



SEVEN MYTHS ABOUT CHINA

BY PAUL MONK

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Debating the implications of the rise of Chinese wealth, power, and ambition has become a global cottage industry. Unfortunately, we are surrounded by myths about China that hamper debate. Here are seven that need dismantling:

Myth 1: China is simply resuming its ‘natural’ position as the world’s greatest power, after an anomalous 200-year ‘blip.’ The kernel of truth to this is that, when all countries were agrarian and China had the world’s largest population (by far) it naturally had the world’s largest economy in gross size. This is uncontroversial and trivially true.

However, at *no* point in the past did this make the Chinese empire the world’s ‘greatest power.’ It was, at most, one among a number of states, such as the Roman, Persian, and Islamic empires, that wielded considerable power. Like them, China was a regional power, not a global one in any meaningful sense.

The powerful T’ang dynasty (649-907) was militarily defeated by Silla (South Korea) in 676 and by the Arabs and Tibetans in 751. Moreover, China has often been fragmented or dominated by foreigners: the Khitan (907-1125), the Mongols (1271-1368), the Manchus (1644-1912). The huge Mongol empire was not ‘China.’ It *included* China. The subsequent Ming dynasty was vastly smaller: it didn’t include Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, or Central Asia.

No dynasty before the Manchus ruled Taiwan. They also added Mongolia, Inner and Outer, as well as Manchuria itself, Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Tibet to the

‘Chinese’ empire. Chinese nationalists then aspired to make the whole Manchu Empire into the nation-state of China, only to see it fragment in the 1910s and 1920s.

Myth 2: China’s strategic culture, unlike ours, is nonexpansionist and pacifist. This is an illusion. Except for a brief flurry of exploratory voyaging in the early 15th century China was never a significant naval power, but it was a continental hegemon. The very idea of ‘China’ and its name derive from the warring state of Qin which, in the 3rd century BCE, conquered all other ‘Chinese’ states in a series of ruthless wars to ‘unite all under Heaven.’ This was beautifully dramatized in Chen Kaige’s film *The Emperor and the Assassin*. The ensuing Han dynasty was resolutely expansionist.

In *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (1995), Alastair Iain Johnston showed that the Ming (1368-1644) chastized its neighbours when it could and otherwise appeased them. Johnston had undertaken the study to test – in the case of one of the more introverted Chinese dynasties – whether the evidence supported or undermined the notion that Chinese strategic culture was especially pacifist or wise. It hasn’t been and it isn’t.

Xiaoming Zhang’s *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam 1979-1991* (2015) is an illuminating study of modern Chinese strategic culture under one of its most astute leaders, at a time when decades of Maoism had seriously hampered the country’s modernization and left its military in a dilapidated condition. Xi Jinping has far greater military power at his disposal than Deng ever had and clearly has considerable strategic ambitions.

Myth 3: Chinese elites have a wise, long-term view of the world. Frankly, if Chinese elites are given to far-sightedness and wisdom, how is it that Chinese empires have again and again lapsed into decay, fallen apart, or been conquered by foreign barbarians? If modern Chinese elites inherited such powers, why did they fail to build a viable republic in the 1910s; fail to find a way to prevent a communist victory; fell in line with Mao Zedong and ended up, as the late Pierre

Ryckmans wrote in 1984, killing ‘more innocent Chinese citizens in 25 years of peace than had the combined forces of all foreign imperialists in one hundred years of endemic aggression’?

Myth 4: China’s current borders – even embracing the South China Sea – date back to ‘ancient times.’ The authorities in Beijing like to claim, for instance, that Tibet, Taiwan, or the South China Sea have ‘always’ been part of ‘Chinese territory.’ This is complete nonsense. China’s borders have not been fixed over the past two and a half millennia. