

## Chapter 8

# **Is China Becoming an Empire? Strategic Tradition and the Possible Options for Contemporary China**

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### Introduction: What is Empire?

Even though academic research on “empire” has a longstanding history, the definition of this term remains worthy of further discussion. It is generally acknowledged that the term “empire” refers to “an extensive group of states or countries ruled over by a single monarch, an oligarchy, or a sovereign state.”<sup>1</sup> However, such an ambiguous definition cannot help to clarify the meaning of so-called “empire.” In fact, the common impression of “empire” is that the term is not unrelated to concepts such as hegemony, great power, and superpower, with the main common chord being “an obvious relative superiority of power.” One reason may relate to the common misuse or abuse of the term “empire” by modern European powers. On the other hand, the seeming naïveté of historians (the majority of whom may be influenced by nationalism) that leads to their direct acceptance of the proclaimed empire statuses of individual states also contributes to the chronic inability to clarify the definition of “empire.” My personal view is that this term can be defined by the three criteria below.

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<sup>1</sup> See “empire,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/empire>

### ***A Roughly Stable System with Geopolitical Scope***

All social research requires a prior delimitation of geographic borders, and research on empire is of course no exception. Basically speaking, we can define the geopolitical environment within which the empire exists as a “world.” The “world” will encompass most of the actors that connect with the empire through interactivity, providing actors with a main stage for action or a place for exchanging interests. Contrary to common knowledge, or just as the original idea of the term “world” which is a plural concept (that is, the “world” is a countable noun); the boundaries of the world are largely decided and drawn by the projection of power from the imperial core. In any event, due to the limits of power, the borders of a world cannot exist as a clearly demarcated line.

### ***Absolutely Asymmetric Power above All Other Powers***

As the center of the world and the ruler of the world order, the empire must hold an absolute (not merely relative) advantage in asymmetric power, whether in terms of territory, population, or economic power. Although NO scientific definition of such superiority exists, the difference in geographical size must exceed 50%, in order for the empire to secure its incomparable position and stability (or “world”).

### ***Institutionalization of World Order***

To retain a meaningful role as the leader of the world, the empire must simultaneously be the ultimate arbitrator within the system and the source of legitimacy which needs to be secured by some form of rudimentary institutionalization. From a certain perspective, the previously mentioned “absolute asymmetry” also offers an important psychological and material basis for securing and executing the process of institutionalization. In other words, asymmetry not only increases the potential chance for successful deterrence, it also provides the possibility for adopting action to protect the system when necessary.

According to the criteria above, empire could be further described as “a way of effectively governing a civilized world where the main point is to demonstrate and maintain some kind of stable and non-moving historic order, with the policy goal being to effectively manage people within a specific region while shaping the world in which they exist.” In

other words, we may also try to define “empire” as a balanced situation where “empire (political concept) = world (geographic concept).” In the giant tide of world history, such as with Persia under Darius I, Macedonia under Alexander the Great in the Hellenistic World, Rome in the Mediterranean System under the so-called Pax Romana, and China’s Qin Dynasty in East Asia, there are some important cases of empire that we can find from the ancient past. It is worth noting here that, from today’s viewpoint under globalization, most cases of empire in the pre-modern period were essentially cases of regional powers. Despite the fact that European countries (e.g.: Spain, France, Britain) that subsequently rose to power during the formation of a globalized world all claimed imperial status, many of these “empires” can be considered as merely great powers. Looking to the future, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out, “empire is the political subject that effectively regulates global exchange; sovereign power governs the world.”<sup>2</sup> Whether an “empire” could reappear on the world stage successfully or merely exists as a natural conclusion deduced from imaginings of historical experience awaits further observation.

## China’s Imperial History: An Overview

Obviously, the Warring States Period (*Zhanguoshiqi*, 403–221 BC) is a critical period in the development of the China-centric imperial geopolitical structure. With complete reform carried out by some main political units in terms of tax collection, personnel administration, legal institution, military mobilization, and economic policy during the period, not only was leadership of the ruler strengthened, but different political units were also encouraged to participate in the vicious spiral of security dilemma. In terms of its forms and goals, war gradually changed from the so-called *ceremonial prestige war* in the Western Zhou Period (with the goal of recognizing kings of Zhou as the system’s highest suzerains) and *prestige limited war* in the Spring and Autumn Period (*Chunqiuoshiqi*, 770–403 BC) (increased intensity of war, with the main goals of acquir-

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. xi.

ing influence and dominance over other units), to *annexing total war* common in the Warring States Period (an even greater scale of military mobilization, with the goal of annexing the enemy), which contributed to the final collapse of the order built originally by the Western Zhou system. At the same time, it may have been that constant warfare gave rise to the universal desire for absolute order, with “empire” as a new concept of political system being introduced naturally.

In contrast to the tendency of traditional historians to treat the past two thousand years of Chinese history as a series of dynastic alternations, this paper seeks to approach the topic from the perspective of “the building and rebuilding of empires,” proceeding from the First Empire (Qin-Han Empire) to the Second Empire (Sui-Tang Empire) and on to the Third Empire (Qing Empire) as the main subjects under examination, before explicating the main points in their respective foreign strategies and evolutionary process.

### ***The First Empire: The Formation of a New System***

This author designates the First Empire as the period beginning from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC), and mainly covering both the Western and the Eastern Han Dynasties (or the two Hans). This period was crucial for the development of both China and East Asia, as the basic scope of the international system in the region over the next two thousand years would be formed and then consolidated. The system also produced a foundation of legitimacy to support central authority, or the so-called concept of *Sino-centrism*.

