

Chapter 1

The China Dream: Revival of What Historical Greatness?

Victoria Tin-bor Hui¹

I. Introduction

Chinese Dream

— song by Roman Tam, lyrics by Jim Wong, music by Man-hoi Chiu
(1984)

My dream and your dream
With origins from the Yellow River, every dream
Through 5,000 years of innumerable longings dreams have flown
Which dream has surged with joy?
Which dream is loaded with sufferings?
How many times we have witnessed the Han-Tang model
Freeing our fellow countrymen from sufferings?
When will the day come when we in China strive?
When will the sleeping lion roar its song to awaken China?

¹I thank Tuan Yao Cheng, Michael Davis and Chih-shian Liou for helpful comments, and Christine Gorman for editorial assistance.

Surging forth and clearing the way
 A giant dragon wielding its new self to stay
 Wishing every Chinese happiness
 Laughters and smiles always in the Yellow River's caress
 5,000 years of innumerable Chinese dreams all share the
 same content
 The wish for every Chinese life to be free, joyful, and happy

The “Chinese Dream” is one of the theme songs of the annual candle light vigils held at Hong Kong’s Victoria Park that commemorate the Tiananmen massacre. Originally written as an ordinary Canto-pop song in 1984, the “Chinese Dream” joined the ranks of protest songs calling for Chinese democracy when Hong Kong people mobilized to support Chinese students in 1989. It is noteworthy that the dream for a democratic future traces its steps back through “5,000 years of Chinese history,” especially the “exemplary” eras under the Han and Tang dynasties. If even Hong Kong protestors who demand the rectification of the Tiananmen massacre and the end of one-party dictatorship look back to history, it is not surprising that Chinese president Xi Jinping, who aims to build up power and wealth and maintain one-party dictatorship, defines his “China Dream” in terms of revival of historical greatness. The “China Dream” is designed to win hearts and minds. Since regime critics are also backward-looking, it is expected that Xi’s dream will resonate with the Chinese population. As China seeks restoration of historical greatness rather than a new rise of Chinese power, it is hoped that Xi’s dream can soothe some concerns among China’s neighbors.

This chapter analyzes the international and domestic dimensions of Xi’s dream: first, “wealth and power (*fuyang* 富強) or “strong country (*qiangguo* 強國)”); and, second, “people’s livelihood/welfare (*minsheng* 民生)” or “prosperous population (*fumin* 富民).”² If the protest song “Chinese Dream” presumes that such achievements

²“*Zhongguo meng: shixian zhongguo minzu de weida fuxing* [China Dream: Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People],” *Gongchandang yuan wang* [Communist Party members net]. Available at: <http://www.12371.cn/special/zgmsxzhmzdwdx/> (accessed 14 November 2013).

were realized only in the Han and Tang eras, the official “China Dream” suggests that they existed for most of China’s “5,000 years of history” until the Opium War. I question the historical basis of both claims to “historical greatness.” China was often not the strongest power in historical Asia. When China was preponderant as during the Han and Tang eras, such greatness was achieved by military prowess rather than cultural attraction. As such, the talk of “strong country” is inimical to diplomatic efforts at promoting China as a strong but peaceful country. As for people’s welfare, it was rarely maintained when China was a dominant power but more attainable when China was divided into competing states. On both fronts, then, there was not much historical greatness to be revived — and Xi’s dream would be merely a dream, that is, an ideal not grounded in the reality.

There was, however, a different aspect of historical greatness that deserves revival. While the “Chinese Dream” song dreams of freedom as well as happiness, the official “China Dream” is silent on freedom. Xi’s dream traces the first call for national revival to Sun Yat-sen but makes no mention that Sun’s “Three Principles of the People (*sanmin zhuyi* 三民主義)” had a third component in addition to “national independence (*minzu* 民族)” and “people’s livelihood (*minsheng* 民生)”: “people’s rights (*minquan* 民權).”³ This points to the gap between Xi’s top-down dream and citizens’ bottom-up dream. The official China Dream wants to build a “strong country” and “prosperous population” under one-party dictatorship, but not all Chinese are convinced that peaceful rise or people’s welfare is possible without freedom. Indeed, notwithstanding the official claim that constitutionalism is a Western development, the roots of constitutionalism are as deep as China’s written history. If China is to look back to 5,000 years of history, the indigenous constitutional tradition must be considered alongside power and wealth. Irrespective of what historical greatness there was to be revived, this chapter concludes that the Chinese should dream about the future rather than

³Rana Mitter, “1911: The Unanchored Chinese Revolution,” *China Quarterly*, No. 208 (December 2011), pp. 1009–1020.

the past. China's future was not carved in stone 5,000 years ago or in Han–Tang times but is to be written by what Chinese leaders and citizens choose to do today.

II. The China Dream as Revival of Historical Greatness

What does the “China Dream” entail? In Xi’s words, the “China Dream” refers to the realization of “national wealth and power (*guojia fuqiang* 國家富強), national revival (*minzu zhenxing* 民族振興), and people’s happiness (*renmin xingfu* 人民幸福).”⁴ A commentary in the official *New China News Agency* outlines the following components:

“First, the ‘China Dream’ is first and foremost a ‘strong country dream (*qianguo meng* 強國夢),’ with ‘strength’ referring to not sheer economic capability, but comprehensive capabilities. Second, the strong country must be tightly linked to a prosperous population (*fumin* 富民). Without the people’s prosperity and sufficiency (*fuzu* 富足) as well as happiness (*xingfu* 幸福), the path to a strong country cannot reach success. Third, realization of the ‘China Dream’ can only be achieved by the joint efforts of comrades on both sides of the [Taiwan] Strait. Fourth, the ‘China Dream’ belongs not only to China, but should also make contributions to the world.”⁵

This chapter analyzes the first and fourth elements involving “strong country” and the second involving “prosperous population.” I will leave it to Taiwanese colleagues to decide if Taiwan shares Xi’s dream.

⁴Zhong Sheng, “*Rang zhongguo meng huiji shijie: san lun xinxiingshi xia de zhongguo waijiao*” [Let the China Dream Benefit the World — The Third Discourse on Chinese Foreign Policy Under New Conditions], *The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China*, last modified 26 October 2013. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-08/26/content_2473633.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

⁵Hao Sun and Li Liu, “*Shixian minzu fuxing de zhengque daolu*” [The Correct Path to Realizing National Rejuvenation], *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth net], 27 February 2013. Available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/ztck/2013nd/zgm/gjry/201302/t20130227_213562.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

Xi kick-started his dream campaign while visiting the exhibition “The Road to Revival” at the National Museum on 20 November 2012. What does “national revival” have to do with the China Dream? As Zheng Wang points out, “the Chinese Dream is a continuation of the rejuvenation narrative.”⁶ The use of the term “rejuvenation (*fixing* 復興)” underscores a return to China’s “natural state of glory,” “a return to greatness and not a rise from nothing.”⁷ Likewise, commentaries in the official *Guangming Daily* point out that revival is based on “prior glory”⁸ — specifically, the “splendid golden ages (*huihuang shengshi* 輝煌盛世)” under the Qin, Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing when “China was a leading world power.”⁹ In this narrative, China’s “natural state of glory” was truncated by the “century of national humiliation that began with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and lasted through the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945.”¹⁰ The combination of national pride in “5,000 years of glorious history” with national shame in “the century of humiliation” leads William Callahan to call China a “pessoptimist nation.”¹¹ Such pessoptimist sentiments have motivated the search for national revival. Orville Schell and John Delury find that “the quest for wealth

⁶Zheng Wang, “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), pp. 1–13.

