and the modern CCP's self-justificatory contention that only under its rule can "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" be achieved.⁶²

Policy Implications

So what is the net impact of all of this? To the extent that Chinese strategic culture can be understood as having realist bones, one should expect that PRC decision-making will continue to be fundamentally focused on classically realpolitik concerns of relative power, and that its leaders will generally shape their choices according to the ever-evolving calculus of risk and opportunity that such power balances imply. The Confucian-moralist flesh of Chinese strategic culture, however, still exerts influence on Beijing's behavior, causing it to differ in some regards from what one might expect from classical realism. These deviations need to be understood, particularly to the degree that Confucian moralism may in reality tend to push behavior in directions different from the peace-loving benevolence predicted by the CCP's official narrative.

Ideological Sensitivity

Traditional cultural elements help make the PRC more sensitive to matters of image, reputation, and ideological justification than one would presumably expect of a purely realist power. This is the result of a confluence of elements within Chinese strategic culture. It is an important idiosyncrasy of that culture, for instance, that foreign and domestic matters are entangled in significant ways. The Chinese cultural heritage of virtuocratic political pretension blurs the distinction between these realms—both because the authority-organizing power of virtue in political affairs is not envisioned as stopping at state frontiers and because any defects in the order created by one's virtue carry implications for the legitimacy of one's authority—while making it difficult for China's rulers to admit anything but omniscient benevolence in either sphere.

Particularly since the CCP lacks any other foundation on which to legitimize its rule, the regime must maintain the quasi-Confucian legitimacy narrative of virtuocratic merit at all costs, and this has implications across the breadth of Chinese public policy. Among them, it has a significant impact on censorship and propaganda, both at home and, increasingly, abroad. The international aspects of what officials call "grasp[ing] the discourse power...to capture position" are particularly interesting, for they are closely

⁶² "Our Bulldozers, Our Rules," *Economist*, July 2, 2016, 37–38; and Wang Faan et al., *Zhongguo heping fazhan zhong de qiangjun zhanlue* [China's Strategy for Invigorating the Armed Forces amid Peaceful Development] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2011), chap. 1.

bound to imperatives of the great telos of return.⁶³ For a successful return, China apparently needs not only to depict itself as a virtuous paragon state on the international stage but also, in a postmodern wrinkle on ancient tribute state psychodynamics, to have others acknowledge it as such (or at least acquiesce by not challenging China's assertions).

Even domestically, within the virtuocratic framework, to concede the existence of major problems is to raise questions about the CCP's claimed right to rule, which grounds itself in economic development, political harmony, and China's growing status. Such legitimacy-imperiling political dynamics are less acute when the CCP can describe difficulties as not being the party's fault—e.g., when they are cast as ills inflicted by malevolent “foreign forces” with “ulterior motives.”⁶⁴ Even where notional blame can be shifted, however, this can still create challenges, inasmuch as problems that the regime cannot simply deny by hiding them behind veils of censorship can produce increasingly repressive party postures against real or imagined domestic opponents, not to mention a grievance-mongering xenophobia against foreign adversaries that inflames Chinese nationalist sentiment and may encourage international belligerence.

For a regime that professes such certitude about its own merits and course, the CCP seems deeply insecure not only about things directly bearing on its own monopolization of power in China (e.g., the “spiritual pollution” of Western political values) but also even about seemingly minor aspects of image maintenance and perceived status.⁶⁵ For example, despite emphasizing the distinctive merit of China's ancient culture and invoking the importance of Chinese values, the regime seems to delight in validation by eminent (or purportedly eminent) Westerners, with “international observers” credited wherever possible with “marveling at the sustained vigor and vitality of the Communist Party of China...and the glorious achievements it has made.”⁶⁶

⁶³ David Bandurski, “Listen to the Citizens, and Control them,” China Media Project, June 22, 2010.

⁶⁴ Wang Jisi, “From Paper Tiger to Real Leviathan: China's Images of the United States since 1949,” in *Chinese Images of the United States*, ed. Carola McGiffert (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2005), 9, 13, 18; “Conscientiously Preserving Social Harmony and Stability,” *Beijing Daily*, March 5, 2011; and David Bandurski, “Beijing Daily: The Masses Support Stability,” China Media Project, March 6, 2011, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/03/06/10679>.

⁶⁵ See Nathan, *Chinese Democracy*, 123.