In contrast to the Western Zhou system, which was mainly confined to the lower reaches of the Yellow River, in the early period of the First Empire, the scope of the system had already expanded northward to approximately where the Great Wall stands today, northeastward to the vicinity of the Liaotung Peninsula, southward to cover the whole Yangtze River valley, and westward near the opening of the Hexi Corridor; this would become the geopolitical basis for China’s imperial establishments in the future, and it is generally known as “China Proper.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover,

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3 Concepts related to “China Proper” actually originated in the West, but the time of the term’s first use is difficult to prove now. According to Harry Harding’s

the regions from the Korean Peninsula to the Far East region of Siberia, from the dry steppes of Inner Mongolia to Central Asia and the outskirts of the Tibetan Plateau, and from the Pearl River valley to the northern part of the Indo-China Peninsula all gradually became important parts of the Sino-centric, or East Asian, system, due to their close connection and interaction with China Proper.<sup>4</sup>

From a certain perspective, the imperial structure established by Qin Shi Huang was similar to the feudal system of Western Zhou, with both systems trying to secure the “centralization of authority” in the form of a hierarchical framework. For example, under the Western Zhou system, the title *wang* or “king” was reserved for the ruler of Zhou. However, with claims to kingship by other units after the Warring States Period, the system seemingly headed towards a parallel structure while sowing the seeds of chaos due to competition. To re-establish the aforementioned hierarchical order, Qin Shi Huang’s self-proclamation as *huangdi* or “emperor” was highly symbolic politically. Furthermore, in the two thousand years following the First Emperor’s claim, theoretically only the ruler or the dominant power at the center of the East Asian system (mostly China) was able to make claims to the throne (of course, there were many exceptions) and provide symbolic meaning to the general existence of a stable world order.

After the establishment of the Han Dynasty, the ripening of the imperial structure caused the nationalistic concept of *Huaxia* (華夏) and the politically symbolic concept of the Middle Kingdom (中國, *Zhongguo*) to gradually develop towards cosmopolitanism, while *Tianxia* (天

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research, the term existed as early as 1827. See “The Concept of ‘Greater China’: Themes, Variations, and Reservations,” *The China Quarterly* 136 (1993), pp. 660–686. However, others point out that the concept of “China Proper” was first suggested by the British scholar William Winterbotham in the title *An Historical, Geographical and Philosophical View of the Chinese Empire* (1795).

4 In fact, Naito Konan (内藤湖南, 1866–1934) and some Japanese scholars have proposed the idea that what is called “Oriental history” is roughly equivalent to the history of Chinese culture, in other words, that the development of Chinese culture provides the scope of Oriental history. This view is objective and worthy as a reference.

下) was used to describe a new world order with the empire at the center.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, before the First Empire, concepts related to cosmopolitanism might have emerged in China, but there still exist at least two important differences: First, there is a clear deepening in philosophical meaning of China's cosmopolitanism; second and more importantly, there is a more advanced level of institutionalized character or the development and realization of designs for managing that. Whether for the sake of maintaining national security or the existence of world order, the management of border regions (between the imperial core and the peripheral zones) and relations between the empire and its subordinates were critical, and these faces of management were mutually reinforcing. Not only did the First Empire establish official diplomatic institutions, in contrast to the more ceremonial and procedural tributary behavior of the Western Zhou Period, but major institutional changes occurred in the Western Han as well. In the Han Period, not only did related ceremonies become more complicated, leading to formal codes of conduct, but the Han emperors also extended the investiture system originating from the Qin Dynasty to their relations with neighboring states, introducing the norm that only the highest leader could hold the title of "emperor," with no other states being able to make claims beyond the title of "king" (*wang*). Extension of the system undoubtedly strengthened China's higher status as the center of the imperial hierarchy.

### ***The Second Empire: Hybrid Character***

While agricultural society in the central region matured and gradually widened the gap between itself and the tribes in peripheral regions, and the imperial government also greatly strengthened the effectiveness of its authority, some agricultural-nomadic peoples living in peripheral regions were forced to take up an absolute nomadic lifestyle under the continued pressure of outward expansion of the civilizing core. Control and regulations established by the imperial center to maintain border security and

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5 For discussions on China's vision or *Tianxia*, see: 王柯, 《民族與國家: 中國多民族統一國家思想的系譜》(北京: 中國社會科學出版社, 2001年); 趙汀陽, 《沒有世界觀的世界》(北京: 中國人民大學出版社, 2003年)等。

protect trade prompted nomadic peoples to make seasonal disturbances and strategic raids at imperial frontiers to offset their economic losses.<sup>6</sup> Nomadic pressure usually was a key factor in the disintegration and re-establishment of empire. For example, nomadic peoples moving on a large scale to the south in 331 AD not only overran and took over the lower reaches of the Yellow River, which was once the imperial heartland, but this tide of migration also initiated the process of national integration that continued until early 7th century, while setting new ethnic and national foundations for the re-establishment of the Second Empire.