⁷Zheng Wang, “Not Rising, But Rejuvenating: The “Chinese Dream,” *The Diplomat*, 5 February 2013.

⁸Weiqiang Song, “*Shixian minzu fixing de ‘zhongguo meng’: zhongguo gongchandang de lishi shiming yu zeren dandang*” [Realizing the China Dream of National Revival — The Historical Mission and Responsibility of the Chinese Communist Party], *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth] net, last modified 4 February 2013. Available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/ztck/2013nd/zgm/llsk/201302/t20130204_209967.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

⁹Yongping Hao, Xianghuai, Huang and Tian Tian, “*Lishi weidu zhong de zhongguo meng*” [The China Dream in Historical Dimensions], *Zhongguo gongchandang xinwen* [Chinese Communist Party News], last modified 15 October 2013. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2013/1015/c40531-23204756.html> (accessed 14 November 2013).

¹⁰Wang, “Not Rising, But Rejuvenating: The “Chinese Dream.”

¹¹William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, Reprint Edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and power” was “a leitmotif that was strewn throughout the writings of virtually every leader and thinker of consequence” in modern China.¹² Xi credited Sun Yat-sen for first advocating the slogan “rejuvenate the Chinese nation (*zhenxing zhonghua* 振興中華).”¹³ In the decades-long civil war, the Nationalists and Communists battled over not only which party could rule China, but also which party could restore the country to its historical greatness. To mobilize nationalist sentiments, both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong re-fashioned the Opium War into not merely “a turning point in modern Chinese history,” but also “the beginning of China’s diplomatic defeats after 5,000 years of isolation,” “the greatest ever humiliation.”¹⁴

When the Communists drove out the Nationalists, they also won the mandate to “rejuvenate China.” Mao declared on 21 September 1949 that “the Chinese people ... have now stood up. The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. ... [We] will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation.”¹⁵ The party soon propagated the anthem “The East Is Red” to credit Mao for “working for the happiness of the people.” Xi’s dream follows the long-standing party position that equates national rejuvenation with the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Sixty years on, the party-state now proudly declares that “each of our dreams has become

¹²Edward Wong, “Q. and A.: Orville Schell and John Delury on China’s Quest for Rejuvenation,” *New York Times*, 16 July 2013.

¹³“*Shenme shi zhongguo meng, zenyang lijie zhongguo meng*” [What is the China Dream? How to Understand the China Dream?], *Xinhua net* [New China News net], last modified 26 April 2013. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-04/26/c_124633467.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

¹⁴Julia Lovell, “The Opium War and China’s ‘Century of Humiliation,” in Naomi Standen (ed.), *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), p. 158.

¹⁵Mao Zedong, “The Chinese People have Stood Up: Opening address at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, 21 September 1949,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*. Available at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_01.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

a reality”: not just “the dream of national independence,” but also “the dream of hosting the Olympics and World Expo,” “the dream of building the Qinghai–Tibet Railway,” “the dream of navigating the sky and sea,” and “the dream of building aircraft carriers.”¹⁶

The dream of a powerful navy, however, may not be compatible with the dream of winning hearts and minds. China has long worked hard to dampen concerns for a coming China threat. But earlier narratives of “China as a peace-loving country according to the five principles of peaceful coexistence” and of China seeking only “peaceful development” in a “harmonious world” have not been effective.¹⁷ It is hoped that the emphasis on *revival* as opposed to new rise may convince the international audience that China does not have a “hegemony dream”¹⁸ and is “not a threat to the world.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the slogan “the China dream, the dream of a strong military (中國夢 強國夢)” — especially when it was made by naval officers standing in formation on the deck of the Liaoning aircraft carrier²⁰ — was anything but reassuring to China’s neighbors.

The China Dream is also targeted at the domestic audience. Chinese officials have “endeavored to convince the general public that the dream was also for each individual Chinese” and that the realization of the national dream is the foundation for the

¹⁶ “[CEG Translation] Building the “China Dream” for the Great Chinese Rejuvenation (Part 1).” *China Election Blog*, translated by Julie Wu, p. 2 (accessed 28 May 2013; the post was later taken down).

¹⁷ Zheng Wang, “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context,” pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ Wu Jianmin, “*Zhongguo meng jue bushi ‘chengba meng’*” [The China Dream is Definitely Not a Hegemonic Dream], *Renmin* [People’s net], last modified 19 August 2013. Available at: <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2013/0819/c119475-22619270.html> (accessed 14 November 2013).

¹⁹ “*Liu Yunshan: Zhongguo meng dui shijie jue bushi weixie*” [Liu Yunshan: The China Dream Is Definitely Not a Threat to the World], *Political China*, last modified 23 April 2013. Available at: <http://www.politicalchina.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=228468> (accessed 14 November 2013).

²⁰ Anne Henochowicz, “Netizen Voices: Chinese Dream, Military’s Dream,” *China Digital Times*, 20 November 2013. Available at: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/11/netizen-voices-chinese-dream-militarys-dream/>.

realization of individual dreams.²¹ The dream certainly resonates with the century-long sentiments of pride and humiliation. Yet, it is not clear that “even those at the bottom of the social ladder have seen their standard of living vastly improve.”²² For the marginalized and dispossessed, the promise that the China Dream means prosperity and happiness rings hollow. Petitioners of all kinds of injustices appear to have different dreams, which included “At 70, I would not be sent to black prisons,” “Judicial fairness: Give back the life of my son,” “My Chinese dream is that China would no longer conduct land grabs of people’s homes, and I can live in safety and enjoy my work.”²³

Such dissenting voices suggest discrepancies between the top-down dream and bottom-up dreams. This contradiction is reflected in the uncertain translation of the Chinese term “*zhongguo meng*”: should it be the “China Dream” or the “Chinese Dream/s”? Ming Wan argues that the former is more accurate because of the emphasis “on state power and on the state’s projection of its power in the international arena.”²⁴ I opt to use different translations to reflect the two meanings, using “China Dream” to refer to the top-down view and “Chinese Dream/s” to reflect bottom-up perspectives.²⁵

²¹ Wang, “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context,” p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²³ Rachel Lu, “Chinese Petitioners: Here’s My ‘Chinese Dream,’” *Tea Leaf Nation*, last modified 27 March 2013. Available at: <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/03/chinese-petitioners-heres-my-chinese-dream/> (accessed 14 November 2013); Evan Osnos, “Can China deliver the China dream(s)?,” *New Yorker*, 26 March 2013; “China Media Bulletin: No. 84,” *Freedom House*, last modified 4 April 2013. Available at: http://www.freedomhouse.org/cmb/84_040413 (accessed 14 November 2013).

