

## Chapter 4

# The Rise of China: History as Policy

Wang Gungwu

The topic of this chapter is ‘the rise of China’ from the perspective of ‘history as policy’ and, as an historian, I am tempted to tell you of the many rises (and falls) of China over the past three millennia. I will, however, resist that temptation. Taking the long view, this China is not rising from its lowest ever position in its history; nor has it risen to anywhere near its highest position when it was perhaps the richest country in the world. Yet, the speed of the recent rise is unprecedented and China cannot turn to its history for help where its economic development is concerned.

How does one measure a ‘rise’ of this nature? We have seen dramatic figures that show how the Chinese economy grew by an average of about 10 per cent annually for the past 27 years. When compared with the peak periods of development of Germany and Japan, first in the nineteenth century and then again since the end of the Second World War, such a growth rate is not the highest. All the same, the figures are exceptional for a centrally planned economy transiting towards a market economy. It is this astonishing feature that first attracted attention. Today, the world has gone beyond that to acknowledge that China is marching towards becoming a major economic power. Moreover, given its vast land and population, plus its ability to produce and mobilise skilled manpower quickly, there are expectations that China will continue to grow at high rates for decades to come. The major questions are whether the leaders are ready to initiate political reforms that could trigger even greater changes in Chinese social and cultural life, and whether their failure to do so would sharply reverse the growth rates.

China has now taken its place as a nation in a world of nations. At the heart of this current rise are the experiences of several transformations from an imperial civilisation. China experienced centuries as an emperor-state before evolving into a republican party-state set up by revolutions; and this party-state has the job of shaping a modern nation-state. By this latest transformation, it not only has its own history to fall back on but also the histories of many other nations. The more China opens up to the world, the more world history will influence its policies. In this chapter, I shall focus on three examples—one from China’s own history, one from outside previous Chinese experience, and one that

illustrates China's creative merging of several histories to serve its current purpose.

### **The Lessons of History: Imperial China's Continental Focus**

China was a continental empire that rose midway up the Yellow River and from the edge of the steppes of Central Asia. Over 2000 years, the empire moved eastwards—including down the other major river, the Yangtze—until its centres were located at the delta regions of both river systems. Although it did eventually build a naval force that boasted the strongest fleet in the world by the fifteenth century, the empire never deviated from its continental commitment. The simple fact was that its really dangerous enemies had always come overland (from the north and west) and certainly never by sea. As a result, the interplay of overland and maritime concerns has always been unbalanced and most Chinese rulers never took naval power seriously. Thus, despite the several defeats by maritime powers in the nineteenth century, it took the Chinese half a century to pay any attention to rebuilding its navy. Even then, they were so helpless at sea for most of the twentieth century that naval capabilities had no role in determining the decisive victory of the Communist Party in 1949.

Here history plays a dual role. It is a burdensome reality that determines the mindset for long periods of time and history, but it could also be interpreted selectively and utilised to induce policy changes. The latter aspect taught Chinese leaders to pay closer attention to the sea while the former continues to inhibit thinking about how best to use maritime power in the most effective way. The story of the debates about the development of the Chinese Navy is too long to relate here. Suffice to say that continental strategies still dominate thinking and place constraints on China's ideas about power projection. Such strategies have stopped China from embarking on the kind of global commitment that the model of British maritime power presented. The Chinese are prepared to leave it to the United States to emulate that. Instead, they have concentrated on land-based nuclear and missile weaponry that would enable them to defend themselves against all kinds of aggression. As for naval force, it is enough to limit that to what would be essential to prevent Taiwan from being used by forces hostile to China's interests. In short, here China's own history has been both a constraint and a reality check and, as far as I can comprehend, the Chinese have examined their historical experiences to good effect.

### **The Lessons of History: How Other Empires Rose and Fell**

My second example arises from lessons learnt from other people's histories, especially those of modern national empires. Chinese leaders have been studying the emergence of the nation-states in Western Europe for a long time now, and noted how many of them were established when earlier empires disintegrated (the classic case of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century has been compared

with the United States as the first new nation created out of the British empire). Of particular relevance to China was that some nation-states had expanded to create their own national empires by the nineteenth century. The success of the Dutch, the British and the French set the standards of modern imperial success, and later nation-states (like Germany) so admired them that they set out to build their own national empires.

In Asia, closely emulating both the German and British empires, the Japanese followed suit. The Chinese are well aware that the later entrants to imperial rivalry and the contest for territory were more urgently aggressive than those that existed before them. However, they also note how others are today using the Germany and Japan analogies to speculate about China's nationalist future, and they have been prepared to counter such analogies by policies and actions that would render such comparisons unjustified. Some recent examples are China's self-conscious use of phrases like 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development', and 'social harmony' as ultimate national goals. One might also include the new Confucius Institute program that emulates the British Council, Alliance Française and Goethe Institute, which are symbols of post-imperial efforts to dilute traditional notions of power projection.