Even though nationalism has been a dominant ideology worldwide since the 19th century, causing the search, development, and glorification of national characteristics to become the policy guide of state competition, in terms of historic reality, emphasis on “hybridization” seems to be the only way towards greatness. Not only was the “hybrid” concept adopted in the Sui-Tang Period of the Second Empire,<sup>7</sup> but the empire under Alexander the Great, the Pax Romana, and the current U.S. hegemony all demonstrate similar characteristics. Ironically, while the First Empire or the leader of the East Asian system was attacked by nomadic tribes in the 4th century, on the western front of the Eurasian continent, the Roman Empire, dominating the Mediterranean system, faced similar challenges. From the 3rd century, the West-wing people of Central Asia (mostly Aryan peoples) had exerted relentless pressure on the imperial frontier, and after gradually penetrating the Danube River valley, the

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6 Wang Mingke (王明珂) divided the activity of nomadic peoples into two categories: subsistence raids, and strategic raids. Subsistence raids were seasonal and usually carried out in autumn or early winter, while strategic raids were carried out to threaten settled states. See Wang's 《遊牧者的抉擇：面對漢帝國的北亞遊牧部落》（台北：聯經出版公司，2009年）。However, here this author considers the former as included in strategic raids. For example, the Hun's pressure on the Han not only forced the latter to pay tribute to the nomadic tribe, but cross-border trade was also opened (the establishment of gate posts) during Wenti and Jinti's rule, providing economic benefits. See 余英時，《漢代貿易與擴張：漢胡經濟關係的研究》（台北：聯經出版公司，2008年）等。

7 See 谷川道雄著，耿立群譯，《世界帝國的形成》（台北：稻鄉出版社，2009年）。

nomadic peoples successfully entered the Italian Peninsula to carry out raids, which paved the way for the Huns, who would eventually destroy the Western Roman Empire in 476 and sweep across more than half of the European continent.<sup>8</sup> After the Huns subsequently brought great empires in both the East and the West into the “Dark Ages,” it may be said that even though the development of civilization became temporarily dormant, the interaction and integration of nomadic and agricultural civilizations provided energy for creativity in the next stage while giving rise to major changes in the meaning of the re-established imperial structure.

In contrast with the First Empire, it is obvious that when confronting threatening forces from the periphery, the succeeding Second Empire seemed to have transformed from discrimination to a more accommodating stance; for example, Tang Taizong was venerated as *Tian Kehan* (天可汗), which means the greatest emperor in the world, confirming China’s place at the center of the system. In fact, emperors in the Tang Dynasty have a long record of being crowned with the title *Tian Kehan*, with Xuanzong accepting the title seven times during his reign. Besides accommodating the peripheral, another characteristic of the Second Empire is demonstrated by the fact that the imperial economic center gradually moved southward from the Huanghuai Plain to the Yangtze River basin. A historical implication of such a great shift was the separation of the political and economic center in China; after that, the imperial capital no longer served as both the economic and political center. More importantly, as external challenges to the empire continued to come from the north, the southern shift of the economic center had the negative effect of extending supply lines and increasing logistical costs, which finally led to the collapse of the Second Empire. Nomadic peoples once again moved in from the north and extended their control over the heart-

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<sup>8</sup> The most renowned Hun leader is Attila, who is also known as “God’s whip.” Attila twice invaded the Balkan Peninsula, besieged Constantinople and entered Gaul (now France) before invading the Italian Peninsula and essentially defeating the Western Roman Empire. Under the lead of Attila, the Huns reached a short period of dominance between 448–450, with their influence stretching from the Aral Sea to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, south to the Danube and north to the Baltic Sea.



land of the old system for another long period. Later dynasties that successfully re-unified China Proper faced much more difficult conditions for re-establishing the empire.

***The Third Empire: A Perfect Structure in Imperial History***

Due to the constant southern migrations by nomadic tribes from the 3rd century, their long-term occupation of the traditional imperial center, and the continued adoption of “hybrid” policies by the re-established Second Empire in the face of a multiethnic environment, northern forces were provided with a rare opportunity to absorb agricultural civilization and narrow the gap in power with the center. In addition, the separation of the political and economic center mentioned above effectively made the Song Dynasty impotent in re-establishing an imperial structure, despite its reassertion of control over China Proper at the end of the 10th century. Despite the chronic wishful thinking of Sino-centric historians to include the Yuan Dynasty (or the Mongol Empire) as part of the “orthodox dynasty” system, it should be noted that during the Mongols’ rise to power, at least until the death of Genghis Khan in 1227, the Mongolian sphere of influence continued to be mainly concentrated in the region spanning the steppes of Mongolia and Central Asia. After Mongke Khan (1251–59) succeeded in claiming power, Mongolia in fact separated into two parts. In other words, the reality may be that a united Mongol Empire generally imagined to span the Eurasian continent never existed.

Furthermore, though the Ming Dynasty regained control of China Proper which had been established and consolidated by the previous two empires, the “cosmic expansion” that originated from the geopolitical challenge brought by the Mongol’s conquest of Eurasia in the 13th century and the new vision of sea power introduced by the Arab drive for trade in the Indian Ocean still became the most important obstacles to the Ming re-establishment of an effective empire. In other words, the Ming was offered two choices: to lock itself within traditional imperial bounds, or to accept new geopolitical variables and connect itself with the new transport artery that was gradually taking shape in Eurasia. However, the result was that neither goal was achieved. In contrast to the variance in length of the transitional period from the Western Zhou system to the First Empire (770 BC–221 BC) and from the First Empire to the Second

Empire (220 BC–580 AD), the transition from the Second Empire to the Third Empire (907–1644) was considerably long. The aforementioned new geopolitical effect is clear.

Regardless of the above developments, the Ottoman Empire that succeeded the Mongols and served as the new connecting hub at the middle of the Eurasian continent seemed to become uninterested in maintaining exchanges between East and West. With the Ottoman Empire investing more effort in strategic expansion towards Eastern Europe in the early 16th century, the geopolitical commotion along China's borders abruptly fell silent. Before the Industrial Revolution commenced in the 18th century, even though the Europeans had begun maritime expeditions to distant seas at the time, Europe was unable to convert those new passages into a geostrategic variable equivalent to the Silk Road. It was precisely under such structural context that the Qing Empire was able to exploit the opportunity offered by the East Asian system retreating into isolation once again to re-establish an imperial framework.

