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The New China: Embodying the “Middle Kingdom”

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Much discussion over the past decade has focused on China’s evolving role in the international system as evidence for a new China. One hundred years ago this October, the Manchu Qing dynasty ceased to govern China at the conclusion of a century of decreasing political cohesion and increased discontent in the face of frustration that, among other things, China was falling woefully behind the rest of the world. The 1842 Treaty of Nanking, resulting in the surrender of Hong Kong to Great Britain and the forced opening of several ‘treaty ports’ to foreigners’ trade and intervention, was only the first major indicator of the failure of ‘the Middle Kingdom’ in its traditional position as a center, dominant state in the international community with all of the attendant rights, privileges, and cultural pride.

This paper discusses the moves that the “new China” of the post-Maoist period has taken to return to its position as “Middle Kingdom.” The goal is not entirely concluded because Taiwan remains outside of Beijing’s control which will continue keeping the government in Beijing from believing it has accomplished its mission. The discussion will project possible Chinese behavior in the future to return to its position in the international system while exploring what the true objectives of such goals serve in the Chinese system today.

China’s Turbulent Century

October 10, 2011 marked the hundredth anniversary since the Qing Dynasty collapsed as the governing power in China. The dynasty was in decline from at least the 1840s, when British, U.S., and French traders had support from their home governments to engage in actions which would force Beijing to open ‘treaty ports’ to non-Chinese trade, and resulted in an expansion of the opium trade from the outside into China and the flow of silver from China in exchange. While the Qing clung to power and *formally* retained power, the foreigners pressured the regime to alter its decisions to ignore activities perpetrated by the foreigners as they expanded their activities inside of China, including bringing in outsiders to engage in religious conversation attempts (to ‘Christianize’ the Middle Kingdom) and to engage in increasingly important trade

relations in the hopes of getting a foothold in a lucrative Chinese market for all sorts of western products.¹

As the ‘round eyes’, a pejorative commonly used for the non-Chinese who became increasingly common especially along the coast, proliferated, providing a direct threat to the sovereign rights of the Qing emperors and their courts and minions across China, public movements in China encouraged the government to reassert China’s position as the Middle Kingdom. The term "Zhongguo" had long been recognized as it described China’s position as the ‘middle’ state around which the rest of the world has developed, providing a unifying theme for China as the nation had a recognizable ethnicity, the Han, in a territory (roughly the geographic entity coinciding with the current entity known as China in Asia), with a written language (Mandarin). The history, passed down through the hundreds of years since China had been “unified” under the Qin dynasty (331-206 BCE), is a source of great national pride and frequently referenced in Chinese discussions. While the term and concept date well back in Chinese history, it had also been a concept that the Chinese understood in the nineteenth century as they saw the challenge of non-Chinese actors come into the nation, threatening their understanding of self-governance as well as of their way of life as the kingdom to which others paid obeisance rather than the dependent, vulnerable state which China was becoming as the nineteenth century progressed. When the Qing, a Manchu (non-Han) dynasty long hated as exploiting the true nature of China, fell, the citizens of China swiftly embraced the ouster without having an obvious replacement.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen, a China-born but U.S.-educated doctor, offered a somewhat vague vision of a democratic system without foreigners in any way coercing Chinese leadership. A man who launched the Nationalist Party, concentrated in southern China with strength in the city of Canton, Sun proved unable to spread the revolution and his vision throughout China as the country dissolved into war-lord-run regions that challenged any central government before his death in the mid-1920s. Sun’s vision, however, of a China fully sovereign and able to defend its traditional position as a major player in its portion of the world (which the Chinese saw as THE world) did take root, as his death exacerbated a struggle between visions for the new China that would be Communist-inspired versus the Nationalist Party which Sun had founded.

Between 1926 and 1949, China descended into war, much of it Chinese on Chinese. The Japanese invasion in 1931 led to a generation of conflict that was some of the most inhuman in a period of international brutality that was astonishing in breadth and depth. When World War II ended with Japan’s defeat, the Chinese civil war resumed in earnest, leading to a nation further broken and uncertain of its future.

The Early Years of the Party Control

Mao Zedong famously declared in October 1949 that "China had risen off of her knees" in reference to the foreigners’ control over the country. Preaching a form of Chinese cultural and political superiority over the rest of the world and Soviet Marxism, Mao preferred leaving the new People’s Republic of China poor and suffering from retarded economic/technical/political

¹ There are many fascinating books on this time period. An easily accessible one is Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* 2nd edition, (New York: Norton, 1999).

conditions compared with the rest of Asia which was receiving reconstruction assistance poured in from the United States. Instead of getting that type of relationship with the United States, Mao maintained his revolution with Chinese characteristics² by tying it a series of wildly shifting national policies which were irrational (the Great Leap Forward, 1957-1960) or aimed at disrupting the development of any potential challengers within the Party (the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976).

Mao's overall effect was to undermine alternate centers of power within the Party while, more importantly, leaving China deeply behind the massive technical advances which characterized the post-World War II period around the world. Instead of the post-Revolutionary period being one of peace, which was desired by the war-weary Chinese populous, Mao's policies managed to paralyze any serious Chinese economic growth³ or modernization while mocking Mao's alleged return of China to its traditional position of the Middle Kingdom as a pivotal state in the world system.

