

The Historical Nature of China's  
“New Era of Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics”

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*“With decades of hard work, socialism with Chinese characteristics has crossed the threshold into a new era. This is a new historic juncture in China’s development....”*

-Xi Jinping, “Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” 2017

Over the recent years, there has been no lack of failed “forecasts” warning about the imminent collapse of China’s Communist Party-run system and government. Perhaps the most notorious of these was Gordon Chang’s 2001 book *The Coming Collapse of China*, with his “forecast” apparently being reiterated by him regularly, at least up until 2012.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, Georgetown University professor David Shambaugh claimed that “We cannot predict when Chinese communism will collapse, but it is hard not to conclude that we are witnessing its final phase. The CCP is the world’s second-longest ruling regime ....and no party can rule forever.”<sup>2</sup> Other such forecasts and predictions abound, as anyone can readily see by typing “fall of communist china” into their internet search engine. Of course, not only have none of these predictions been correct, but one might argue that the exact *opposite* has happened. *Why? How could such otherwise intelligent and well-informed Western analysts be so wrong?* I believe that the main reason for the glaring errors in analysis from these self-proclaimed forecasters is that they seem to insist on imposing relatively recent Western ideological prejudices upon what is in reality a long and complex Chinese historic process spanning over four millennia.

## **The Civilizational State**

I believe that the current course charted by Chinese President Xi Jinping is more clearly understood when viewed in the context of China’s historic dynastic cycles rather than as another

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon G. Chang, “The Coming Collapse of China: 2012 Edition,” *foreignpolicy.com*, December 29, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/29/the-coming-collapse-of-china-2012-edition/>

<sup>2</sup> François Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 201-202.

transient episode in the rocky history of modern China. Chinese scholar Zhang Weiwei's book *The China Wave* (which English edition was published in 2012) usefully sheds much light on this subject. Zhang is a former interpreter of Deng Xiaoping and is considered one of China's experts on foreign affairs. *The China Wave*, which has been recommended to dignitaries by Xi Jinping himself,<sup>3</sup> delineates some of the fundamental ideas governing the outlook of the present Chinese leadership and its self-identified commitment to a long-term historical view of itself. Zhang argues that China is not (and has no desire to be) a "Western democracy," but instead is a "civilizational state" which is "now the only country in the world which has amalgamated the world's longest continuous civilization with a huge modern state."<sup>4</sup> Identifying with this "continuous civilization" includes a renewed appreciation of the totality of Chinese history and culture, including the revival of Confucius and the Chinese Classics. Zhang further contends that this shift in Chinese identity to the civilizational state (made possible, in part, by Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" in the 1980s) has greatly contributed to the extraordinary recent growth of the Chinese economy and its global influence.<sup>5</sup> Chinese "New Left" intellectual Gan Yang has developed this further, claiming that China's success is the product of a combination of three traditions dominating the PRC today: the Mao period, the past twenty-five years of Deng Xiaoping inspired reforms, and finally, "the tradition of Chinese civilization that dates back several thousands of years."<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of his presidency in 2012, Xi Jinping's visit and speech to the newly renovated China National Museum was another important indication of such a commitment to

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Zhang Weiwei, *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilization State*, (Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Corporation, 2012), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-18.

<sup>6</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 151.

this historical identity for China. The new museum (now the largest in the world outside of Paris' Louvre) featured a "Road to Rejuvenation" exhibit, fusing post-1839 China with the rich cultural tradition of "5,000 years of continuous Chinese civilization." In the speech, Xi expressed his idea of the "Chinese Dream" that would guide "the historical struggle of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in forging valiantly ahead," and proceeded to forecast that by "the time of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party [2049], the objective of constructing a moderately prosperous society in a comprehensive manner can absolutely be realized."<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Xi deliberately (and consistently) uses the Confucian term *xiaokang shehui* (小康社会), or "moderate, prosperous society" to refer to China's future.<sup>8</sup> Xi's 2017 speech to the 19th National Congress of the CPC announcing the "New Era" for China strikes the same chord:

"Rooted in a land of more than 9.6 million square kilometers, nourished by a nation's culture of more than 5,000 years, and backed by the invincible force of more than 1.3 billion people, we have an infinitely vast stage of our era, a historical heritage of unmatched depth, and incomparable resolve that enable us to forge ahead on the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>9</sup>

## **The Confucian Revival**

Xi Jinping's surprising revival of Confucius and Confucian ideas contributes further to this historic Chinese identity. This was signified by Xi's now famous visit to Confucius' birthplace,

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<sup>7</sup> Xi Jinping, "Speech at 'The Road to Rejuvenation'," *China Copyright and Media*, November 29, 2010. <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/speech-at-the-road-to-rejuvenation/>

<sup>8</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 22-24.

<sup>9</sup> Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xinhua, October 18, 2017. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf)

Qufu, in 2013 and his subsequent celebration of the master's 2565<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2014. According to Xi, Confucianism has “recorded the Chinese nation's spiritual activities, rational thinking and cultural achievements in building their homeland, reflected spiritual pursuits of the Chinese nation, and provided a key source of nutrition for the survival and continuous growth of our nation.”<sup>10</sup> Not only was this a clear break from the mass, anti-Confucian campaigns of Mao, et.al. during the Cultural Revolution, but it ended more than a century of anti-Confucian sentiment in China by clearly identifying the PRC with this time-honored foundation of Chinese civilization.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, a key feature of this Confucian tradition that has generally characterized the most successful Chinese dynasties was the *meritocratic* system for choosing government officials, as opposed to primogeniture, or outright purchasing of offices.<sup>12</sup> In fact, both primogeniture and slavery were abolished in China during the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-202 BC).<sup>13</sup> This system, called *xuanxian juneng* (选贤住能) or “selecting the virtuous and recommending the able,” goes back to at least the Han Dynasty's compilation of the Confucian *Book of Rites* two millennia ago. Candidates for government appointments had to pass a series of rigorous exams at many levels demonstrating their mastery of the Confucian classics. Historically, this “rise by merit” system has been key to allowing social mobility in China, as, theoretically, one could rise from peasantry, pass all levels of exams, and reach the highest level government offices.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 129-131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Zhang, *The China Wave*, 131-132.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Murphey, *East Asia*, 103-104.

Although the Confucian examination system as such ended with the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the same *principle* of meritocracy is employed in the selection of top government officials in the PRC today, *sans* the required mastery of the Confucian classics.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the short video "How Leaders Are Made," which hit the internet in China in 2013. The video (which was made for children) promotes the idea that the rigor and effectiveness of the current selection of Chinese Communist Party leaders by merit and experience is more efficient and effective (at least for China) than Western democratic methods. The video quickly went viral, underlining the immense popularity of this ancient tradition among the Chinese population today.<sup>16</sup> Gan Yang (cited above) has written unambiguously that, "In essence, the People's Republic of China is a Confucian socialist republic."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Zhang Weiwei has characterized the current Communist Party of China as "in the Confucian ruling tradition," continuing "the long tradition of a unified Confucian ruling elite."<sup>18</sup> Some prominent scholars have even openly proposed a "Confucian constitution" for China, which would include a "house of scholars" as part of a tri-cameral system.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Mandate of Heaven**

Xi's advocacy of a tightly controlled centralized government is certainly something that upsets many Western observers, perhaps leading them to believe that this is something not desired by the Chinese people. In reality, China has been ruled by a relatively strong, unified political entity ninety-five percent of the time since the Qin Dynasty unification in 221 BC.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Zhang, *The China Wave*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 45. An English version of the video may be viewed at: [https://youtu.be/M734o\\_17H\\_A](https://youtu.be/M734o_17H_A)

<sup>17</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 151.

<sup>18</sup> Zhang, *The China Wave*, 60, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, 149-150.