In contrast with the First and Second Empires, even though imperial architecture in itself hints at a high degree of centralization, surrounding security threats from Hun and Turkic peoples continued to challenge central authority. Before Europe unexpectedly exerted its pressure on the Third Empire in mid-18th century, the latter, which had been established by the Qing regime, enjoyed an environment that could almost be deemed "absolute security," the main reason being the Qing's enforcement of a highly integrative (hybrid) ethnic policy. Before entering China Proper, the Manchu had already established the *Lifan Yuan* (理藩院) to deal with issues related to its subordinates. Besides the *Lifan Yuan*, the Qing government also adopted flexible policies that catered to different regions to deal with related issues. For example, the Qing improved relations with the Mongols through frequent aristocratic marriages, controlled Tibet through the division of politics and religion, and strengthened central rule over the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. As a result, the Qing became the only imperial period in Chinese history to disregard reinforcement of the Great Wall as an important national security priority.

### ***New Challenges in Modern History***

For the most part, research on China's foreign relations and their strategic implications have focused on a series of questions revolving around the Qing interaction with the European-led international community since the mid-18th century. As China was in a weak position relative to Europe at the time, it led research about China's foreign relations to easily target issues such as how and why China should seek to enter the international community but was unable to actively do so. At least until today, China has still never been analyzed objectively. Because the image of China has usually been twisted and fictional, it might be why we should reexamine the imperial history of China first.

Actually, if Europe had not ushered in a wave of globalization from the 16th century with the Age of Exploration and the Great Navigations, which spread European influence across the world, then the East Asian system that was established by Qing efforts toward imperial reconstruction would have achieved a higher degree of stability. Even though social conditions (人和, *renhe*) may not have been favorable (rule by ethnic minorities became the key variable in the failure of the Late Qing reforms) and despite the fact that the Third Empire met its demise with the coming of globalization, favorable geopolitical conditions (地利, *dili*)(limited projection of power at the start made the Orient the last arrival place of European settlers) and favorable timing (天時, *tianshi*) (after engendering a wave of assault at the end of the 19th century, the new imperialists were mired in two great wars mainly based on the European continent) saved China Proper from colonization. However, with the incompetence of new democratic systems to effectively resolve problems, and chronic external and internal threats (from feuds among warlords and two civil wars between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), to the Japanese invasion) constantly foiling opportunities for recovery, in the process of the globalizing system's development and maturation, China did not gain opportunities for re-participating and competing in the new system until the end of the 20th century.

After the collapse of the Third Empire at the end of the 19th century, China is again entering another historic period of imperial transition. Currently, just like Qin during the establishment of the First

Empire, China is facing the similar challenge of a vast expansion in the scope of its system. In the foreseeable future, as China seems unlikely to consolidate its status and achieve the ultimate goal of stabilizing the international order through large-scale warfare as it had done in the past, the historical situation of China today may be close to that of the Ming Dynasty, at a critical point of strategic choice between a unified China Proper and new geopolitical variables. As the CCP regime is unlikely to adopt semi-isolationist policies like those of the Ming, the challenges confronting China are even greater.

## China's Traditional Foreign Strategy in Retrospect

Although the rise of China has become a topic of heated discussion in international politics, in view of the historical development of the previous three Empires, “the re-rise of China” may more accurately describe the current phenomenon. On the path of China’s potential re-rise, in the foreseeable future, one may expect the following issues to continue to be the focus of academia and popular opinion across the world: Will China rise? How will China effectuate its rise? What influences will that rise have on the global structure and order? How will other powers respond to the challenge of that rise? Will further conflicts be provoked? The answers to these questions may once again be sought in history.

### ***Three Options for China's Ancient Dynasty***

The historical development and essence of China’s foreign relations can be divided into two main points: “one priority,” and “three options.” “One priority” refers to China’s eternal policy of “domestic politics first, then foreign policy” as its highest principle for decision making. The reason is that, over the course of the past two thousand years, the inability to overcome technical barriers related to the issue of the scale of governance (wide territory and immense population) has chronically haunted China’s ruling elite.<sup>9</sup> Despite the introduction of new manage-

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<sup>9</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 14, *The People's Republic*, part 1, *The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949–65* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chap. 1.

ment skills provided by science in the industrial age, the government of a country with such a great size and high ethnic diversity remains a titanic challenge. The most important task for China’s ruling elite remains how to acquire sufficient authority to support the legitimacy to rule.

After achieving the policy aim that we mentioned above or maintaining domestic stability, “three options” kick into the decision-making process against actual foreign strategic goals (refer to the following table).

Table: A Comparison of China’s Traditional Foreign Strategic Options

Option	Political Premise	Main Content of Foreign Strategy
Imperial Policy	Dynasty under Unification	<p><b>Strategic Goals:</b> Gain the feedback of prestige; establish the system as the main feedback mechanism; aim external economic activity mainly at exchanges for prestige; pursue dominance from the threat of war and severance of trade.</p> <p><b>Interactions with Other Actors:</b> These interactions serve as the source of political legitimacy for neighboring units and as confirmation for the hierarchical relationship that defines the center and the periphery.</p> <p><b>War Possibility:</b> Adopt a passive defensive strategy, with wars mainly aiming at gaining prestige, thus remaining passive and not threatening the security of the target.</p> <p><b>Ideology:</b> Cosmopolitanism and hybridization</p>
Imperializing Policy	Dynasty under Unification	<p><b>Strategic Goals:</b> Gain an advantageous power position; focus on key competitors and attempt to demonstrate advantage through the application of pressure; depending on the situation, express limited compromise with stronger actors or competitors; pursue conditional intertribal marriages.*</p>

		<p><b>Interactions with Other Actors:</b> These interactions serve as the source of political legitimacy for some neighboring units.</p> <p><b>War Possibility:</b> Incline towards active offensive strategy, with wars being mainly power based, aimed at removing obstacles in the way of imperial establishment.</p> <p><b>Ideology:</b> Inward-oriented nationalism</p>
<p>Status Quo Policy</p>	<p>Divided Regimes</p>	<p><b>Strategic Goals:</b> Maintain survival of the regime; express servitude (kowtow) towards stronger actors in exchange for survival; use external economic activity to make exchanges for opportunities for survival; keep security through conditional intertribal marriages.</p> <p><b>Interactions with Other Actors:</b> Maintain the limited interactions that are necessary.</p> <p><b>War Possibility:</b> Adopt a defensive strategy, with wars being mainly based on self-defense, on reactions to the threat of aggression or on pre-emptive attacks.</p> <p><b>Ideology:</b> Exclusionist nationalism</p>

\* In contrast to being an important diplomatic tool during the age of aristocratic rule, “political marriage” is clearly no longer an option today. Such strategy may be replaced by entering into a detrimental asymmetric alliance or bilateral treaty.

If the ultimate goal of foreign policy is securing political security, and the objective environment is favorable, then the best outcome (resulting in the highest security assurance) would obviously be an imperial policy. Not surprisingly, the difficulty of successfully building an empire is exceptionally high. In Chinese history, only the Qin-Han, Sui-Tang, and the Qing accomplished this feat. Despite the adoption of the *hezhan*-

*bingyong* (和戰並用, carrot-and-stick) strategy in the three imperial periods, maintaining the imperial system through the “structural *jimi* (羈縻) system” (using trade and economic inducements to buy political loyalty through a tributary system) while maintaining strategic advantage, and finally establishing a “perennial” world order by applying the policy of *yi yizhi yi* (以夷制夷, using barbarians to subdue barbarians), the fact is that in distant memory, China more often adopted either an imperializing policy (with the precondition of unification and the goal of establishing imperial structure) or a status quo policy (or a “non-imperial policy,” with the goal of preserving the status quo, mainly during the periods of political fragmentation). The difference is that elites adopting an imperializing policy would exploit the so-called *yuanjiaojingong* (遠交近攻, befriending distant enemies while attacking nearby ones) strategy more frequently, targeting key enemies first and relentlessly seeking to diminish their strength. However, once elites forwent the goal of imperial establishment and turned towards status quo policy, the *yuanjiaojingong* policy could have been adopted when necessary (as in the Northern Song), while a realistic policy of regression, such as arranged marriages (和親, *heqin*) or the offering of dowries (納幣, *nabi*), remained the main policy choice.

Even in the periods when imperial policies were finally enforced, the imperializing policy was inevitably experienced in a process leading to completion of the imperial structure (in the early period of an imperial dynasty). Moreover, “degeneration” or the appearance of certain characteristics of imperializing policy might occur as a result of a general weakening of power near the end of empire. On the other hand, in terms of other imperial architects who failed (such as the Northern Song and the Ming), even though they might have possessed ideals for imperial establishment after the re-unification of China Proper and they might have attempted to push the imperializing policies, political reality still forced them to orient themselves towards non-imperial policies. Historical experience shows that once the task of uniting China Proper was completed, the dynasty usually went on to pursue imperializing policies, with the only exception perhaps being Western Jin (265–316).

### ***The Effect and Influence of World Enlargement***

In the past, the most important objective factor that affected China's strategic choice inarguably came from the challenge of world enlargement and its effects. Yet certain differences existed, as well, regarding the phenomenon.

First, the Qin Dynasty itself can be noted as a main source of world enlargement for its defeat of the six other states, conquering barbaric tribes on the territorial outskirts and establishing a geopolitical basis for China Proper for the next two thousand years. Second, in the face of geopolitical threats posed by the Mongols' establishment of the Eurasian passage and the initiation of the second enlargement of the world, the Ming Dynasty once adopted a more active response (such as Zheng He's distant expeditions in 1405–1433). Even though the Ming degenerated and became more passive as time passed, the Ottoman's defeat of the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453 and the severing of the East-West passage effectively annulled the negative effects of the Ming's isolationist policy. Finally, supported by the Industrial Revolution, the European expansion abroad forced the Qing to confront the challenge of the third world-enlargement effect led by the new European powers from late 18th century (since the arrival of the Macartney Embassy in 1792). As mentioned earlier, moving towards the end of a dynasty at the time, China had long before commenced the switch from imperialization to degeneration; thereby, in the face of new external challenges, China could only respond passively. Although Qing initiated various reform movements, the collapse of the empire remained inevitable.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast with European countries' achievement of the unfinished globalizing journey in the past four hundred years from the 16th century

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10 It is worth noting that, in contrast to a progressive viewpoint of history, it is a fact that despite China's several confrontations with external pressure from expansion of the world, "the world is not under constant expansion." There are three key factors to world expansion: the objective reality of increased power projection, the existence of high-stakes motivations for expansion, and the existence of power differentiation or power vacuums. However, this is not the focus of this article. Due to space limitations, this author will forgo further discussion of this here.



to the 19th century, the new wave of globalization since the 1970s provides modern China with the challenge of a fourth world enlargement. This new situation, based on the characteristics of “openness” and “integration,” was not the only thing to reduce the gap between China and the world; Richard Nixon’s visit to China also served as a critical turning point.<sup>11</sup>

Compared with previous experiences, even though China is not the main driver of current development, the state is not pushed into the awkward position of passivity but is rather offered an opportunity to select its response from a more neutral and subjective point of view. In a certain sense, the geopolitical context of contemporary China may be at wide variance with the Ming Dynasty, but the two are similar in terms of the context for decision making. In other words, both have the opportunity to choose. Accordingly, not only did Deng Xiaoping adopt the gradual mode of “crossing the river by feeling the stones” (摸著石頭過河, *mozhe shitou guohe*) regarding economic reform, but he also adopted it regarding foreign relations. However, as the dictum “development above all else” (發展才是硬道理, *fazhan caishi yingdaoli*) suggests, China is prepared to confront the challenges of the new global order based on the traditional policy foundation of prioritizing domestic politics over foreign policy.