²⁴ Ming Wan, “Xi Jinping’s “China Dream”: Same Bed, Different Dreams?,” *The Asan Forum*, 2 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.theasanforum.org/xi-jinpings-china-dream-same-bed-different-dreams/> (accessed 1 December 2013).

²⁵ As Evan Osnos puts it, “Xi Jinping has sought to inspire his people by raising the flag of the China Dream, but they have interpreted it as China Dreams — plural. Talk to just about anyone these days and she can tell you what she wants, what is standing between her and her goals, and how she will define success in reaching it. And that — the proliferation of 1.3 billion China Dreams — will prove either the wisdom of the concept or the potential danger embedded it.” Evan Osnos, “Can China Deliver the China Dream(s)?,” *The New Yorker*, 26 March 2013.

The Hong Kong pop song “Chinese Dream” is translated as such because it is concerned with the people’s happiness and freedom.

III. What Historical Greatness?

If we are doubtful of claims to “strong country” and “people’s livelihood” at present, we should also examine their historicity in the past. The official China Dream takes for granted that China, as the “Middle Kingdom,” was historically powerful but peaceful toward its neighbors for 5,000 years.²⁶ As such, today’s “strong country dream” should likewise bring about “peace, development, and cooperation” to the world.²⁷ This line of “peaceful development” predates Xi and is best articulated by State Councilor Dai Bingguo:

“China has no culture or tradition of seeking expansion or hegemony. Throughout our history of thousands of years, benevolence and harmony are at the heart of our political and cultural tradition, which values harmony, good-neighborliness and friendship with all. China never sought expansion or hegemony even in its heyday centuries ago. ... China’s territory has basically been what it is today since the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–24 AD).”²⁸

Dai’s claim of peaceful development went back for 2,000 years rather than 5,000 years. Nevertheless, if it is true that China never sought expansion for 2,000 years since the Han, then China’s neighbors should rest at ease that China has a history of being strong but peaceful.

To adequately assess the claim of a strong but peaceful Middle Kingdom, we need to examine if “China’s territory has basically

²⁶ Song, “Realizing the China Dream of National Revival.”

²⁷ “Liu Yunshan: The China Dream is Definitely not a Threat to the World.”

²⁸ Dai Bingguo, “Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development: Why has China chose the path of peaceful development?,” *Beijing Review*, 23 December 2010. Available at: http://www.bjreview.com.cn/quotes/txt/2010-12/27/content_320120.htm. Chinese names follow the Chinese convention of listing surnames first, except for the names of scholars who have published in English.

been what it is today since the Western Han Dynasty.” This involves asking a prior question: what is “China (*zhongguo*)”? Mainstream Chinese history books present Chinese history as a clean dynastic cycle, which begins with Xia, Shang, and Zhou, through Qin, Han, Jin, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, and ends with the Republic of China and the People’s Republic. With few exceptions, a later dynasty immediately follows the previous dynasty. Such a presentation gives the impression of a seamless web of history in which the Middle Kingdom was always unified and predominant. But there is no provision for a definition of what “China” entailed or what the Middle Kingdom encompassed.

I follow Max Weber’s conception of the effective state as one “that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”²⁹ “China” was a unified entity only when the central court faced no armed challenges. The prevalence of civil wars and armed rebellions means that the official founding of a new dynasty did not necessarily mean the establishment of central control. As for the “given territory,” the late Tan Qixiang, the chief editor of the authoritative *Historical Atlas of China*, argued that “historical China” should be defined by the maximum territorial reach achieved under the Qing dynasty.³⁰ Ge Jianxiong follows the same definition,³¹ but acknowledges that it would yield only 81 years of unity from 1759 to 1840.³² Indeed, such an expansive conception of historical China is by fiat biased against the view of the Middle Kingdom as a unified and predominant entity. Ge thus turns to a much more limited definition: the maximum territorial reach of the

²⁹Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.

³⁰Qixiang Tan, “Lishishang de zhongguo,” [Historical China], in *Qiusuo shikong* [An Exploration of Time and Space] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi, 2000), p. 2; and Qixiang Tan, *Jianming zhongguo lishi dituji* [Concise Historical Atlas of China] (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1991).

³¹Jianxiong Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie: Zhongguo lishi de qishi* [Unification and Division: Insights from Chinese History] (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhì sanlian shudian, 1994), p. 184.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 79.

Qin dynasty as achieved in 214 BC. This territorial space is roughly bounded by the Yellow River in the northwest, the Yin Shan and the lower Liao River in the northeast, the Sichuan basin in the west, the eastern part of the Yungui plateau in the southwest, the Guangdong and Guangxi regions in the south, and the coastline in the east.³³ In dynastic records, this space is termed “the interior (*neidi* 內地),” as distinguished from regions “beyond the pass (*guanwai* 關外 or *saiwai* 塞外)” in Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Yunnan-Guizhou.³⁴ In this chapter, I adopt the terms “the interior” and “the periphery.”

1. Rethinking “strong country”

When “China” is examined rather than presumed, it is clearly not true that “China” was a “strong country” for 2,000 years (not to mention 5,000 years). “China” more often took the plural form than the singular form. “China” established effective rule over the territorial space of today’s China for only 81 years (1759–1840), and the interior for only 991 years up to 2000.³⁵ Indeed, it is often overlooked that the Chinese term for “China,” *zhongguo*, did not always mean the singular and powerful Middle Kingdom. The term *zhongguo* originally referred to “central states” in the plural form in the ancient period (before 221 BC). It acquired the meaning of the Middle Kingdom long after the first successful unification (in 221 BC). The Chinese language does not distinguish between the singular and plural forms. This explains why “*zhongguo meng*” could refer to both the “China Dream” in the singular and “Chinese Dreams” in the plural.

If it is not true that “China’s territory has basically been what it is today since the Western Han Dynasty,” then it is worth examining how “China” expanded in history. Since I use the Qin’s territorial

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 179.

