

JFQ

JOINT FORCE QUARTERLY

Issue 47, 4th Quarter 2007

Published for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by National Defense University

Focus on China



U.S. Pacific Command

2007 Essay Winners

**Restructuring
U.S. Country
Teams**

A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY AND SECURITY JOURNAL

The Past as Prism

China and the Shock of Plural Sovereignty



PLA soldiers at Shenyang training base

By CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

China's conceptions of international order are grounded in lessons drawn both from its history and, particularly today, from the ancient Warring States period in which proto-nations struggled for hegemony. At the end of this period, the Ch'in state gradually emerged victorious. Today, as China seeks to orient itself in the modern international world into which it was plunged by its tumultuous contact with European powers during the 19th century, it seems to have turned increasingly to its ancient past to teach itself lessons for the future—and perhaps most of all to the history of its Warring States period. This modern focus on the Warring States model is itself the result of the conceptual collision between Western ideas of pluralist international

relations and a far more ancient tradition that has its roots in imperial history and the Confucian core of China's classical canon.

The Chinese tradition has as its primary model for interstate relations a system in which legitimate, stable order is possible only when one power reigns supreme—by outright conquest of the Sinic geographic core and by at least tributary relationships with all other participants in the world system. Its central assumptions about the need for political unity, the natural order of all politics as hierarchy, and the fundamental illegitimacy of separate and coequal state sovereignties enjoy powerful roots in China's intellectual tradition.

This worldview has influenced how China has lived out its relationships with others

for centuries, in particular its painful encounters with the West. And it may be important in the future because China is still a relative newcomer to the system of Western-derived international law. Chinese history provides no precedent for the stable, long-term coexistence of coequal sovereigns, and its traditional ideals of moral governance and statecraft, at least, deny the possibility. Whether China has internalized the mores of international pluralism or will be tempted to return to its conceptual roots as its power grows is a question that may shape the geopolitics of the 21st century.

The Weight of History

China's thousands of years of history have an extraordinary presence in traditional and contemporary Chinese life and thought. Perhaps "the most historically conscious nation on Earth,"¹ the Chinese have long been

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“almost uniquely concerned with history, seeing in it not only the main source of knowledge regarding the functioning of human society . . . but viewing it also as providing a model for the present.”² The principles embodied in the classics are seen as spelling out the causal sinews of the world as it exists at all times—making them fundamental reference points for decisionmaking. Even in the communist period, “scholars, bureaucrats, and ordinary people alike” tend “to draw examples from the Chinese past to illustrate points about the present.”³ This profound reverence for the past and focus on grounding the legitimacy of contemporary thought and action in congruence with alleged historical lessons has “inimically influenced China’s attitude toward military preparedness and intelligence over the centuries.”⁴ It has also powerfully conditioned China’s approach to basic issues of legitimacy and legality in the international system.

Among the most important conceptual reference points in the classicist tradition of understanding everything in terms of ancient precedents and analogies were the tumultuous events leading up to the first great unification of China by the Ch’in (Qin) dynasty in 221 BCE. This unification was preceded by a long period of conflict and disunity. The increasing decline of the feudal Chou kingdom led to the corresponding rise of de facto independent states. During the so-called Springs and Autumns period between 722 and 481 BCE, some trappings of Chou authority persisted, and politics was largely seen as consisting of a “struggle for dominance between the rulers of the separate states composing the Chou realm.”⁵ In this struggle for dominance, more than 100 states were annexed or simply extinguished.⁶

This process of warfare and consolidation by rival warlords continued into the so-called

Warring States period, which began in the mid-fourth century BCE. By this point, the galaxy of fragmented post-Chou feudal remnants had coalesced into a handful of survivor states, the Seven Great Martial States, “each contending for control of the realm, and fifteen weaker states for them to prey upon.”⁷ At stake were the grim alternatives of conquest or extinction, for “it was clear that all but one of them would be destroyed.”⁸

The triumph of the state of Ch’in put an end to this warfare, and its ruler is remembered today as the First Emperor of China. His brutal totalitarian rule created a state far more centralized than any prior kingdom and yet stretching over much of what is China today. Ch’in’s notoriously tyrannical rule was short-lived, collapsing in 207 BCE. Its successor dynasty, the Han (202 BCE to 220 CE), however, is remembered as setting the mold for all subsequent Chinese history.