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11 After the 1960s, as détente progressed, Washington’s worldview changed, the Nixon Doctrine was introduced, and the “Vietnamization” of the war in Indochina was carried out. Coupled with the CCP’s turn towards the pursuit of pragmatic and open policies at the end of the Cultural Revolution, opportunities for normalization appeared in Sino-U.S. relations. Besides the U.S. Seventh Fleet’s withdrawal from Taiwan Strait in 1969 as a friendly gesture to China, Secretary of State William Rogers further announced U.S. support for the People’s Republic of China’s admission to the United Nations in 1971. The U.S. plan to reconcile with China was carried out in three stages: Pakistan president Yahya Kahn and other influential members of the elite were secretly asked to serve as messengers between the U.S. and China, then National Security Council Advisor Henry Kissinger paid a secret visit to Beijing in 1971, and finally, Nixon’s visit to China and the agreement of the Shanghai Communiqué in 1972 sealed the deal.

## China's Options: Now, and Then

Besides the above discussion, the more important question is what choice the CCP regime will make in the future. As mentioned earlier, after the 1911 collapse of the Third Empire (Qing) and the long period of internecine conflict among warlords and civil war between the KMT and the CCP, China finally completed the task of uniting China Proper again in 1949 (even though the goal of annexing Taiwan has yet to be realized; it has to be noted that Taiwan is traditionally excluded from the scope of so-called China Proper), standing at the possible starting point for an imperializing policy based on traditional logic. Without doubt, the current geopolitical environment that China faces is at great variance with the past. Coupled with the effects of a new wave of world enlargement, China's future is fraught with uncertainty.

### *Development of the CCP's Foreign Policy*

Generally speaking, scholars often divide the development of China's foreign policy since the 1950s into the following periods: the first period (1950s), characterized by the "lean to one side" (一邊倒, *yibiandao*) foreign policy; the second period (1960s), the "two line" (兩條線, *liang-tiaoxian*) policy and the so-called "middle ground" (中間地帶, *zhong-jian didai*) theory; and the third period (1970s), the "single line" (一條線, *yitiaoxian*) policy and the "three worlds" (三個世界, *sangeshijie*) theory. The 1980s was characterized by the so-called "independent and autonomous foreign policy" (獨立自主外交, *duli zizhu waijiao*), while the 1990s to the present is the stage of great-power diplomacy (大國外交, *daguo waijiao*).<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the establishment of the CCP regime in 1949, Mao Zedong proposed foreign policy guidelines such as "setting up a new kitchen" (

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12 See Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, "Peking's Growing Political, Economic, and Military Ties with Latin America," in David S. Chou, ed., *Peking's Foreign Policy in the 1980s* (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, 1989), pp. 389–391; 尹慶耀, 《中共的統戰外交》(台北: 幼獅出版公司, 1985年), 頁4–12; 張小明, 〈冷戰時期新中國的四次對外戰略抉擇〉, 收於劉山與薛君度編, 《中國外交新論》(北京: 世界知識出版社, 1997年), 頁1–20。

另起爐灶, *lingqiluzao*), “cleaning up the house before inviting visitors” (打掃乾淨屋子再請客, *dasao ganjing wuzi zaiqingke*), and “leaning to one side.”<sup>13</sup> First, “setting up a new kitchen” means that, in contrast to accepted and traditional international norms (as the mainstream idea of the moment), the CCP rejected the concept that a new regime should inherit foreign relations from the previous government. The CCP essentially responded to nationalistic emotions harbored in China from the Qing Dynasty. Second, even though “cleaning up the house before inviting visitors” emphasized the elimination of the remnant influences of old imperialist powers in China, the slogan actually implied the complete annihilation of the remaining power of the KMT on the mainland and the consolidation of domestic unification. Finally, “leaning to one side” referred to the CCP’s main diplomatic dilemma in the early stage of the regime, namely the issue of overreliance on the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Besides the previous guidelines, in an essay published in 1952, Zhou Enlai included three more guidelines: “tit-for-tat” (禮尚往來, *lishangwanglai*; to return the “favor” of capitalist countries afterwards), “scratching each other’s back” (互通有無, *hutongyouwu*; to connect with the world according to the principle of equality and mutual benefit), and “uniting peoples of the world” (團結世界人民, *tuanjie shijie renmin*; to put together, especially formerly colonized states).<sup>15</sup> Zhou’s further guidelines reflect the fact that China was not limited to the “leaning to one side” framework, but sought to escape from the limitations of political ideology and preserve a flexible space for exchanges with capitalist states.