³⁴ James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Xinjiang, 1759–1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

³⁵ Victoria Hui, “What is ‘China’?” work in progress.

reach as the base line, it is easy to trace developments from the Han on. Overall, the Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) sent armies to the Western Regions (the Zungharian and/or the Tarim Basins in modern-day Xinjiang), southern Manchuria, northern Korea and Southeast Asia; the Sui dynasty (581–618) to the Western Regions, southern Manchuria, northern Korea and Southeast Asia; the Tang dynasty (618–907) to the Western Regions, Mongolia, eastern Tibet, southern Manchuria and northern Korea; the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) to Korea, Japan, Yunnan, Burma, Vietnam and Java (after subjugating the vast Eurasian steppe zone and the Song dynasty); the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the Western Regions, Mongolia, southern Manchuria, northern Korea, Burma, Vietnam, and beyond in South and Southeast Asia; and the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the Western Regions, Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal and Taiwan. That is, when “China” took the singular form in the interior, it repeatedly launched campaigns to the periphery.

This is not to say that the Middle Kingdom ceaselessly sought expansion. Even in periods when “China” was dominant in historical Asia, it stumbled when it sent expeditions to the far-away periphery. The immense costs of putting mass armies in the field and transporting supplies over long-distances led to budget deficits, heavy extractions and consequent peasant rebellions. Warfare in the tropical south involved the additional risk of deadly diseases. And warfare in the Inner Asian steppes required an effective cavalry which Chinese courts could build only by relying on defected or mercenary nomadic horsemen. Even victorious campaigns entailed the administration of conquered territories and the subjugation of resistant populations, which turned successful conquests into millstones that slowly dragged down China’s economy. This pattern casts doubt on the supposedly splendid eras of the Han and Tang. Although Han’s Emperor Wu (r. 140–187 BC) seized territories in the Zungharian Basin and northern Korea and beyond, the Han court gradually lost various distant conquests. The Sui dynasty tried to reconquer the periphery but suffered from rapid collapse. Tang’s Emperors Taizong (r. 626–649) and Gaozong (r. 649–683) succeeded at taking the Western Regions and vanquishing Koguryo, but the

Tang immediately lost Koguryo to Silla and later the Western Regions after the An Lushan rebellion (755). As it was impossible to subjugate recalcitrant neighbors, even powerful singular “China” had to conduct diplomatic relations, giving rise to the image of the cosmopolitan court especially under the Tang. If it is difficult to fathom the idea that China’s greatest dynasties were not so great, we may consider similar challenges the US has faced during the *Pax Americana*: outright military defeats by much smaller states (especially Korea and Vietnam in East Asia), and forced retreats when material and human costs became unsustainable — and “China” historically did not have the option of contracting national debt on the international financial market to smooth over budget deficits. It took a revolution in logistics for the Qing dynasty to finally subjugate the vast periphery in the 18th century.³⁶

However fleeting they were, military victories represented the hallmark of greatness. Expansionist emperors were glorified in dynastic records then and continue to be hyped in the popular media now. The wave of movies and TV dramas praising exemplary emperors predated Xi’s dream. The list includes the movie “Hero (*Yingxiong* 英雄)” about Qin’s First Emperor, TV series “Han’s Great Emperor Wu (*Han Wu dadi* 漢武大帝),” “Tang Taizong Li Shimin (唐太宗李世民),” “In Praise of Tang Taizong’s Reign (*Zhenguan changge* 貞觀長歌),” “Emperor Yongzheng’s Court (*Yongzheng wangchao* 雍正王朝),” “The Great Emperor Kangxi (*Kangxi dadi* 康熙大帝),” and “Emperor Qianlong’s Court (*Qianlong wangchao* 乾隆王朝).” The images of these expansionist emperors negate Xi’s message that China was historically powerful but peaceful. Christopher Ford pointedly argues that the dream of “a Sinocentric world” signifies a more aggressive approach.³⁷ No wonder another *Guangming Daily* commentary has to underscore

³⁶Victoria Hui, “From Asian Neighbors to Chinese Provinces: Implications from China’s Historical Expansion to the Periphery,” paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies annual meeting, Honolulu, 31 March–3 April 2011.

³⁷Christopher Ford, “Strategic Caution, Confrontation, and the ‘Chinese Dream’ of a Sinocentric World,” *New Paradigms Forum*, 20 November 2013. Available at: <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=1754> (accessed 1 December 2013).

that “national revival definitely does not mean revisiting the ‘golden ages of the Han and the Tang’ or the ‘Chinese empire’ in history.”³⁸

2. Rethinking “humiliation”

A hard look at “what is ‘China’?” challenges not only the historical greatness narrative, but also the modern humiliation narrative. It is commonly said that the Qing brought humiliation to China for losing vast pieces of territory in the periphery. In 1973, Mao lamented to Henry Kissinger the loss of “a half million square kilometers” of territory in Eastern Turkestan, Outer Mongolia and Manchuria to the Soviet Union. However, these peripheral regions had repeatedly broken free of Chinese control for two millennia. If all previous dynasties failed to hold on to Eastern Turkestan, Outer Mongolia and Manchuria, it is not inconceivable that the Qing would have lost them even without the Opium Wars. It is true that Western encroachment significantly drained the Qing’s military, administrative, and financial capabilities. However, the entrance of Western powers also allowed the Qing to contract loans and buy sophisticated weapons when peripheral populations rebelled. Paradoxically, then, it was the Western practice of sovereign debts that allowed the Qing to hold on to the periphery. And it was the Qing’s success at quelling rebellions and the Western concept of sovereignty that allowed the Republic to claim the entire Qing realm. As William C. Kirby observes, “The amazing fact of the 20th century is that this space [the periphery] was not only redefined as ‘Chinese’ and as the sacred soil of China, but also defended diplomatically to such a degree that the borders of the People’s Republic of China today are essentially those of the Qing.”³⁹

³⁸“*Zhonghua minzu fuxing bingfei huifu ‘han tang shengshi’*” [The Revival of the Chinese People is not the Restoration of the ‘Splendid Times of the Han and Tang’], *Xinhua xinwen* [New China News], 27 June 2008. Available at: http://news.xinhua-net.com/theory/2008-06/27/content_8447544.htm (accessed 1 December 2013).

³⁹William C. Kirby, “Lessons of China’s Twentieth Century,” Paper Presented at the Wianno Summer Study, Harvard University, 24–28 June 2002.

3. Rethinking “people’s livelihood”

If “China” was not always powerful and peaceful in the external realm, it also did not always provide for the people’s livelihood in the domestic realm. While the official line presumes that ordinary Chinese enjoyed prosperity for 5,000 years, the “Chinese Dream” song believes that the people were free from sufferings only in Han and Tang times. Xi Jinping underscores that “the China Dream is at its root the people’s dream”⁴⁰ and must “benefit the people.”⁴¹ It is correct that the “strong country dream” must be built on the “foundation of people’s livelihood.”⁴² Paradoxically, this dream was truer under plural “China” than singular “China.”