Imperative of Unity

The Han adapted the centralized structure of the authoritarian Ch’in state to a public ethic based on the teachings of the great sage K’ung-fu tzu (Kongzi) (551 to 479 BCE), who is better known in the West today by the Latinized version of his name, Confucius. This “Han synthesis” cemented this ethos of centralized Confucian governance in place as the Chinese governmental archetype for millennia to follow. The core patterns of Chinese imperial governance—the “fundamental forms of

national culture, founded on a common script and literature, and endowed with the capacity to survive no matter what the future had in store of the Middle Kingdom”—were forged at this time.⁹

A key element of the Chinese governmental ideal, however—one that Han governance took as its foundation—was already in place as the basic model of rule toward which every aspect of Chinese statecraft aspired, even (or perhaps especially) during periods when China had no single sovereign: the imperative of universal rule. The patterns of interstate relations established during the Warring States period revolved around aspirations to unity. The thinkers and statesmen of that chaotic time had “longed for a political unification,”¹⁰ and these impulses became a core part of the Chinese intellectual framework.

It is hard to overstate the impact of this monist ideal of statecraft. Over the ensuing generations, there were other periods in which China lacked a single ruler and rival regional warlords faced off in ways not unlike the protostate system of the pre-Ch’in era. However, such claimants never asserted their reciprocal legitimacy as formally coequal sovereigns. Rather, they claimed the natural right to rule over the whole of China.¹¹ The key conceptual model for Chinese theories of political order, in other words, was that of brutal state competition for hegemony tending inevitably toward unification under a regime organized along the lines of the Han synthesis. Once this crucial pattern had been established, “the impulse to harmony and unity never waned” over the sweep of China’s extraordinarily long and rich history.¹²

What is interesting to the historian of ideas is the degree to which this model of Sinic universalism enjoyed such powerful roots in currents of Chinese thought that long predated

profound reverence for the past has conditioned China’s approach to legitimacy and legality in the international system

Left to right: First Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huangdi; Warriors of the Qin Dynasty; Imperial Guards



the Han synthesis. This is most obviously the case with Confucianism, which became, in effect, the secular religion of the empire for most of China's subsequent history.

Politics of Hierarchy

Confucianism is at its core an ethical teaching, stressing the importance of benevolence, "the characteristic element of humanity," and righteousness, "the accordance of actions with what is right."¹³ The Confucian gentleman should cultivate moral self-knowledge and virtue in the fulfillment of his responsibilities within a network beginning with the family and extending throughout society as a whole, accumulating moral conduct and continually resisting selfishness in the course of daily living. Fundamental to this conception is an idea of society in which actions can be harmonized smoothly with "what is right" precisely because what is right is clearly known—or would be if persons and situations were properly understood.

Confucianism thus regards the correct use of language and names as in part constitutive of correct action in society. If one's son is properly characterized as a "son," for instance, then from this designation will flow an entire spectrum of understood social roles, rituals, and responsibilities revolving around the nature of what it means to be a son that will define both his and others' proper relationships to him. When these roles and rituals are properly lived out, society will function as it should, from the level of the family up to the great affairs of state. As Confucius declared, "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."¹⁴ Through the rectification of names, in other words, Confucianism aspires to "an ideal social order with everything in its place."¹⁵ This ethic would help give a special salience in subsequent Chinese history to issues of terminology, particularly with respect to the symbolic trappings of status and hierarchy.

This focus on properly naming things and thereby understanding and acting on the

relationships denoted by proper labels and symbolic forms was vital. Moral education of the Confucian gentleman focused on internalizing "the moral content embedded in the form"¹⁶ with an eye to rendering improper conduct "repugnant or unthinkable."¹⁷ The aim was to ensure that the civilized man possessed instincts—both moral and ceremonial, for these aspects were closely related—that would unerringly guide him to conduct perfectly appropriate for the circumstances at all times.

With respect to ideals of governance, Confucian philosophy did not distinguish between "personal" and "political" spheres. The web of social responsibilities—the rites and rituals (*li*)¹⁸ of civilized society—that defined proper behavior might begin with the core virtues of filial piety, but they radiated outward to form the core of harmonious living in all aspects of life. In its broadest sense, the notion of *li* encompassed

all institutions and relationships, both political and social.

Confucian ethics thus speaks to issues of statecraft as well as everyday social behavior, and the key to successful governance is found in the same processes of cultivating right conduct. Government works precisely to the degree that the ruler

cultivates his virtue and thereby transmutes his right conduct into a "moral potency."¹⁹ In effect, the virtuous prince "secretes" authority:²⁰ social harmony spreads outward in concentric circles around him precisely because he is virtuous. Ultimately, this is simply another aspect of the rectification of names: harmonious order arises when each person understands and embodies the virtues and conduct appropriate to his role in the world. As Confucius put it, there is proper government "when the prince is a prince, and the minister is minister, when the father is father, and the son is son."²¹

The virtue of the ruler thus creates good order in the state. No real compulsion need be involved, for if "the true king leads the way" by moral example, "the people consent and voluntarily follow."²² In effect, so powerful is the example of a true prince that right order spontaneously self-assembles around him: he who understands *li* and embodies its virtue "would

find the government of a kingdom as easy as to look into his palm."²³ According to Confucius, "If a truly royal ruler were to arise . . . virtue would prevail" within a generation.²⁴ This ideal of rulership—in which political authority naturally coalesces around the virtuous ruler—embedded itself deeply in the Chinese consciousness.