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13 韓念龍主編，《當代中國外交》（北京：中國社會科學出版社，1987年），頁3。

14 謝益顯主編，《中國當代外交史》（北京：中國青年出版社，1997年），頁3-4；周恩來，〈新中國的外交〉（1949年11月8日），中華人民共和國外交部與中共中央文獻研究室編，《周恩來外交文選》（北京：中央文獻出版社，1990年），頁1-7；楊勝群與田松年主編，《共和國重大決策的來龍去脈》（南京：江蘇人民出版社，1996年），頁462-466；盧子健，《一九四九以後的中共外交史》（台北：風雲論壇出版社，1990年），頁22。

15 《周恩來外交文選》，頁51。

It is worth noting that the dependence of the CCP on the USSR during the regime's startup period was mainly based on a consideration of the latter's interest, which did not necessarily pertain to China's interest and often went against the rising populism in the country at the time. In response to nationalist sentiments coming from the masses, Zhou Enlai pointed out in 1949 that "[the CCP] holds a basic stance regarding foreign policy issues, which is the whole independence of the Chinese people."<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, China adopted a roundabout and progressive policy by reducing its dependency on the USSR first through the "middle ground" policy, before establishing an autonomous foreign policy through the so-called "three worlds" doctrine.<sup>17</sup> According to above traditional categories of policy option, despite the re-emergence of "revolutionary diplomacy" (革命外交, *geming waijiao*) during the Cultural Revolution (1966–68), something unseen since 1925–31,<sup>18</sup> and the CCP's constant reference to "independence and autonomy" in response to nationalistic popular demands, China's foreign strategy from 1950 to the 1990s demonstrated an essentially non-imperialist status quo policy. Deng's introduction of the guideline of "hiding one's light under the bushel" (韜光養晦, *taoguangyanghui*) after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 more sufficiently explains the basic guiding principle of the CCP's foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

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16 《周恩來選集》（北京：人民出版社，1980年），頁321。

17 The so called "middle ground" theory first appeared in the conversation between Mao and American reporter Anna Louis Strong. As Mao expressed, "... a wide middle ground lies between the U.S. and Soviet Union; here, there are many capitalist, colonial and semi-colonial states that span across the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. Before suppressing these countries, reactionaries in the U.S. will not move against the Soviet Union... Before long, these countries will understand their real oppressor, the Soviet Union or the U.S." See 尹慶耀，《中共的統戰外交》，頁45–47。

18 蔡東杰，《兩岸外交政策與對外關係》（台北：高立圖書公司，2001年），頁128。On the development of Revolutionary Diplomacy in 1925–31, see 李恩涵，《近代中國外交史事新研》（台北：台灣商務印書館，2004年），頁237–341。

19 See 《鄧小平文選：第三卷》（北京：人民出版社，1993年），〈社會主義的中國誰也動搖不了〉，頁328–334，〈堅持社會主義，防止和平演

### ***Transformational Diplomacy in the New Century***

In the early stage of the CCP regime, as it had to concentrate on consolidating the vital interest of survival, the context of a status quo non-imperialist policy seemed to be a hard fact, and it served as the main departure for foreign thinking in the Deng Era (1978–97). As early as 1984, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that “China is a big country, and also a small country; ‘big country’ refers to large population and territory, ‘small country’ refers to China being a developing state . . . China lives up to the claim of being a small country, but she is also a big country, as in the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China counts as one.”<sup>20</sup> The statement expresses Deng’s guarded recognition of China’s power. The idea that came out of the above statement was the strongly protectionist concept of “anti-hegemony” (反霸, *fanba*). Not only did Hu Yaobang mention in the CCP’s 12th Congress Report in 1982 that “anti-hegemony and maintaining world peace is the most important task of peoples in the world today,” but Zhao Ziyang also mentioned at the 6th National People’s Congress in 1983 that “China will not seek hegemony . . . regardless of who, where and what kind of hegemonism is initiated, we absolutely reject [such ignorance].” In 1990, Deng Xiaoping further stated that “. . . we should never take the lead . . . we are incapable of taking the lead . . . China will never claim hegemony nor will she take the lead.”<sup>21</sup> Even until 2001, China’s President Jiang Zemin still continued to claim that “. . . [in terms of] China’s enforcement of independent and autonomous foreign policy, its basic goals include the rejection of hegemony and the maintenance of world peace.”<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, with the achievement of positive effects in reform policy since the 1980s and the transformation of the international system

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變》，頁346–348，〈中國永遠不允許別國干涉內政〉，頁361–364。The motto is sometimes simplified as “observe calmly; hide our light under the bushel; stand firmly; act decisively.” See 唐家璇，〈當前國際形勢與我國對外關係〉，《解放軍報》，1994年3月7日。

20 《鄧小平文選：第三卷》，頁105。

21 中共中央文獻研究室編，《十二大以來重要文獻選編》（北京：人民出版社，1986年），頁43與頁498；《鄧小平文選：第三卷》，頁358。

22 江澤民於2001年4月19日訪問阿根廷時的講話。

towards the development of multi-polarity in the Post-Cold War Era, China seems to have begun to adjust its foreign policies as well, under the combination of a gradual increase in comprehensive national power and a favorable objective environment.<sup>23</sup> As Deng Xiaoping pointed out, “the situation of American and Soviet monopoly over everything is changing; whether the world system became three, four or five poles . . . so-called multi-polarity, China counts as a pole; China should not diminish herself, she counts as a pole no matter what.” It is clear that after experiencing a period of dependence (1950–60s) and a period of autonomy (1970–80s), China’s foreign relations have been gradually moving towards a new period of expansion since the 1990s. Whether the task at hand is to adopt a preventative strategy in order to counter the hidden isolation policy of the West (headed by the U.S.), whether it is to prevent great powers from supporting domestic separatism or Taiwanese independence, or whether it is to continue to strive for an international environment that supports a running strategy of economic liberalization, China has not only elevated its influence in recent years, it has also placed high competitive pressure on the current U.S. hegemony, and it has done this through self-recognition of its international status,<sup>24</sup> frequent high-level exchanges to establish communication channels with the global system, the large-scale renewal of military armaments and facilities, and increased global participation through its seat on the UN Security Council.