⁶⁶ Yao Jianing, “Senior PLA Official Meets with Former U.S. Secretary of State,” China Military Online, March 21, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-03/21/content_6970195.htm; and “Chinese Communist Party Lauded for Strength, Achievements on 95th Birthday,” Xinhua, July 1, 2016. The PRC eagerly latches on to “foreign expert” opinions congruent with its message, even when the experts are obscure and the position tendentious. See “UK Law Expert: South China Sea Arbitration Lacks Legal Basis,” *People's Daily*, June 22, 2016; and Fu Jing, “South China Sea Tribunal Has No Validity,” *China Daily*, June 27, 2016. Chinese press accounts also delight in depicting elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as Spring Festival (New Year) celebrations, as being “no longer celebrated only by Chinese people” but as having “an ever larger effect internationally.” Gao Yanan, “Chinese New Year Carries Weight Worldwide,” *People's Daily*, February 15, 2016.

Understanding the virtocratic pretension and politico-moral insecurity of the modern Chinese regime gives insight into why Beijing considers it so important to try to control such things as descriptions of World War II in Japanese textbooks, a mural painted on a private building in a small Oregon town that highlights Chinese brutality in Tibet and advocates Taiwanese independence, or website data from the U.S. embassy in Beijing that contradicts official Chinese air pollution figures, among other examples.⁶⁷ Modern Chinese leaders are extraordinarily interested in what they call “grabbing the megaphone” of public discourse even overseas, reportedly spending \$10 billion a year trying to place propaganda messages in foreign media and reacting with notable bitterness and anger to perceived slights.⁶⁸

Almost all governments care about their international image, of course, and make its promotion part of their public diplomacy. Few, however, seem to care about it as much as the CCP regime or turn with such vicious intensity against those who “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people” by disrespecting China’s virtue and status.⁶⁹ There seems to be no *de minimis* threshold for what can count as a grievance against the PRC’s dignity.

I would suggest, however, that this characteristic behavior is not the result of any actual immaturity. Rather, it is the natural and foreseeable result of the CCP’s lack of any democratic legitimacy capable of providing a foundation for state authority independent of the monist and virtocratic conceits of a Confucian political tradition that tends to prize virtue-based claims to political power, to stress role-ascriptive articulations of social hierarchy and see agreement on such positional status as essential to social order, and to fear disorder and pluralism as indicators of the leadership’s moral failure and hence lack of a right to rule. In this fashion, some of the distinctively Chinese elements within Chinese strategic culture have made the PRC more sensitive to matters of image, reputation, and ideological justification than one would expect of a classically realist power.

⁶⁷ See the foreword by Quansheng Zhao in Xuanli Liao, *Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks and China’s Policy towards Japan* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006), ix; Bennett Hall, “Mural Draws Fire from China,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, September 8, 2012, http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/mural-draws-fire-from-china/article_22529ace-f94a-11e1-bf2a-0019bb2963f4.html; and Tanya Branigan, “APEC: China Blocks Access to U.S. Air Pollution Data for Beijing,” *Guardian*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/10/apec-china-blocks-access-us-air-pollution-data-beijing>. Nor do Chinese authorities shrink from such things as demanding rosier assessments from economists and other analysts “whose public remarks on the economy are out of step with the government’s upbeat statements.” Lingling Wei, “China Presses Economists to Brighten Their Outlooks,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2016.

⁶⁸ “Grabbing the Megaphone,” China Media Project, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2010/04/20/5436>; and “Who Draws the Party Line?” *Economist*, June 25, 2016, 36.

⁶⁹ Biwu Zhang, *Chinese Perceptions of the U.S.: An Exploration of China’s Foreign Policy Motivations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 56.

The Exacerbated Realism of Moralistic Coercion

In contradistinction to the official narrative of a Confucian moral tradition that pulls China away from a classically violence-focused realpolitik, the PRC's cultural inheritance could exacerbate the problems of potential belligerence already implicit within the realist paradigm for any increasingly muscular rising power. Here, I see four principal reasons for concern.

Ideological incentives to violence. On top of the ideological sensitivity discussed in the preceding section, elements of Sinic idiosyncrasy may make China more prone to violence over particular issues than a more conventional realism would suggest is warranted. The case of Taiwan is illustrative. A traditional realist would presumably not be averse to territorial self-aggrandizement if the associated costs and risks did not make attack prohibitively dangerous. Yet that same traditional realist would surely also not seek out confrontation with powerful opponents in order to seize territory that presents no threat and the forcible possession of which is unlikely to bring significant concrete benefit.