Moreover, there was no frontier beyond which such virtuous order-creation would not reach. By exhibiting supreme virtue, men are "brought to resort to [the ruler] from all quarters," and by "kindly cherishing the princes of the States, the whole kingdom is brought to revere him."²⁵ The extent to which virtue compels the extension of the ruler's authority is proportional to the extent of the virtue, and a prince of perfect virtue would inevitably find the entire world subjecting itself to him. The very presence of a true Sage-king in the world, therefore, is enough to precipitate another Golden Age because "forthwith, multitudes would resort to his dominions."²⁶ Confucius likened this dynamic almost to an irresistible force of nature: "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 towards it."²⁷

The Confucian philosophy of governance and world order is thus radically monist. Idealizing the vassalage relationships of Chou-era feudalism into a general principle of political order, it assumes that a perfectly virtuous ruler would naturally come to hold sway over all of humankind. In one commentary on Confucius, for instance, it is recounted that the Master felt of the Sage-king that "his fame overspreads the Middle Kingdom, and extends to all barbarous tribes . . . [so that] all who have blood and breath unfeignedly honour and love him. Hence it is said, 'He is the equal of Heaven.'"²⁸

Such a system did not have "national" frontiers in the modern sense. When asked by scandalized pupils how he could have at one point considered going to live among the "rude" and barbarian "nine wild tribes of the east," the Master replied that "if a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?"²⁹

These themes were echoed by Meng-tzu (Mencius) (371–289 BCE), who also made his way into the orthodox Confucian canon. According to the Book of Mencius, "The benevolent [ruler] has no enemy" anywhere, and if a prince were to establish a properly benevolent government all manner of merchants, travelers, visitors, and "all under heaven



Confucius

when roles and rituals are properly lived out, society will function as it should, from the level of the family up to the great affairs of state

who feel aggrieved by their rulers” will flock to his banner.³⁰ As with Confucius, virtuous rule was for Mencius the remedy for all the world’s ills—and ideal virtue would set off a sort of political chain reaction leading in the direction of universal dominion.³¹ The ruler who wishes to enlarge his territories, therefore, need only display the proper virtue, and soon he would not only rule the Middle States (all of China) but also “attract . . . the barbarous tribes that surround them.”³²

Confucianism, therefore, seems to take a clear position on whether a legitimate international order can rest upon the formal equality of coequal sovereigns: it denies this. Unless all leaders are imperfect in a precisely balanced way, with virtue distributed precisely evenly among international actors—a possibility that would seem to be inherent in the model but that does not appear actually to have been imagined and is surely highly unlikely, to say the least—Confucianism presumes that such a system will be unstable and tend, over time, toward consolidation under the most virtuous. Just as a family can have only one father, so can stable, long-term order in a Confucian system really exist only under a single ruler, a Sage-king whose virtue-derived authority unifies the Sinic geographic core and causes even remote “barbarian tribes” to turn in tribute toward the Son of Heaven as iron filings toward a magnet.

In effect, Confucian ethics thus presumes that interstate relations, in the sense they are conceived in the modern West, cannot exist over the long term and must give way to universal order under the most virtuous ruler. As Mencius made clear, the key to political order in the world is a radical monism derived from the reification of Chou-era feudal vassalage and its hierarchical analogues in all Confucian social relationships: “When there is unity, there will be peace.”³³ Any arrangement short of this ideal is necessarily provisional.

Even during periods in which China was not unified—such as during the Springs and Autumns and Warring States periods when politics within the Chinese system consisted of a form of interstate relations that exhibited a rich diversity of balance-of-power behavior and in which some norms of “international” conduct gained some purchase—the competing states’ concept of self seems to have been less that of emergent, separate nations than as

contenders in a winner-take-all struggle for imperial supremacy over “All under Heaven” (*T’ien Hsia* or *tian xia*). The underlying ethos

*as with Confucius, for
Mencius ideal virtue would set
off a political chain reaction
leading in the direction of
universal dominion*

of the Chinese states system pointed emphatically toward unification, and this precluded the development of an explicitly international conception of legitimate political order.

Whereas post-Westphalian Europe, in effect, made a virtue out of a necessity by elevating “a fact of life—the existence of a number of states of substantially equal strength—into a guiding principle of world order,”³⁴ China concluded that the problem of war could only be answered by Empire. This had dramatic consequences for Chinese understandings of world order because “empires have no interest in operating within an international system; they aspire to be the inter-

national system.”³⁵ From the Warring States period onward, there appears to have been no point at which the various rulers of China did not regard it as axiomatic that unification was their ultimate goal. They merely disagreed over whose rule unification should occur under.