To be sure, the Sons of Heaven always upheld the importance of people’s welfare, light taxation and famine relief. Emperors always claimed to care for the people in the same way that parents provided for their children.⁴³ Rhetoric aside, it was in the interest of emperors to guarantee the people’s livelihood because every dynasty was eventually overthrown by rebellions. The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven held that emperors, as the “intermediary between Heaven, Earth, and Humanity,” were “liable to be judged on how well they delivered desirables such as peace and low taxes.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ “[CEG Translation] Building the “China Dream” for the Great Chinese Rejuvenation (Part 1).”

⁴¹ “China Dream: Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People.”

⁴² “Zhongguo meng de minsheng zhi ji” [The China Dream’s Foundation with People’s Livelihood], *Xinhua xinwen* [New China News], 7 May 2013. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-05/07/c_124673665.htm; “Zhongguo meng shi renmin de meng: ping shixian zhongguo meng zhi si” [The China Dream is the People’s Dream — On the Realization of the China Dream, No. 4], *The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China*, last modified 4 June 2013. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-06/04/content_2418628.htm (accessed 14 November 2013).

⁴³ R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 250.

⁴⁴ Naomi Standen, “Introduction: The Creation of History in China,” in Naomi Standen (ed.), *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), p. 5.

Failure to provide for the people revoked the Mandate and justified the “right to rebel.”⁴⁵ Despite both moral and pragmatic appeals for a people-based policy, tax rebellions and food riots recurred in history, not just during dynastic decline, but also at the height of dynastic power. Theoreticians for the “China Dream” somehow forgot the Marxist view of Chinese history which presumes that the “feudal era [read “imperial era”]” was always exploitative (so that only socialism could save the people).

Why were Chinese peasants routinely squeezed? First, the administrative structure under singular “China” was conducive to structural corruption. The central court appointed officials down to the magistrates. Thanks to the doctrine of light taxation, magistrates were given neither the budget nor the manpower to run local administration. Magistrates were reliant on a sub-bureaucratic staff of clerks, secretaries, and tax-collectors who made their livings from imposing surtaxes and fees on commoners.⁴⁶ Abuses by these functionaries were legendary. Magistrates, on their part, remitted to the court “only explicitly mandated quotas” of tax revenues and kept the rest.⁴⁷ As actual collections far exceeded reported revenues and the poorest bore disproportionate tax burdens, the Chinese state faced the paradox that revenues “remained short of its needs” but peasants were “up in arms against extortionate taxes.”⁴⁸ Second, the taxes remitted to the central treasury were not necessarily spent on improving the people’s livelihood. Whether or not the Son of Heaven cared about the people, he was tempted to consider “all under heaven” his private property. Ge Jianxiong observes that annual revenues were mostly spent on court consumption rather than public projects.⁴⁹ Han’s emperor

⁴⁵Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 134.

⁴⁶Patricia M. Thornton, *Disciplining the State: Virtue, Violence, and State-Making in Modern China* (Harvard: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), p. 24.

⁴⁷Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 95.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁹Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie*, p. 201.

Wu, for instance, used one-third of annual revenues on constructing his tomb, and most of the rest on building palaces, gardens, and ancestral temples.⁵⁰ Tang's Xuanzong was notorious in showering luxuries on his consort Yang Guifei.

Peasants were not free from sufferings in the golden eras of the Han and Tang for a third reason: glorious emperors in fact heightened extractions to pay for expansionist campaigns. If regular land taxes could barely cover ordinary expenses in peace times, they certainly could not meet the extraordinary demands of military campaigns in war times.⁵¹ Han's Emperor Wu and subsequent ambitious emperors understood that excessive extractions would incite peasant rebellions. The Middle kingdom typically planned for war only after it had accumulated sizable budget surpluses. But if victory did not come quickly as expected — and it rarely did, surpluses would be turned into deficits. Even victory involved additional administrative and military expenses to consolidate conquests, so that every piece of territorial gain was a drain on the central treasury. When a budget crisis hit, the court would be tempted to heighten extractions. If there is any lingering illusion about life under the Tang, one does not need to look further than Du Fu's "The Ballad of the Army Wagons (兵車行)":

“The din of wagons! Whinnying horses!
Each marcher at his waist has bow and quiver;
Old people, children, wives, running alongside,
Who cannot see, for dust, bridge over river:
They clutch clothes, stamp their feet, bar the way weeping,
Weeping their voices rise to darkening Heaven;
And when the passers-by question the marchers,
The marchers but reply, “Levies come often:
“They take us at fifteen for up the river,
To garrison the West, they’ll take at forty,
Your Headman has at first to tie your turban,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 196–197.

⁵¹ Wong, *China Transformed*, pp. 90, 94.

Grey-headed you come home, then back to duty —
 “The blood that’s flowed out there would make a sea, Sir!
 Our Lord, his lust for land knows no degree, Sir!
 But have you not heard
 Of House of Han, its East two hundred regions
 Where villages and farms are growing brambles?
 “That though a sturdy wife may take the plough, Sir,
 You can’t see where the fields begin and end, Sir?
 That Highlanders fare worst, they’re hardy fighters
 And so they’re driven first, like dogs and chickens?
 “Although you, Sir, ask such kind questions,
 Dare the conscripts tell their wretchedness?
 How, for instance, only last winter
 The Highland troops were still in the line
 When their Prefect sent urgent demands,
 Demand for tax, I ask you, from where?
 So now we know, no good having sons,
 Always better to have a daughter:
 For daughters will be wed to our good neighbors
 When sons are lying dead on Steppes unburied!
 But have you not seen
 On the Black Lake’s [Kokonor] shore
 The white bones there of old no one has gathered,
 Where new ghosts cry aloud, old ghosts are bitter,
 Rain drenching from dark clouds their ghostly charter?”⁵²

The poem criticizes Han’s Emperor Wu on the surface, but in fact laments the Tang’s mobilization for campaigns to Kokonor (in eastern Tibet) and Nanchao (modern Yunnan) around AD 750. Not surprisingly, unsustainable taxes, conscription, and corvee imposed in war times were “detonators of rebellion.”⁵³

If the people’s welfare was readily sacrificed when “China” took the singular form, it fared slightly better when “China” took the plural form. Inter-state competition compelled rulers to provide for material

⁵² Arthur Cooper, *Li Po and Tu Fu, Poems Selected and Translated with An Introduction and Notes* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 167–170.