Nevertheless, Beijing is almost fanatically committed to the principle that Taiwan—an island that has enjoyed *de facto* independence for generations and presents almost no military threat to the PRC—must be prevented from declaring *de jure* independence at virtually any cost, and that Taiwan's eventual joinder with the mainland must be ensured by force if necessary. Nor is this just a rhetorical posture. Ensuring the capability to defeat Taiwanese “splittism” has been an organizing principle of the PRC's military posture for decades and has long been a driver for its anticipation of a possible conflict with U.S. naval forces if they are sent to save Taiwan from invasion. Indeed, PRC officials have repeatedly signaled that they would attack Taiwan even if it did nothing more than officially declare itself independent. Unless this is all entirely a calculating realist's bluff—which seems unlikely, since a predictable result of this posture is to make both Taipei and Washington more concerned about and prepared for war with Beijing than would otherwise have been the case—the PRC's bellicose approach to Taiwan is hard to understand as fundamentally realpolitik behavior. To make sense of it, one must turn to more ideational factors.

Here we circle back to the essentialist eternalism so prominent in the PRC's official narrative of China. The legitimacy discourse of the contemporary CCP cannot permit any admission that what has been declared to be “China” has any destiny other than unification under party control. In the Chinese tradition, as we have seen, political authority is both virtocratic and inherently monist. Accordingly, if China has always been by its nature one and indissoluble and if Taiwan has been part of China in the past, then the CCP cannot concede that the island's destiny today is anything other than

reunification, because to do this would impugn its legitimacy to rule at all. Taiwan's development from a one-party Kuomintang dictatorship to a vibrant democracy over the last quarter-century has only made this problem worse. For the CCP to accept the legitimacy of a Taiwan that is both independent and democratic would be to admit that electorally accountable governance is an option available and appropriate for Chinese people—a position that is obviously anathema to CCP authorities.

Thus, ideological imperatives linked to Chinese political culture and party legitimacy narratives have helped push the regime's calculation of its interests in directions different from what one might expect of a more thoroughgoing realism. Significantly, this “realism with Chinese characteristics” seems more aggressive and conflict-prone as a result of the admixture of these ideational elements.

Unrealistic global ambition. Second, virtuocratic pretensions and an obsession with positional hierarchy—coupled with and fed by officially promoted narratives of past national humiliation that it is China's destiny to rectify and overcome—seem to have encouraged the CCP not just to build up China to the point where it can resist international “bullying” and protect its sovereign rights, but in fact also to go much further: to seek an ambitious revision of the structure and norms of the international system so as to privilege China and achieve its long-awaited return to geopolitical primacy. This line of thought has been encouraged by modern Chinese thinkers' frequent recourse to models of statecraft with roots in canonical works from the Warring States period, which in their own time spoke insistently to the imperative of systemic primacy. Moreover, it gains momentum from Confucian-Mencian traditions of monist, virtuocratic political authority and has been nourished by generations of regime propaganda focused on the great telos of return.

The impact of the CCP regime's fetishization of humiliation-redressing return and rejuvenation—coupled with longings for the status and civilizational supremacy that imperial China is imagined to have enjoyed in the ancient world—may push the PRC toward prideful assertion and unreasonable ambition, making it less conflict-averse and less likely to settle for sub-maximalist positions and outcomes than would a state with a more conventionally realist approach. Where one might expect the behavior of a pure realist to be modulated depending on the circumstances, sensitive to both positive and negative shifts in relative power, the modern PRC's realpolitik with Chinese characteristics may find self-restraint more challenging and the prospect of reverses more difficult to accept because of its emotional investment in a romanticized concept of national destiny and the great telos of return. In this way, ideological imperatives may push

Chinese strategic culture in a direction very different from what the official PRC narrative would lead one to expect.

Inflammatory moralism. The third type of potential problem lies in the link between virtuocracy and two related forms of moralistic oppositionalism: the demonization of opponents (to forestall the emergence of competitors in virtue) and the depiction of all significant problems as being someone else's fault (to forestall suspicions that one does not deserve to rule after all). To the degree that virtocratic pretension, and its associated modern performance metrics of ever-advancing Chinese power, prosperity, and international status, form critical components of the CCP regime's legitimacy narrative, one should expect any unfavorable perturbations in China's trajectory to give rise to more vituperative and heavy-handed treatment of dissenters at home and to more shrill opposition to and blame-shifting demonization of real or imagined adversaries abroad.⁷⁰