Relations with the Other

This ancient legacy of hierarchical assumptions about international order also shaped China’s relationship with non-Chinese peoples. In cultural terms, Confucian notions of virtue seemed to make it axiomatic that “each step away from the central [Chinese] states led only into less civilized, more unrighteous cultures.”³⁶ China had been under varying degrees of “barbarian” threat from beyond its borders long before the Ch’in unification, and Chinese security policy was thus permeated by the challenges of what was called “containing the barbarians.”³⁷

Indeed, there was some tendency to deny barbarians the status of human beings at all. This was not simple racism, for it also had theoretical roots in Confucian thought. For Confucians, one acquired one’s humanity not simply by virtue of embeddedness in a political

society per se, but according to the degree to which one partook of Chinese Confucian society. A land whose inhabitants observed the ritualized *li* of Confucian propriety was civilized, and its people were fully human, but “one whose people did not follow *li* was not civilized, and its people were not fully human in the sense that they had no means of realizing their potential as human beings.”³⁸

A person was thus not regarded as an innately autonomous individual but was instead merely “born as ‘raw material’ who must be civilized by education and thus become a truly human man.” The central moral issue for Confucianism was thus not how to respect any sort of intrinsic humanity as such, but “the factual questions of whether a man is properly taught the Way and whether he has a desire to learn diligently.”³⁹ Becoming a person was something to be *achieved* through personal cultivation and proper socialization, with the natural implication that it was not just political order that existed in concentric gradations around the virtuous ruler—the Son of Heaven—but *humanness* itself. The farther they were from the cultural center of the universe, the less human did humans become: “To conceive of humans apart from the civilizing practices of society is impossible—one would be not a person, but a beast.”⁴⁰

The social contextuality of Confucian humanity had implications for China’s relations with non-Chinese peoples. If one achieves humanity by participation in proper Confucian society, a barbarian people might acquire it by accepting incorporation into the greater cultural whole of the Chinese system, but non-Sinicized peoples would forever remain little more than brutes.⁴¹ It was thus a persistent conceit in Chinese history that “only the Chinese were fully human; all others, who had human form and substance but not human (Chinese) consciousness and cooperation, were barbarians.”⁴² This contrast goes back to Confucius himself, who noted that filial piety must incorporate proper ritualized reverence for one’s parents, and not simply material support for them: otherwise one would not differ from “dogs and horses.”⁴³

Not surprisingly, therefore, Imperial China maintained a basic contempt for foreign “barbarians” who did not observe Chinese cultural mores. Official pronouncements likened them to subhuman dogs and sheep, and dripped disdain for those whose “hearts and minds are different” and thus “in all respects have a different essence [from the Chinese].”



They should be “rejected as animals” because there was “no difference between them and birds and beasts.”⁴⁴ This Confucianized racism provided an additional set of reasons why relationships of formal equality with barbarian rulers were out of the question.

In keeping with this idea of civilizational gradients and the Confucian emphasis on the rectification of names, throughout China’s long history of struggling against incursions from



neighboring peoples, a consistent theme of imperial diplomacy was the importance of maintaining formal symbolic inequality with its neighbors. It was

Puyi, the Xuantong Emperor of China, last Emperor of Qing Dynasty

key to the ancient Chinese conception of world order that China be recognized as the center of the civilized world. The Chinese Emperor was the Son of Heaven (*Tiēn Zū*), and his rightful realm was All Under Heaven.

Accordingly, it was a grave offense—and an implicit denial of the Emperor’s virtue and thus authority to rule even within China—for another ruler to claim formal equality with the Chinese emperor, and China punished such effrontery when it could.⁴⁵ Imperial China certainly did not always enjoy military supremacy over the steppe peoples, and on occasion—most notably with the Mongol and Manchu conquests—victorious barbarians actually founded Chinese imperial dynasties. Nor were Chinese officials in weaker dynasties averse to paying substantial gifts to particularly powerful barbarian peoples to help keep them at bay. It was crucial, however, that even such extortion payments be accompanied by symbolic acts of deference and tribute by the barbarians to China, so the proper order of the world would still seem to be preserved. Maintaining a clear status-hierarchy between itself and barbarian peoples was a defining feature of the Middle Kingdom’s approach to the Other.