That is one side of the coin. The other side derives from the history of new and smaller nation-states being created out of failed and declining empires, something that larger nation-states and successful empires had encouraged. The best examples were the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires that many Chinese leaders carefully studied. Some of the new entities ended by becoming colonies of other empires—notably those of Britain, France and Russia. Yet there were also examples of the old imperial cores themselves becoming residual states, like that of Austria and, even more strikingly, that of modern Turkey. Decades later, this was repeated with the defeat of Germany and Japan, followed afterwards by Britain, France, Netherlands, Portugal and, after 1990, Soviet Russia. In each case, an empire more or less retreated back to the original nation-state.

China saw early in the twentieth century that this same fate could befall imperial China if empires like Russia, Japan and Britain each had their way. Japan went the furthest by detaching Taiwan and Manchuria and trying to control several Chinese provinces as parts of the Japanese empire. Russia helped to establish an independent Mongolia and failed in Xinjiang, but British India seemed only half-hearted about recognising Tibet as a distinct polity. China was fortunate. By pursuing their own, often competing interests, the Great Powers ultimately accepted Chinese sovereignty over territories defined by Qing imperial borders. The end of the Second World War confirmed those borders when Taiwan and Manchuria were returned to China. In that way, China was an

unusual example where the nation-state-to-be was more or less the previous empire—the Manchu empire becoming the Chinese nation, one might say.

China's rise today is tied to its ability to make this emperor-state equal to China the nation-state. Most members of the United Nations that recognise the People's Republic of China have accepted this, but debates about Taiwan, Tibet and the Uighur cause in Xinjiang remain. Such discord reflects shifting views about the security of post-Second World War boundaries. Of course, some of these views were by-products of the Cold War that used all varieties of nationalisms and localisms against international communism. But the threats to Chinese ideas of its national borders remain. Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia had troubled Mao Zedong, and the so-called Brezhnev doctrine was fiercely rejected at the time. More recently, China is not alone in watching the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the invasion of Iraq with apprehension. An age that threatens regime change, when the supposed sanctity of a country's sovereignty can no longer be taken for granted, calls for close attention to the lessons of other peoples' histories. The Chinese know that these lessons could apply to China itself. If such threats persist, it could feed into the nationalist agenda of those who place China's unification and survival above other goals. That would be a severe test of what the Chinese might have learnt about the need to contain heightened calls for robust nationalism in a suspicious neighbourhood, and to do it before that became too difficult for the leaders to control.

## **The Lessons of History: Preserving the Empire in the Modern Era**

I turn now to my third example where China's own history and the histories of others seem to converge. I refer to perceptions of what the term 'status quo' might mean. The Chinese have learnt how the term was used against them when China is compared with Otto von Bismarck's Germany as a non-status quo power (Japan since the Meiji was also described in a similar way). What does that mean for China? In Chinese history, the idea of status quo can be seen in the famous opening lines of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (a thirteenth–fourteenth century classical Chinese text attributed to Luo Guanzhong), which states that periods of division must end with unification, and periods of unity must end in division. To most Chinese, division and reunification invariably alternated. One learnt to live with that rhythm of change in political entities as a norm. In that context, the idea of sovereignty as a permanent condition that could be guaranteed by international law was new and something they came to value as a useful way to defend China's national rights. Can the two ideas be reconciled?

When China was described by the United States as a non-status quo power where Taiwan was concerned, its leaders were unsure what to do or say. Their protestations that the Taiwan issue was an internal matter—an extension of a

civil war—went unheeded. A confrontation over Taiwan that pits US guarantees and national credibility against China’s integrity and national honour would be very dangerous indeed. The American and European moral high ground raised the historical analogy of ‘non-status quo’ power—a rising China could be like Germany and Japan. The Chinese have since been concerned enough to pay special attention to the international system operating today to underline their commitment to the status quo. They have made great efforts to show consistency in supporting existing positions across the board. They also wish to affirm that they are content with such a state of affairs, where most nations recognise the People’s Republic of China as the only China and that there is no nation called Taiwan. That way, they can argue that anyone who seeks to change this situation would be the ‘non-status quo’ power and not China. Moreover, the Anti-Secession Act shows that China is prepared to go to war to preserve the status quo. According to the pendulum formula that division followed by unification is the inevitable norm, the Chinese can still contemplate the time when China’s unification is generally accepted.

There are many uses of history. I have selected some examples to suggest that, while the Chinese do not believe that history repeats itself, they have always been keen to use historical analogies in their policy analyses, irrespective of how far back in time they elect to go to draw those lessons. This is not necessarily backward-looking. Chinese practice shows that their ‘timeless’ approach, which sought the most helpful and relevant examples to support their current cause or guide their choice of policy, has been used with care, and often with practised skill. Whether they decided their policies first and then found historical examples to strengthen their case, or whether they searched the records to look for lessons that would be most appropriate for deciding on policy is not always obvious. That all rulers and their officials resorted to the use of history, however, is abundantly clear. Such dependence on analogies from the past often led Chinese elites to act conservatively. This could prove dangerous if it meant that they worked exclusively within their own historical boxes instead of being encouraged to think outside them. There is ample evidence that modern leaders have learnt, sometimes painfully, to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and to use historical analogies more creatively. When they succeed in doing so, it confirms that the practice of closely linking history and policy has served them well.