The True New China

Mao's death in September 1976 and the attendant rise of Deng Xiaoping finally led to a true emergence of the New China that many thought would appear after the foreigners were ousted by the end of the civil war in 1949. Deng's embrace of the "Four Modernisations"⁴, coinciding with foreign investment, initially from Taiwan and Hong Kong that could bring changes to the Pearl River delta which allowed the explosion of small factories which would employ young Chinese to produce consumer products for export that would fuel China's modernization. While Deng delivered his priority challenge, China then went through three and a half decades of massive economic growth to provide revenue to the government in Beijing to expand its economic prowess and provide a dramatically improved standard of living for hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens.

Along with that increased standard of living, the Communist Party could claim credit for China gradually returning to its position as a global international player. States around the world, roughly beginning with the early 1970s, had withdrawn their diplomatic acceptance of Taipei as the capital of China in favor of Beijing; even Taiwan's major ally, Washington, did so in 1979. China's position as a permanent member of the Security Council reminded the world of China's role as one of the five most important nations in the world, one to whom states might turn for support and/or leadership.

² Philip Short. *Mao: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

³ Frank Dittoker, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London: Walker and Company, 2010)

⁴ Originally accredited to Mao's long-term revolutionary compatriot, Zhou EnLai, long the foreign 'face' of the People's Republic before his death in early 1976, Deng supported and encouraged the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense, in that priority. A new biography of Deng Xiaoping highlights the evolution of support for this modernization. See Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University/Belknap Press, 2011).

As China's economic prowess grew, the sense that the old, failed China of the past was receding into bad memories under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. For a generation of young people under the age of 35, who have no memory of the humiliation under the Treaty of Nanjing, the Taiping Rebellion (with its nominal responsibility borne by the foreigners who introduced Christianity to the Middle Kingdom), the banditry of the 1920s, the Long March of the 1930s, the horrors of the Japanese invasion, the starvation of the 1950s, and the unpredictability of the Cultural Revolution, this New China was a place of great pride and, apparently, virtually unbroken opportunities for growth.⁵

The Party sought to return all of what it defined as *Zhongguo* to the control or the domain of the 'New China.' The missing part of this equation was Taiwan, the island that has operated as a *de facto* independent entity since 1949. Taiwan, first under the Nationalists and the father-son Chiang family then the subsequent electoral victors, has increasingly been an entity that appeared to undermine the Party's claims of a New China: Beijing was not strong enough to achieve the goal of getting all of what Beijing states unequivocally is China's historic territory and population. As long as Taiwan seeks to retain its sovereignty, the New China is not fully in place and the Party must continue fighting for that objective.

New China-New Middle Kingdom-Old Party?

China's Communist Party seeks to reunify Taiwan to conclude a painful chapter in the Middle Kingdom's history, but it also views this and other foreign policy goals as methods to keep the party in control. The Party leadership understands that it took power through the violence of the civil war and fears that violence could again undermine the Chinese government as it did in 1911.

At the same time, the Party recognizes that the New China must take steps that prove it is the Middle Kingdom as much as simply stating it. The Party is thus willing to use foreign policy activities to achieve both its goal of staying in power along with helping provide an enhanced standard of living for Chinese, ensuring petroleum supplies, and other means that will help them meet these goals. The overall objective is to retain power through proving it is a New China which has been able to reach the peak that was the Middle Kingdom in the distant past.

The Party needs to have ample evidence that its actions have led directly to the changes that have been positive for China. These include trumpeting the sustained economic growth that has led to millions of jobs and raising the standards of living for all of China but most dramatically for the three to four hundred people raised out of poverty into a considerably better life in the last thirty years. Additionally, the Party needs to be able to cite its ability to force foreigners to stop "humiliating" China by curtailing activities that China believes adversely affects its interests. At the same time, the Party raises China's prestige by assuming positions in international organizations, such as U.N. peacekeeping efforts, where China is a decisive player. This is a continuing process, however, that requires the Party to keep pushing—and succeeding.

⁵ Countless stories in various sources discuss enhanced young people's pride in China today that was not evident a generation ago.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the Chinese Communist Party is to retain its control over governing. The Party believes its governance has returned China to its rightful position as the Middle Kingdom and that it is able to increase the country's position of respect globally. There is a sole exception to this picture: Taiwan, still outside of the fold, was a reminder that the New China had not entirely reached the position of being the Middle Kingdom that had no outsiders deter or coerce its decision-making.

The Party also believes it still has the responsibility of reuniting Taiwan with the mainland as a national obligation. This partially justifies the Party staying in power but also addresses the concept of the New China being synonymous with the Middle Kingdom.⁶ The Party will keep working towards this goal, and the Chinese people are likely to have high tolerance for this goal.

But foreign policy goals intertwine with other Party aspirations and imperatives. The question will be how long the Party can sustain all of this as it becomes more demanding about domestic priorities instead of accepting that the Middle Kingdom trumps everything else.

For the United States, this means the interactions with China will be increasingly complicated, complex, and challenging. There is no easy "finish line" to this evolving relationship which will make either the United States or China comfortable with the other's stance in East Asia or the international community. The key for the United States will be balancing actual Chinese behavior with anticipated or feared aspirations. This will prove a delicate balance for U.S. strategists and their counterparts in Beijing but the risk of failures are significant and the costs of miscalculations high for billions around the world.

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⁶ *Financial Times*, October 11, 2011.