Ultimately, the tributary hierarchy under the Son of Heaven was viewed as a unitary global system of concentric circles that did not stop at Empire’s edge. Around the Son of Heaven were arranged “barbarians of varying degrees of uncouthness and hairiness,” but who “could yet be brought within the religio-cosmic circle of Chinese enlightenment if they would but ‘come to be transformed’ (*lai hua*) by the Virtue (*te*) of the universal monarch” by

acknowledging themselves as tributaries.⁴⁶ As John King Fairbank observed:

*the mystical influence of the all-wise example and virtue (te) of the Son of Heaven not only reached throughout China proper but continued outward beyond the borders of China to all mankind and gave them order and peace, albeit with gradually decreasing efficacy, as parts of a concentric hierarchy.*⁴⁷

Imperial China maintained a basic contempt for foreign “barbarians” who did not observe Chinese cultural mores

Whether “inside” or “outside” the Celestial Kingdom itself, therefore, all was an extension of Confucian ideals of family life and filial piety: “China was envisaged as the head of a family of nations, presiding with patriarchal wisdom over the junior members around her.”⁴⁸ The Chinese concept of world order thus admitted no such thing as “international” relations, inasmuch as everyone, to a degree proportionate to their basic humanness, owed formal obeisance to the Celestial Emperor.

All of this suggests why Fairbank, for instance, has described “the chief problem of China’s foreign relations” as having been “how to square theory with fact, the ideological claim [to supremacy] with the actual practice”—which could vary considerably.⁴⁹ The Sinocentric world order may have been “a myth backed up at different times by realities of varying degree, sometimes approaching nil,”⁵⁰ but it was a myth that was critical to the legitimacy of the entire Imperial system and indeed the very foundations of Confucian society. It was a recurring



Soldiers of the Boxer Rebellion

challenge for the Imperial Court, over the centuries, to sustain the symbolic baggage of Chinese moral geography first in the face of “the geographic fact of nomadic Inner Asian fighting power,”⁵¹ and thereafter when confronted by European power projection.

The Shock of Plural Sovereignty

The Middle Kingdom’s engagement with the world of European-derived norms of international law can be said to have begun with the Emperor’s rejection of successive British diplomatic overtures in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. British traders had long been present at Canton, but beginning in 1793, British envoys were dispatched to open more formal relations with the Empire. These missions, under three English noblemen—the Earl of Macartney (1793), Lord William Amherst (1816), and Lord William Napier (1834)—were wholly unsuccessful, mired in diplomatic and protocol struggles with their Chinese hosts and confronted by the Imperial Court’s refusal to countenance the relationship of sovereign equality the Britons proposed.

It was a stalemate: the English were “resolved that nothing [they] might do should be interpreted to indicate vassalage or subordination of England to China,”⁵² while the Chinese were equally determined to agree to nothing that would imply any derogation from the natural position of the Son of Heaven at the top of a global status-hierarchy of politico-moral virtue. Both Macartney and Amherst were conveyed through China on vehicles decked out with Chinese-language signs describing them as tribute-bearing envoys. Things became acute with Macartney when he resisted the traditional *kowtow* of subservience to the Emperor, but in any event the Emperor flatly refused to permit the establishment of a permanent British embassy in Peking; there was no place in the Chinese system for a foreign official claiming to represent a foreign sovereign in a relationship of formal equality with China. Amherst also refused to *kowtow* and became offended when Chinese officials tried to press him into what he considered an unseemly court visit. He declined the offer of an audience on those terms and was sent packing. The Emperor was quite displeased, declaring in a letter to the King of England that:

such gross discourtesy is utterly unprecedented. . . . Henceforward, pray do not dispatch missions all this distance; they are merely a waste of time and have their journey for nothing. If you loyally accept our

*sovereignty and show dutiful submission, there is really no need for these yearly appearances at our Court to prove that you are indeed our vassal.*⁵³

Napier fared worse still, becoming bogged down in protracted squabbles over protocol arrangements before departing ill and empty-handed, soon to die of malaria in Macau.

These three missions helped lay the groundwork for an ideological and symbolic sparring match, lasting for the duration of the 19th century between two competing norms of international order: the post-Westphalian European system of international relations, characterized by formal equality between sovereign state units, and the ancient Chinese worldview of status-hierarchy. The material aspects of the Sino-European disputes of the mid and late 19th century are well known, particularly Britain's desire to protect and advance its merchants' trade in opium from India. What seems to have been forgotten, however, is the degree to which these long-running squabbles also revolved around symbolic issues.

As an illustration, British records of the period leading up to and through the conclusion of the Opium War of 1842 are replete with accounts of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, berating his plenipotentiaries on the scene for leaving unchallenged measures and comments by the Chinese that implied Queen Victoria's vassalage to the Son of Heaven. Palmerston had made quite clear that "Her Majesty claims no superiority for Her Plenipotentiaries, but can allow none to those of the Emperor,"⁵⁴ and throughout the negotiations, he sent them angry letters informing them of symbolic slights which they had failed to correct. The British ambassadors had been "instructed to maintain a footing of perfect equality with the

these British concerns, with terms carefully undermining the Celestial Empire's claims to political preeminence in the world system.