Moreover, because virtocratic politics do not permit leaders to concede error or incompetence, and because the CCP's hostility to democratic values denies the party a claim to legitimacy grounded in anything more than the Confucian conceit that unaccountable power is the natural result of omniscient benevolence, the regime may be tempted to take unusually risky courses of action for fear of otherwise having to admit that some major plank of its policy agenda had been wrongheaded. As Scobell has suggested, despite its self-image as being conflict-averse, traditional Chinese society nonetheless approved of the use of force and coercion by state and authority figures against those that threatened "the correct order of things"—a position that seems reinforced by China's adherence for many decades to Marxist-derived conceptions of class struggle, which tend to valorize violence against "enemies of the people."⁷¹ Such vituperative moralism is seldom conducive to moderation.⁷²

The virtocratic pretensions of Chinese strategic culture, therefore, may be less conducive to the peaceful pursuit of harmonious coexistence than to a moralistic irascibility likely to inflame tensions more than soothe them. This is thus another way in which realism with Chinese characteristics might derogate from what one might expect from the realism of traditional imagining, but this departure is not in the direction of peace-loving harmoniousness. Instead, emphasis on the axiomatic righteousness of

⁷⁰ As China's debt burden mounts and the economy slows under President Xi Jinping, for instance, there seems to be not just an ever-harsher crackdown upon dissent but also an increasing emphasis on the CCP's role in providing "ideological guidance" across the breadth of Chinese politics. See, "The Return of Correct Thinking," *Economist*, April 23, 2016, 35–36.

⁷¹ Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 22–24.

⁷² Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System," 1008.

China's cause and the depravity of any who stand in its way may serve to reinforce, rather than counteract, the sort of violence-friendly parabellum instincts identified by Johnston and others.

The “cult of defense.” The Chineseness of China's strategic culture might also exacerbate parabellum tendencies in a fourth way: by providing a discourse in which the PRC can essentially rationalize any use of force as necessary for self-defense, that most upright of moral principles justifying violence. As discussed above, Huiyun Feng sees Chinese strategic culture as fundamentally “defensive in nature.”⁷³ While this view correctly identifies a defensive focus as being an important part of how PRC leaders articulate and defend their policies, Scobell's account is more consistent with what we have seen both in actual Chinese practice and in the ideological imperatives of virtocratic legitimation—what he terms a cult of defense, through the prism of which whatever China does is defensive and fundamentally benevolent in nature.

Such a mindset, however, does not merely make it easier to rationalize or publicly defend violence one might wish to undertake for other reasons. As Scobell suggests, the cult of defense may impede China's ability to manage crises and conduct foreign and national security policy in ways that are in fact realistic, for it threatens to leave Beijing intellectually “incapable of recognizing that actions it views as purely defensive may be construed as offensive and threatening in other capitals.”⁷⁴ But the problem might actually be worse than Scobell suggests. Framing the use of force as a matter of self-defense also undermines arguments against using violence, making such force seem non-optional and making moderation in its employment sound like a kind of self-betrayal.

Just as the moralism of Chinese virtocracy can impede compromise or bargaining with opponents that it obliges the regime to portray as depraved threats to the natural order of things, China's discourse of infinitely malleable “defensive” self-justification could make violence seem more attractive or necessary in the first place. These ideological factors may thus reinforce each other, potentially creating a strategic culture that is both intemperate and immoderate, perhaps eventually even to the point of pathology—a parabellum paradigm both comfortable with the use of force and predisposed against the traditional realist's willingness to be flexible, or even to retreat, when circumstances require.

⁷³ Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture*, 2, 74, 80.

⁷⁴ Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 198.

The Realism of Party Self-Interest

In at least one way, however, China's legacy of quasi-Confucian virtuocratic political culture could help moderate the moralistic bellicosity of such a system of exacerbated realism. In certain circumstances, it might be possible to elicit restraint where the interests of the CCP itself can be pitted against the broader interests of the country as a power maximizer in the international arena. This possibility derives from seeing in the PRC's decision-making process a very specific sort of realism: a party-focused realism rather than one that necessarily revolves around the interests of the Chinese state or the Chinese people. The CCP, in other words, prizes its own continued survival and monopoly of power irrespective of whether this is good for China as a whole.

Understanding this partial relocation of the locus of realist calculation opens up new avenues for analysis and may also offer opportunities to influence Chinese behavior by playing on this distinction. To the degree, for example, that foreign bellicosity seems incompatible with the party's own domestic self-interest—such as if the CCP were to perceive that in the event of conflict it would be faced with conditions inside China in which party officials would no longer be able to guarantee their own continued control⁷⁵—it might be possible to elicit moderation from party-centric realists in Beijing even when a more state-centric realism might still counsel war.