Responding to the so-called “rise of China” has already become the chief aim of U.S. current strategic planning in the West Pacific.<sup>25</sup> For example, as William Kristol and Robert Kagan pointed out in 2000,

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23 章一平，〈從冷戰後國際體系的複雜化看中國與大國關係〉，《世界經濟與政治》，第12期（2000年），頁22–23。

24 杜攻主編，《轉換中的世界格局》（北京：世界知識出版社，1992年），頁7。

25 Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: Regional Security after 9/11,” *Parameters* 33:2 (Summer 2003), pp. 98–107; Elizabeth Economy, *China’s Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the United States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005); Evelyn Goh, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on the China Challenge,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30:4 (2007), pp. 809–832.

despite the U.S. achievement of unprecedented status after the First Gulf War, more importantly, it still has begun to face the potential threat of China's rise.<sup>26</sup> President Barack Obama also expressed during the 2007 Democratic primary elections that "China . . . is neither our enemy nor our friend . . . she is a competitor of the U.S." The statement sufficiently hints at the conflict underlying Sino-American relations, which also forms the legitimate basis for the U.S. strategy of "return to Asia."

## Conclusion: The Fourth Empire?

Following the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War, for the first time since the end of the 19th century, groups of countries remain undivided in the East Asian regional system. Such outcome saves China from having to consider national defense in an environment rife with conflict, and for the first time in her modern history, China is able to engage all countries at the same time. In addition, with increased growth in economic and military influence, China can shape its neighboring environment while playing a more active role.<sup>27</sup> China's economic rise has had obvious impact on world economy since 1980s, and the speed of its growth may have even sprinted way ahead of China's expectations. For example, as the CCP's 13th Congress Report in 1987 points out, the GDP by 2000 was estimated to increase threefold over the amount of 1980; the actual increase was 6.55-fold.<sup>28</sup> In the CCP's 16th Congress Report in 2002, the goal for 2020 was set at twice the GDP in 2000; the figure was achieved earlier, by 2010. More importantly, China's rise is actually changing the general impression of the characteristics of the international structure. Not only did historian Niall Ferguson coin the

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26 William Kristol and Robert Kagan, *Present Dangers Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (California: Encounter Books, 2000), p. 59.

27 Michel Oksenberg, "China: Tortuous Path onto the World's Stage," in Robert Pastor, ed., *A Century's Journey How The Great Powers Shape The World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 318.

28 國家統計局編，《中國統計摘要，2007》（北京：中國統計出版社，2007年），頁23。

word “Chimerica” in 2007, to emphasize the interest community formed by the world’s greatest consuming state (U.S.) and saving state (China) and to show how the new structure would have a major impact on the world economy,<sup>29</sup> but Fred Bergsten further proposed the so-called *G-2* concept, suggesting that China and the U.S. should establish a model for equal negotiations and joint leadership in global economic affairs, in order to respond to challenges against U.S. interests on questions such as China’s currency rate and international trade.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Oded Shenkar also points out that, despite China’s continuing problems in the new century, the country will eventually regain her past glory. Particularly after China becomes the industrial, commercial and political center of the region, its influence will exceed the traditional scope of East Asia, first expanding to Central and Southeast Asia, then entering the Middle East due to its energy demand, and finally taking the lead in economic assistance towards Africa. In any case, China is bound to become a world-class power.<sup>31</sup>

Since the beginning of the new century, objectively speaking, not only has China had the potential to compete with U.S. hegemony, but China’s growing intervention in global affairs has also encouraged Western observers to conclude that the development of China’s foreign strategy has implications of neo-imperialism (especially in Africa). However, this article has no intention of pursuing such an ambiguous concept.

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29 Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, “Chimerica and the Global Asset Market Boom,” *International Finance* 10:3 (2007), pp. 215–239; see also Niall Ferguson, “What ‘Chimerica’ Hath Wrought,” *The American Interest* 4:3 (2009), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2009/01/01/what-chimerica-hath-wrought/>; Zachary Karabell, *Superfusion: How China and America Became One Economy and Why the World’s Prosperity Depends on It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

30 C. Fred Bergsten, “A Partnership of Equals: How Washington Should Respond to China’s Economic Challenge,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64448/c-fred-bergsten/a-partnership-of-equals>

31 Oded Shenkar, *The Chinese Century: The Rising Chinese Economy and Its Impact on the Global Economy, the Balance of Power, and Your Job* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), p. 207.



In sum, based on the concept of strategic choice proposed above and the reality of China's rise in the new century, China does seem to harbor the potential to turn from her long-term non-imperialist stance in the 1950–90s towards the new tendency of imperializing policy. The transformation from discriminatory nationalism towards the development of limited nationalism in 1980–90s is major ideological evidence of China's change. However, since the end of the 1990s, increased tensions in Sino-American relations and Sino-Japanese relations (the U.S. and Japan being China's main global and regional competitors, respectively) and China's increasingly high-profile diplomatic stance against the U.S. and Japan reflect some aggressiveness in China's external strategy. Although some signs of transformational diplomacy have appeared in China's foreign relations, the country clearly remains a long way off from rebuilding an empire. It is worth noting that, despite the twentieth century being the so-called "American century," the lone superpower was unable to achieve the goal proposed by some observers of establishing an empire.<sup>32</sup> Given that the U.S. failed, what should one expect from a rising China with an uncertain future? In other words, even if the China's leaders have the idea of reviving a *Pax Sinica* (similar to the U.S. neo-conservatives during 2001–04), tangible results for evaluation will remain few and far between in the near future.

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32 See Robert Cooper, "Why We Still Need Empires," *The Observer*, April 7, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/observer/worldview/story/0,11581,680117,00.html>