With the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858 after the second Sino-British war, the British obtained what Macartney had been refused: the right to appoint an ambassador directly to the Imperial Court and do so without having to "perform any ceremony derogatory to him as representing the Sovereign of an independent nation, on a footing of equality with that of China."⁵⁷ The provisions in the settlement pertaining to foreign diplomats' rights of residence in Peking, however, were the hardest-fought part of the negotiations. After an additional round of fighting that saw the Chinese kill a group of European negotiators and a vengeful allied army under Lord Eglin burn the Emperor's legendarily beautiful Summer Palace in 1860, Britain installed a permanent envoy in Peking, a step duly followed by the other powers.

For China, the issue of ambassadorial representation was problematic because "diplomatic practice ran counter to the whole political and social system of Imperial China."⁵⁸ It was not only that European-style diplomacy was inconsistent with the Sinic view of world order but also that such diplomatic relations directly threatened the authority of the Emperor. Since true virtue in the Son of Heaven inevitably resulted in both China and the barbarian world spontaneously ordering themselves around him, the acceptance of barbarian nations as formal equals would necessarily imply the Emperor's lack of virtue: "If the barbarians were no longer submissive, the dynasty had clearly forfeited the Mandate of Heaven and would soon come to an end under the stress of rebellion from within and invasion from without."⁵⁹ As Werner Levi observed, "The granting of equality to foreign diplomats at the court would overthrow the whole social order."⁶⁰

Defense Minister General Chi Hoatian, who led military crackdown in Tiananmen Square



Demonstrators on front line attempt to stop 5,000 PLA soldiers from entering Tiananmen Square

tors. For the duration of his status as a minor, therefore, China found a way to prevent the horror of barbarian representatives appearing before the Celestial Emperor without showing appropriate respect (for example, by performing the traditional prostrations of the *kowtow*). It was not until 1873 that China was finally prevailed upon to permit formal diplomatic audiences—though even then the Emperor carefully conducted them at the hall in the capital traditionally used for receptions with representatives from tributary states. It was not until around 1890 that a full set of agreed protocols were worked out to govern the foreign diplomatic corps' interactions with the Emperor.

The late-19th century humiliations of a weak and corrupt Ch'ing dynasty at the hands of the West are well known, as are the increasingly unequal treaties and other arrangements that China was forced into. As acute as was the bitterness this engendered, however, China suffered far less than most other victims of European power during this period. Unlike most of the native rulers of, for instance, India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, or Sub-Saharan Africa—or indeed Latin America in an earlier century—the Imperial government was fortunate to have stayed in power and remained more than merely nominally independent of direct European rule. China suffered greatly, but the severity of its *perceived* wounds was a function as much of its prior self-esteem as of any disadvantage vis-à-vis other non-Europeans during this period. China's adversaries succeeded in imposing a long succession of measures that seemed to strike at the heart of

missions under three English noblemen were confronted by the Imperial Court's refusal to countenance the relationship of sovereign equality the Britons proposed

Chinese," he complained, but "this instruction has been very imperfectly obeyed."⁵⁵ Palmerston even sent them a draft treaty that he hoped they would obtain after the close of hostilities, explicitly writing into it a requirement that the prescribed method of signature demonstrate "clearly the absolute equality of England and China, and of their reigns."⁵⁶ The resulting Treaty of Nanking (1842) reflected many of

Even after the traumas of 1858–1860, therefore, China maneuvered tenaciously to preserve what it could of its ancient symbolic supremacy. Forced to accept the residence of foreign envoys in Peking, the court sought at least to insulate the Son of Heaven himself from those indignities. Accordingly, the Europeans were told that the new Emperor, then merely a child, was too young to receive diplomatic visi-

the ancient discourse of symbolic legitimacy that underlay Imperial rule.

Perhaps, therefore, the most interesting aspect of the Sino-European conflicts was the fact that they were not just about trade or conquest but that they also represented a profound clash of intellectual paradigms. This period has a special significance precisely because it was one of status conflict, a struggle that was clearly understood as such on both sides, as the opposing worldviews of Sinic universalism and international pluralism ran headlong into each other. Neither competing conceptual system had any space in it for the other's views, for each denied the premises on which the other was founded. One might say that the world had become too small for both to coexist.

Models for the Future

A key question for observers pondering the future, then, is how the shock of plural sovereignty has affected China's view of itself and its conception of world order. It had been taken as axiomatic for millennia that the key to peace and plenty in China was unity and that disunity produces only "civil war, insecurity, and disaster for elite and commoners alike."⁶¹ Just as Confucian ethics "required cultural unity as an essential ground of a civilized political-social unity,"⁶² so the proper ordering of the peoples of the world required a political unity—or at least a recognized gradient of power and virtue that reaffirmed the centrality of the Middle Kingdom. Legitimacy and socio-moral superiority were indissolubly linked. As Chinese writings on geopolitical strategy echo even today, the "great mission under heaven was to turn chaos into unity," and the "basic trend of Chinese history" was toward unification.⁶³ And yet here came



(Top) Demonstrators on front line attempt to stop 5,000 PLA soldiers from entering Tiananmen Square; (bottom left) Demonstrator injured during clash with police outside Great Hall of the People; Policeman tackles protester during 10th anniversary of Tiananmen Square confrontation

relationships and a series of classically hallowed approaches to coping with the problem of political diversity. Beginning in the 19th century, it came to be felt that the key to understanding China's uncomfortable present and uncertain future lay in its ancient past before the Ch'in unification. The Warring States became the prism through which Chinese thinkers viewed the post-Westphalian world.