Indeed, in the right circumstances, it might be possible to leverage the fragility of quasi-Confucian political authority against the party, inasmuch as the CCP's performance-based legitimacy narrative is a brittle one likely to have trouble handling undeniable setbacks or failures. If a situation were to confront the party, in other words, with a sufficiently high likelihood of failure in a major international undertaking—or even a sufficiently high likelihood that aggressive action would result in a diminishment of China's international status and thus a reversal on the road to real civilizational return and global respect—this might suffice to deter that undertaking. This, after all, seems to have been part of the thinking behind Deng Xiaoping's warning about biding time, which was all the more essential for fear that the CCP's authority could not survive leading China unprepared into another Qing-style humiliation in a confrontation with barbarian outsiders. Looking forward, it might be possible to induce a return to Dengist strategic caution by confronting the CCP itself with the risk of regime calamity triggered by international failure.

⁷⁵ One example of such a scenario is if a foreign adversary seemed likely in wartime not just to target traditional military assets and facilities but also to disrupt the regime's instruments of coercive political control, such as its Internet monitoring, censorship, and message control system, or the command-and-control network of its domestic security police.

Conclusion

Chinese strategic culture is an amalgam: a fundamentally realist system, but one nonetheless shaped by ideational elements with roots in China's ancient history and the assumptions its people have traditionally made about the nature of power, authority, and China's role in the world. It is important to understand this *realpolitik* with Chinese characteristics, both because its contours help explain actual PRC behavior and because such an understanding may help foreign leaders in dealing with a rising China.

It follows from the foregoing analysis that just as the core of Chinese strategic culture is a realist one, so presumably should responses to China follow a basically realist logic—one alive to the impact of shifting power balances, including the role of hard power and deterrence-based strategic signaling as key components of competitive behavior, and dedicated to adjusting the ingredients and manifestations of countervailing national power for best advantage. This is a discourse that Chinese leaders understand, one that shapes their own behavior, and one to which they are likely, on the whole, to respond. At the same time, however, a sophisticated understanding of the Chineseness that is nonetheless present in Chinese strategic culture can point us to the ways in which Chinese realism is likely to differ from realist expectations, for good or for ill.

Understanding these wrinkles can help improve policies for dealing with a rising China. As we have seen, one important way in which this may occur is through efforts to deter aggression through an awareness of—and a systematic effort to target—the insecurities inherent in the party-centric realism of the CCP's calculations and the ways in which these weaknesses might perhaps be manipulated to elicit a return to less provocative and more Dengist forms of strategic caution. In the realm of soft power and diplomatic engagement, moreover, Sinologically informed policies might also affect the PRC beyond what traditional realism would suggest is possible.

As one example, precisely because discourse control is so important to PRC leaders—and because their strategic culture seems to drive them in somewhat idiosyncratic directions in diplomacy and propaganda—one might expect that other powers' public diplomatic engagement with China could play with some effectiveness, in both positive (affirming) and negative (oppositional) ways, on the peculiar predilections and sensitivities of the modern CCP's quasi-Confucianized virtuocratic narrative. Although it is common for Western leaders to criticize the PRC for censorship and human rights abuses, the CCP might find it more painful to be accused of failings that more directly challenge the party's legitimacy. Exposing the endemic corruption of China's party-state system and the personal venality and moral

turpitude of CCP leaders, for instance, might do more to rattle party grantees and undercut their legitimacy within China than simply decrying their use of heavy-handed tactics against dissidents. After all, ruthless coercion against those who threaten social “harmony” has always been practiced in China and has traditionally been considered acceptable and appropriate even within the system of Confucian ethics. By contrast, being exposed as corrupt, selfish, and immoral—and as being incompetent or incapable enough so as to allow disorder and injustice to flourish in society—would drive directly at the core of the virtocratic legitimacy narrative of every Chinese regime, including the contemporary CCP. Such criticism strikes, in effect, at its “mandate of heaven.”⁷⁶ The ability to play on such narratives could be a useful tool.

That said, while there is a great deal to admire in China’s venerable civilization, this chapter’s exploration of Chinese strategic culture suggests that troubling pathologies can arise from this ancient culture’s interaction with the modern circumstances of CCP rule. Of particular concern is the emergence of a dogmatic moralism and virtocratically insecure irascibility that may tend to create an exacerbated realism that is potentially more prone to violence even than classic *realpolitik* would suggest. This chapter has examined some of these dynamics in the hope of prompting deeper engagement by policymakers and scholars with these important issues.

⁷⁶ Christopher Ford, “Puncturing Beijing’s Propaganda Bubble: Seven Themes,” New Paradigms Forum, November 20, 2015, <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=1993>.