⁵³ Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, p. 81.

welfare so as to motivate the people to fight and die in war. This was the most pronounced in the pristine classical era, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC). It was a time when competing “central state” introduced national conscription and national taxation, so that national security rested with the well-being of peasant-soldiers who paid taxes and fought wars. As starving peasants could not afford grain tax or provide military service, various states distributed land grants to ensure subsistence. To improve productivity, states introduced intensive farming methods. To stabilize the livelihood of peasants amidst annual fluctuations in yields, states established grain stores, provided disaster relief, and introduced a counter-cyclical policy. Confucian and Mencian thinkers of the time regarded the state’s provision of material welfare as representing a conditional state–society relationship: If the basic economic needs of the people were met, loyalty would ensue, and the state would be strong; if not, resentment would ensue, and the state would be weakened.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, Qin’s unification of the Warring States system in 221 BC fundamentally reversed state–society relations. The Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) is well-known for its brutality. Peasant welfare was abandoned. The court increased tax burdens and further drafted over 800,000 men to expand to the northern and southern frontiers. Punishments became so harsh that there were about 1.4 million convicts to provide forced labor to build the Emperor’s palaces and tomb. The court also burnt all books except Qin’s court records and those on medicine and agriculture, and persecuted 460 scholars who expressed doubts about the First Emperor’s policies. Qin’s subjects turned to the ultimate resort under tyranny — the right to rebel, setting the example for two millennia of peasant rebellions.

After the Qin and Han, competing “central states” in eras of plural “China” would again be compelled by international competition to introduce more open policies. If a “central state” was enslaving its population, all neighboring “central states” would be tempted to seize the opportunity to vanquish it. As good governance

⁵⁴E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 250, 259.

was seen as the foundation of national power and wealth, ambitious rulers had to tax at tolerable levels, develop neglected regions to enlarge their tax bases, attract new talents, and win hearts and minds. In short, while there is historical ground for the provision of people's livelihood in history, both top-down and bottom-up dreams are mistaken to believe that "strong country" was conducive to "people's welfare." It was instead during eras of plural "China" that competing regimes were compelled to provide for the people.

IV. The Missing Dream of Chinese Constitutionalism

If the top-down and bottom-up dreams overlap in their yawning for historical greatness, they differ fundamentally on another component: the dream of freedom and democracy. As a netizen puts it, "How about the ... dream of constitutionalism — could that be the Chinese dream? What happens after the strong military? Suppressing the commoners?"⁵⁵ According to Ming Wan, "[t]he latest round of the ideological fights in China is over constitutionalism."⁵⁶ The call comes from not just disgruntled netizens and traditional dissidents, but also establishment figures. Jiang Bixin, a vice president of the Supreme People's Court, urged in a November 2012 commentary that the party should operate within the boundary of the Constitution.⁵⁷ *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, a political journal affiliated with pro-reform party members, published an article entitled "The Constitution is a Consensus for Political Reform" in its "New Year Greeting" in January 2013.⁵⁸ The liberal-minded *Southern Weekly* even explicitly penned "China's Dream: The Dream of Constitutionalism":

"We hope that ... our Constitution can be realized someday soon.
This is the only way ... our nation and its people can stand strong

⁵⁵ Henochowicz, "Netizen Voices: Chinese Dream, Military's Dream."

⁵⁶ Wan, "Xi Jinping's 'China Dream.'"

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ David Bandurski, "A Consensus for Political Reform," China Media Project, last modified 2 January 2013. Available at: <http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/01/02/30203/> (accessed 14 November 2013).

once again on firm ground. ... With the Xinhai Revolution the rule of the Qing fell, and our forebears built Asia's first republic. But a free, democratic and prosperous China under constitutional rule never followed. ... Today, ... we dream not only that our country can be strong, but even more that the people of our country can enjoy dignity. ... Only if constitutionalism is realized and power effectively checked can citizens voice their criticisms of power loudly and confidently, and only then can every person believe in their hearts that they are free to live their own lives. Only then can we build a truly free and strong nation. ..."⁵⁹

This planned editorial for 3 January 2013, unfortunately, was censored and replaced by another piece "Pursuing Our Dreams" written by Guangdong's propaganda chief, Tuo Zhen. While the party has busily promoted the China Dream, it has also fiercely denounced "Western-style constitutionalism" in various documents and speeches.⁶⁰ Over the course of 2013, voices calling for constitutionalism have been silenced and jailed.

1. A century-old dream for Chinese constitutionalism

Party theoreticians seem to forget that the dream of constitutionalism is as old as the 1911 Chinese Revolution. It could be that the sin of the censored *Southern Weekly* editorial was exactly that it reminded Chinese of the Revolution's republican legacy. Yet, however bold the aborted editorial was, it was wrong in asserting that "a free, democratic and prosperous China under constitutional rule never followed" in the short-lived Chinese Republic. This misunderstanding is clearly the product of Chinese sentiments that equate foreign encroachment with nothing but humiliation. It is too often

⁵⁹David Bandurski, "A New Year's greeting gets the axe in China," China Media Project, last modified 3 January 2013. Available at: <http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/01/03/30247/> (accessed 15 November 2013).

⁶⁰The Editors, "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation: How Much is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China's Current Political Climate," China File, last modified 13 August 2011. Available at: <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation> (accessed 15 November 2013).

overlooked that the threat of foreign encroachment “also politicized the citizenry in a liberating sense.”⁶¹ Shocked by China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent “Scramble for Concessions” by Western powers, Chinese intellectuals openly debated the notions of constitutional monarchy, republicanism, and democracy during the decades from the 1890s to the 1930s. Orville Schell highlights that the May Fourth era of 1919 was a great “Chinese Enlightenment.”⁶² Arthur Waldron observes that the Northern government of 1912–1928 was “a period of professedly parliamentary rule.”⁶³ Likewise, Stephen MacKinnon points out that the Nationalist–Communist unity government at Hankou in 1938 was marked by power-sharing among rival militarists and thus witnessed “the absence of the repressive power of the state.”⁶⁴ It was the total triumph of the Communists over the Nationalists — and the reversion to singular “China” — that aborted China’s democratic experiment.

2. Citizenship rights in pre-modern history

If the call for modern constitutionalism is already a hundred years’ old, pre-modern citizenship rights are as ancient as written Chinese history.⁶⁵ It is often presumed that the origins of constitutionalism are unique to Western civilization and alien to Chinese civilization. R. Bin Wong argues that citizenship was “a culturally foreign concept” in imperial China.⁶⁶ Elizabeth Perry suggests that even if the

⁶¹ Stephen MacKinnon, “The Tragedy of Wuhan, 1938,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Special Issue: War in Modern China, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 1996), p. 943.

⁶² Orville Schell, “China’s Hidden Democratic Legacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (July/August 2004), p. 117.

⁶³ Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China’s Turning Point, 1924–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 264.

⁶⁴ MacKinnon, “The Tragedy of Wuhan, 1938,” p. 935.

⁶⁵ Victoria Hui, “Ancient China,” in Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 60–70.