Modern Chinese thinking about international relations is thus wrapped tightly in the cloak of pre-Ch'in geopolitics. Chinese writings on statecraft, strategy, and international politics are rich with analogies to the pre-unification period, as Michael Pillsbury has noted, and China's generals clearly find today's "multipolar

world" to be "vivid stories . . . during the Spring and Autumn Period and the seven major powers during the period of the Warring States"⁶⁷ to explain contemporary international dynamics. The quarterly journal of the People's Liberation Army's Academy of Military Science and the China Military Science Association, for instance, has urged modern Chinese statesmen to follow lessons from the Warring States period in how to use skillful combinations of cooperation and conflict to win victories in the modern world.⁶⁸ Similarly, the journal of the CCP's Central Committee has urged modern leaders to continue to study strategic thinkers from the Springs and Autumns and Warring States periods in learning how to build up China's strength in a world of competing states.⁶⁹

Such analogies are particularly useful to the Chinese leadership in that they explain both the basic pluralist nature of the modern international system and provide a theoretical explanation for (and justification for resisting) the alleged predatory onslaught of aspiring non-Chinese hegemonies such as the former Soviet Union and, more recently, the United States. Thus, for example, regional adversaries such as India in the 1960s and Vietnam in the 1970s could be decried as would-be "regional hegemonies" that needed to be "taught a lesson" in punitive Chinese expeditionary wars.⁷⁰ The Soviets were long seen as global hegemonists who sought to surround and isolate China with client allies. And even Japan is sometimes described, with a longer historical perspective, as a would-be hegemon that would be delighted to replace U.S. influence in East Asia. Most of all, in recent years, Warring States analogies have been used in connection with exhortations to resist purported American hegemony.

Recourse to the Warring States period for lessons about modern international politics, especially when combined with continuing idealization of the Confucian unity of the Han dynasty—even as the government in Beijing turns increasingly to Confucian ideology to provide a post-Marxist theory to legitimate its rule—suggests important implications for Chinese views about the future course of international politics.⁷¹ Simply put, Chinese history provides no precedent for the stable, long-term coexistence of coequal sovereigns, and the country's traditional ideals of moral governance and statecraft cannot comfortably admit such a possibility. The modern world may be understandable through the prism of the Warring States, but it is thus intelligible only as a waystation along the road to hierarchical order. The perceived lessons

Chinese writings on statecraft, strategy, and international politics are rich with analogies to the pre-unification period

European power crashing in on the Celestial Empire both as a physical challenge—for unlike the Mongols and Manchus, the West chose not to conquer China—and as a conceptual one.

With the myth of "geopolitical centrality" shattered and the Middle Kingdom humiliated,⁶⁴ China needed a frame of reference through which to approach the new world it found itself in. But China did have one conceptual model that seemed to allow a way of understanding international pluralism: the Warring States period provided both a model for admitting the possibility of sovereign state-to-state

world" to be "amazingly' similar to the Warring States era."⁶⁵ Even where it exists in a complex amalgam with Marxist dialectics, Warring States-era statecraft is central to China's understanding of the future.

As recounted in the official journal of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for instance, the 20th century was "a global 'Warring States Period' characterized by 'clear boundaries between nations, between areas, and between cultures' that exist in competition."⁶⁶ Chinese writers on international politics or military strategy

of thousands of years of Chinese statecraft, in other words, teach that multipolarity is both unstable and morally illegitimate in a system that includes Chinese civilization—the natural and inevitable state of which is to exist as the moral and political hub of the known world.

The implications of the conceptual framework that China brings to contemporary international relations are necessarily indeterminate, for history is not destiny, and the modern world presents Chinese leaders with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. But as the inheritors of a monist political ideology that conceives of international order in fundamentally hierarchical terms, idealizes interstate order as tending toward universal hegemony or actual empire, and lacks a meaningful concept of coequal, legitimate sovereignties pursuant to which states may coexist over the long term in nonhierarchical relationships, modern Chinese statesmen would seem to carry heavy cultural “baggage” indeed.