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Weiwei, "The China Model and Its Implications," Schiller Institute, July 13, 2017, You Tube video,

More importantly, however, is that the *stable and prosperous* periods in Chinese history have been historically associated with not just strong governments, but also *enlightened* ones, whose main mission was to serve the development of the population as a whole. This idea of the primacy of the state serving the “people’s livelihood” goes back to at least Mencius (third century BC), who understood that any emperor or dynasty must practice *minxin* (民心) i.e., “win the minds and hearts of the people,” in order to maintain the “Mandate of Heaven.”<sup>21</sup> If, on the other hand, an emperor and dynasty failed to serve the interests of the people, revolts inevitably ensued as the dynasty lost the mandate and began to fall apart. A new “dynastic cycle” would then begin.<sup>22</sup> One can find many historic examples of this Chinese “cycle.” For example, the period of the Song Dynasty (960-1127) was in many ways a paradigm of “good governance,” where vast improvements in science, agriculture, and government combined with a flourishing of the arts produced a successful dynasty, despite fierce rivalries over the famous Wang Anshi reforms leading to its untimely collapse.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, The Han dynasty’s improvements in agriculture and technology, alleviating some of the burdens of everyday life for people, contributed greatly to its four hundred-plus year success.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the short-lived Sui Dynasty (581-617) carried out extensive infrastructure projects, but did them at the expense of a million-plus lives thus losing the “hearts and minds of the people,” resulting in rebellion and overthrow as they lost their Mandate.<sup>25</sup>

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20:11. <https://youtu.be/P7XIYP0Lvgl>

<sup>21</sup> Zhang, *The China Wave*, 131-132.

<sup>22</sup> Gascoigne, *Dynasties of China*, 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> Rhoades Murphey, *East Asia: A New History*, 5th Ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2010) 101-104.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>25</sup> Murphey, *East Asia*, 82.

Over the past decades, the increasing prosperity and drastic improvement of living conditions in China testify to an acute attention by its government to the people's livelihood.<sup>26</sup> The extraordinarily high approval rating of the Chinese people with their current government (80-90%) certainly seems to be in accord with the traditional Mandate of Heaven.<sup>27</sup> Since there's no indication that Xi Jinping or his collaborators intend to abandon this path of prosperity toward the Chinese Dream (at least not until 2049!), it seems that their current Mandate will hold for some time to come.

### **A New “Dynasty”?**

There are other aspects of China's New Era which echo the beginning of a successful phase of past dynasties. These include the building of new grand infrastructure projects and cities, the crackdown on corruption of past governments, and the deliberate identification of a new dynasty with the best traditions of Chinese civilization, to name but a few. There is also the issue of the periods of instability between dynasties in the historic Chinese cycle. These have quite often been between or even at the beginning of the most successful Chinese dynasties, before entering the period of their maximum development. A good example of this is the Han Dynasty which began with a period of instability until the reign of Han Wudi (some sixty years after the dynasty's founding) who set it on a solid footing where serious reforms could begin to be implemented.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, China saw a fifty-three year period of instability between the Tang and Song Dynasties, the so-called Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms.

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, “How Did China Succeed?”, BI Norwegian Business School, September 14, 2018, You Tube video. <https://youtu.be/law4n9IZDdc>

<sup>27</sup> Zhang, “The China Model and Its Implications,” 9:30.

<sup>28</sup> Bamber Gascoigne, *The Dynasties of China: A History*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004) 59.

Zhang Weiwei contends that China today is actually in the *beginning phase* of an upward *shi* (势) or “overall trend” typical of early periods of the most successful of Chinese dynasties, which have then lasted for another 200-300 years. From this standpoint, the sixty-five years between the end of the Qing Dynasty and Mao’s death in 1976 could rightfully be seen as such a period of instability before the take-off of China’s self-proclaimed New Era “dynasty” to new heights. Zhang drolly adds that “Western scholars and their pessimistic predictions of China’s collapse” are the only thing that has “collapsed” over the past two decades.<sup>29</sup> Conjecture perhaps, but one thing is certain: if today’s Western analysts don’t care to view China from such a long-term historical perspective, Xi Jinping and his CPC co-thinkers certainly do.

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<sup>29</sup> Zhang, *The China Wave*, 156-157.