⁶⁶ Wong, *China Transformed*, p. 93.

classical concept of Mandate of Heaven provides for socioeconomic rights, there is no place for political rights in China's political tradition.⁶⁷ What this mainstream view overlooks is that China shares with Europe crucial contingent developments conducive to the emergence of citizenship. If Western dynamism is assumed to come from the political fragmentation of Europe, then it is significant that "China" experienced fluctuations between the singular and plural forms in history. What compelled European kings and princes to make concessions to their populations in the domestic realm was the fact that they had to fight other kings and princes in the international realm at the same time. Scholars of European state formation have highlighted the military basis of citizenship. Citizenship rights emerged in Europe not because European rulers were more benign or European subjects had higher "rights consciousness," but because European rulers were forced by Darwinian international competition to bargain with domestic resource-holders. State-society bargaining for the wherewithal of war then created a variety of rights. Did such dynamics exist in Chinese history? I should note that what is at issue is not electoral democracy, a largely 20th-century phenomenon even in the West, but citizenship rights, a more transhistorical development. If we follow Charles Tilly's definition of citizenship rights as recognized enforceable claims on the state that are by-products of state-society bargaining over the means of war,⁶⁸ then we can find both political and socioeconomic rights in Chinese history.

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods epitomized the military basis of citizenship. Ambitious Chinese rulers faced a daunting challenge familiar to European rulers: how to motivate the people to fight and die in war. International competition compelled

⁶⁷Elizabeth J. Perry, "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights': From Mencius to Mao — and Now," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2008), pp. 37–50 at p. 43.

⁶⁸Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 101–102.

three major state-society bargains.⁶⁹ In addition to the bargain of peasant welfare discussed earlier, there was also a justice-based definition of citizenship. As Xu Jinxiong observes, “rulers gradually promulgated laws which were meant to bind rulers and ruled alike. ... Laws were originally tools used by aristocrats to arbitrarily suppress the people. They gradually became the contractual basis on which the people would accept a given rulership.”⁷⁰ E. Bruce Brooks calls this development “the new legal quid” in exchange for “the new military quo.”⁷¹ Transmitted texts and unearthed legal documents show that the right of access to justice and the right of redress before higher judges existed at least in the states of Qin, Chu, and Qi by the late 4th century BC.

International competition further nurtured the third bargain: freedom of expression. Ambitious rulers competed for not just the support of peasant-soldiers, but also the assistance of talented generals and strategists. In the interest of the state, senior court ministers were expected to freely criticize rulers’ mistaken policies. Independent scholars of the time were even less hesitant to speak their minds. Wong argues that the European phenomenon of popular sovereignty had no place in China’s late imperial state dynamics.⁷² He overlooks that the Warring States era was a different world. The received wisdom that the Mandate of Heaven rested with the Son of Heaven was a post-unification construction by Han’s Emperor Wu. The Mandate of Heaven as originally articulated in the classical era insisted on the ultimate sovereignty of the people. Most notably, the *Mencius* unequivocally places the Mandate in the hands of the people because “Heaven does not speak; it sees and hears as the

⁶⁹Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 4.

⁷⁰Jinxiong Xu, *Zhongguo gudai shehui* [Ancient Chinese Society] (Taipei: Taipei Shangwu, 1988), p. 543.

⁷¹E. Bruce Brooks, “Evolution Toward Citizenship in Warring States China,” paper presented at the European–North American Conference on “The West and East Asian Values,” Victoria College, University of Toronto, 31 July–2 August 1998, p. 6.

⁷²Wong, *China Transformed*, p. 101.

people see and hear.”⁷³ In discussing the bad last Shang ruler, Mencius is quoted to say: “I have heard about the killing of the ordinary fellow Zhou, but I have not heard of the assassination of any ruler.”⁷⁴ This passage is reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes’s complaint about resistance theorists: “they say not regicide, that is, killing of a king, but tyrannicide, which is, killing of a tyrant, is lawful.”⁷⁵ The *Zuo chuan* similarly remarks that if a ruler “exhausts the people’s livelihood ... and betrays the hopes of the populace, then ... what use is he? What can one do but expel him?”⁷⁶ Even the *Xunzi*, the classical text most supportive of strong central authority, states that “the ruler is like a boat and the people are like the water. While the water can float the boat, it can also capsize it.”⁷⁷ Classical Chinese thinkers thus preceded modern European resistance theorists in arguing that tyrants ceased to be rulers, properly speaking.

Together, the three bargains of material welfare, legal protection, and freedom of expression marked the emergence of citizenship rights in classical China. Of course, “central states” were not democracies, and many rulers remained abusive of the people (the same can be said of their European counterparts). Nevertheless, the very existence of inter-state competition necessarily gave rise to the “right of exit,” which made rulers aware of limits to repression lest the people would move to competing states. Europeanists argue that the right of exit served as an implicit check on arbitrary power, and even

⁷³ Mencius 5A5, trans. Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), p. 75.

⁷⁴ Mencius 1B8, trans. E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, “The Nature and Historical Context of the *Mencius*,” in Alan Kam-leung Chan (ed.), *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 254.

⁷⁵ Thomas Hobbes, “Leviathan [1651],” in Michael Morgan (ed.), *Classics of Moral and Political Theory* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), Pt. 2, Chapter 29, pp. 571–732.

⁷⁶ *Zuo Zhuan*: Ch. Duke Xiang 14th year, in Burton Watson, translation with a commentary, *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. xv–xvi.

⁷⁷ The *Xunzi*: Chapter 9, trans. Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, p. 206.

a substitute for formal representation in modern European politics.⁷⁸ In the Chinese context, scholars, peasants, and traders could similarly “vote with their feet” to states with the most open policies in eras of plural “China.”

For the next two millennia from the Qin to the Qing, citizenship rights would be eroded in eras of singular “China” and restored somewhat in eras of plural “China.” It is noteworthy that citizenship rights were not completely erased under the Middle Kingdom. The underlying principles, once they had been developed and enshrined in classical texts, were kept alive in Confucian rites and principles which even all-powerful Sons of Heaven had to pay lip service to. This explains why every emperor proclaimed that his primary concern was the people’s well-being. This also allows us to see that China has a deeply-rooted constitutional tradition conducive to building the dream of constitutionalism.

3. A millennia-old constitutional tradition

The classical bargain of freedom of expression, like the bargain of people’s welfare, continued to exist in imperial times, albeit in a much diminished form. Pierre-Étienne Will defines freedom of expression as “the right to remonstrate and to denounce, in memorials sent to the throne, abuses of power.”⁷⁹ The *Xunzi* advises scholar-officials: “Follow the Way, do not follow the ruler.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸Eric L. Jones, *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 118; Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), p. 518.

⁷⁹Pierre-Étienne Will, “Epilogue: Virtual Constitutionalism in the Late Ming Dynasty,” in Stéphanie Balme and Michael W. Dowdle (eds.), *Building Constitutionalism in China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 261–274.