Thankfully, modern China appears to believe that principles of sovereign equality and international law are currently in its interest. Nevertheless, viewed through the prism of the Warring States period—the conceptual framework through which China itself seems to view today’s multisovereign world—such sentiment might simply be a tactical choice useful, for now, in helping fend off the depredations of strong, would-be (non-Chinese) hegemony. As China’s strength grows, however, the Middle Kingdom may well become more assertive in insisting on the sort of Sinocentric hierarchy that its history teaches it to expect and its traditional notions of power and legitimacy will encourage it to demand. **JFQ**

NOTES

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² Witold Rodzinski, *The Walled Kingdom* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 62.

³ William P. Alford, “On the Limits of ‘Grand Theory’ in Comparative Law,” *Washington Law Review*, no. 61 (July 1986), 945, 948.

⁴ Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 291–292.

⁵ Rodzinski, 27.

⁶ *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview, 1993), 9.

⁷ *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, 10; see also Arthur Cotterell, *The First Emperor of China* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1981), 101.

⁸ Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2000), 20.

⁹ Rodzinski, 61.

¹⁰ Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 187.

¹¹ Michael Loewe, *Everyday Life in Imperial China* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 24.

¹² Gray L. Dorsey, *Jurisculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993), 149.

¹³ Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*, ed. and trans. James Legge (New York: Dover, 1971), 405–406.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263–264.

¹⁵ Lin Yutang, ed., *The Wisdom of China and India* (New York: Modern Library, 1942), 811.

¹⁶ Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 3; Piero Tozzi, “Constitutional Reform on Taiwan: Fulfilling a Chinese Notion of Democratic Sovereignty,” *Fordham Law Review* 64 (1993), 1193, 1202.

¹⁷ Joel Kupperman, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104–107, 136.

¹⁸ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 7.

¹⁹ Ames, 2.

²⁰ The phrase is Gernet’s. See Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, 2^d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 96.

²¹ Confucius, 256.

²² Fingarette, 62; see also Rodzinski, 33.

²³ Confucius, 402–404.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 349 (emphasis deleted).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁰ Lin, 751.

³¹ Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 684.

³² Lin, 755.

³³ Fung, 180.

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft*, 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸ John Y. Fenton et al., *Religions of Asia*, 3^d ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), 169.

³⁹ Fingarette, 34–35.

⁴⁰ Randall P. Peerenboom, “Rights, Interests, and the Interest in Rights in China,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 31 (1995), 381.

⁴¹ Fung, 188.

⁴² Dorsey, 29.

⁴³ Confucius, 148.

⁴⁴ Alistair Ian Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 187.

⁴⁵ Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2000), 54.

⁴⁶ *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-t’ao, Liu Hsi-Hung, and Chang Te-yi*, trans. J.D. Frodsham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), xvi.

⁴⁷ John King Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework,” in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, ed. John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 1, 8.

⁴⁸ *The First Chinese Embassy to the West*, xvi.

⁴⁹ Fairbank, 2–3.

⁵⁰ Lien-sheng Yang, “Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order,” in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, 20.

⁵¹ Fairbank, 3.

⁵² Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire: The Period of Conflict 1834–1860* (London: Longmans, Green Co., 1910), 53–55.

⁵³ Quoted in Harley Farnsworth MacNair, *China’s International Relations and Other Essays* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1926), 23–24.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Morse, appendix B, 628.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, appendix G, 645.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 300. The phrasing here is apparently Morse’s summary or paraphrase.

⁵⁷ Reproduced in Min-ch’ien T.Z. Tyau, *The Legal Obligations Arising Out of Treaty Relations Between China and Other States* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1917), 24–26.

⁵⁸ *The First Chinese Embassy to the West*, xxiv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Werner Levi, *Modern China’s Foreign Policy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 13.

⁶¹ Swaine and Tellis, 45.

⁶² Fingarette, 64.

⁶³ Mi Zhenyu, “A Reflection on Geographic Strategy,” *Beijing Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* (February 20, 1998), 6–14 (FBIS trans. FTS19980616000728).

⁶⁴ Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky, *Patterns in China’s Use of Force* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2000), 80 n. 2.

⁶⁵ Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2000), xxxv, 315.

⁶⁶ Hao Tiechuan, “On the Rule of Law Versus Rule by Virtue in Governing the State,” *Beijing Qishi* (March 16, 2001), 32–35 (FBIS trans. CPP20010329000065).

⁶⁷ Wang Yusheng, “Guard Against U.S. Style ‘Mutual Respect,’” *Shanghai Wen Hui Bao* (March 21, 2002) (FBIS trans. CPP20020322000009).

⁶⁸ Li Bingyan, “Emphasis on Strategy: Demonstrating the Culture of Eastern Military Studies,” *Beijing Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* (October 2, 2002) (FBIS trans. CPP20030109000170).

⁶⁹ Zong Han, “Further Increasing China’s Comprehensive National Strength,” *Beijing Qishi* (June 1, 2002) (FBIS trans. CPP20020719000103).

⁷⁰ Burles and Shulsky, 40.

⁷¹ See, for example, “Confucius Makes a Comeback,” *The Economist*, May 19, 2007, 48.