⁸⁰The *Xunzi* says, “He who obeys the orders and benefits the ruler is called compliant; he who obeys the orders and does not benefit the ruler is called servile; he who contradicts the orders and benefits the ruler is called loyal; he who contradicts the orders and does not benefit the ruler is called a usurper. He who cares not for the ruler’s glory or disgrace, cares not for the success or failure of the state, but just

Generations of Confucian scholars heeded the advice. Theodore de Bary highlights “freedom of discussion” in terms of “the responsibility Confucian scholars felt to speak out against the abuse of power.”⁸¹ Moreover, although the Sons of Heaven were formally unchecked, they subjected themselves to the higher authority of Confucianism and Heaven when they sought legitimacy in the Confucian tradition and the Mandate of Heaven. Chu Ron Guey points out that, when Han’s first emperor Gaozu (r. 202–195 BC) offered sacrifice to Confucius, he not only legitimized his claim to rule, but also “exposed himself to being regulated by” the Confucian tradition.⁸² When Dong Zhongshu reinterpreted the Mandate of Heaven to rest with the Son of Heaven for Han’s Emperor Wu, he also “attempted to curb the arbitrary exercise of the ruler’s power by threatening the intervention of heaven in the form of natural portents and disasters” and by retaining the people’s “right to rebel.”⁸³

In the more open environment of the Song dynasty (960–1279) (which did not achieve unification of the interior and faced intense international competition), neo-Confucian scholars further worked out a “doctrine of political rights.”⁸⁴ Song neo-Confucian scholars such as Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi moved away from Han scholars’ emphasis on rites toward “heavenly principles” which “transcended the ruler and therefore obliged him to obey them.”⁸⁵ Alan Wood insists that the theory of “heavenly principles” is strikingly similar

blandishes and flatters the ruler in order to grasp emoluments and nurture ties [with the sovereign] is called the state’s villain.” *The Xunzi*, “Chen dao,” IX. 13: 249, translated and discussed in Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, pp. 179–180.

⁸¹ Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 109.

⁸² Ron Guey Chu, “Rites and Rights in Ming China,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming (eds.), *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 169–178 at p. 170.

⁸³ Alan Wood, *Limits to Autocracy: From Sung Neo-Confucianism to a Doctrine of Political Rights* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), p. 154.

⁸⁴ Wood, *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Wood, *Limits to Autocracy*, p. xi.

to the European conception of natural law because both uphold the belief “that there exist certain laws or rules of action that are inherent in human nature and that reflect the rationally apprehensible order of the universe.”⁸⁶ At the same time, neo-Confucians increasingly recognized the importance of “duly constituted institutions to protect this public discussion.”⁸⁷ Most notably, Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) understood that one could not count on the emperor’s capacity for self-restraint and thus sought to limit the power of the ruler by defining legal constraints and incorporating them in the organizational structure of government.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, this “literati power”⁸⁹ was not buttressed by legal constraints, or the classical bargain of legal protection. Confucian scholars who exercised this right had to risk their lives. As Will nicely captures it, “one could be brutally beaten on order of the emperor, thrown in one of the central governmental jails to die, or at a minimum lose all of one’s ranks and titles. But, nevertheless, one *had* such a right and one could always choose to exercise it.”⁹⁰ Given such high risks, it is not surprising that only the most courageous would choose to exercise this right. As such, the “dissenting Confucian tradition” was “unable historically to prevail over the politically more dominant dynastic tradition.”⁹¹

Even though the right to criticize was more philosophical than real, its survival over time left behind a tradition of “pre-constitutional thinking” which “partook of the general notion of a control of the actions of the government and even of the emperor himself, entrusted to a body of officials whose independence was

⁸⁶ Wood, *Limits to Autocracy*, p. 136.

⁸⁷ Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights*, p. 109.

⁸⁸ de Bary, “Confucianism and Human Rights in China,” pp. 49–50.

⁸⁹ Will, “Epilogue: Virtual Constitutionalism in the Late Ming Dynasty,” p. 263.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁹¹ Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Introduction,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming (eds.), *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 1–26.

protected by the law and by their reputation for integrity.”⁹² Whether pre-constitutional thinking remained an abstract ideal or already formed a constitutional order, it “constituted a significant line of Confucian thought from Confucius and Mencius” through Song and Ming scholars down to the present.⁹³ This constitutional tradition is part and parcel of Chinese history.

V. Dreaming about the Future Rather than the Past

Maybe the real problem for China is that it has too much history. Wang Gungwu laments that the “sanctification of the past” has created “a world in which the past owned the Chinese.”⁹⁴ While Chinese leaders use history to legitimize expansionism in foreign policy and authoritarianism in domestic policy, Chinese reformers blame history for most of China’s ills. If Chinese are to dream about the past, they should take history seriously. If the dream is about a strong country, “China” encompassed the interior for less than half of history and the periphery for only 81 years. When “China” was number one in historical Asia as during the Han and Tang eras, such greatness was achieved by military conquest. If the dream is about the people’s welfare and happiness, then it was more real under plural “China” than singular “China.” If Chinese intend to look back at “5,000 years of history,” then the millennia-old constitutional tradition must be counted. The fact that “China” more often took the plural form than the singular facilitated the emergence and restoration of citizenship rights. Once developed in the classical era, citizenship rights were preserved in classical texts so that they could not be erased even in eras of singular “China.” The right to criticize, in particular, gave rise to constitutional thinking that was defended by courageous scholar-officials in the teeth of power. Although

⁹²Pierre-Étienne Will, “Democracy, Human Rights, and the Chinese Political Tradition,” presentation at the Vancouver Institute, 2005.

⁹³de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights*, p. 109.

⁹⁴Wang Gungwu, *To Act is to Know: Chinese Dilemmas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002), pp. 167–168.

citizenship rights and constitutional thinking were not translated into constitutional institutions, it would be a mistake to call constitutionalism a Western concept alien to China. China's constitutionalist tradition is as old as written Chinese history and provides immense resources to building the dream of Chinese constitutionalism.

It is remarkable that even the bottom-up "Chinese Dream" song is ignorant of history in general and the constitutional tradition in particular. But then why do Chinese dream about the revival of history when the goal is to build a better future? Hong Kong protestors who have been singing "Chinese Dream" for over 20 years seem unaware of the contradiction between the backward-looking lyrics and the forward-looking call for Chinese democracy. China's future should not be confined by what Confucius and Mencius said or what Han and Tang emperors did, whether good or bad. As Schell and Delury put it, "To move forward, the country must move on."⁹⁵

⁹⁵Orville Schell and John Delury, "A Rising China needs a New National Story", *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 2013. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324425204578599633633456090> (accessed 17 November 2013). Wang objects to this phrase, suggesting that "It is probably easy for people outside China to say that China should 'move forward.' However, for the Chinese themselves, historical memory of past humiliation is not just a psychological issue or something only related to perception and attitude. It is a key element of constructing the Chinese national identity." Zheng Wang, "The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context," p. 4. It is for this reason that this chapter takes a very hard look at narratives of historical greatness and humiliation.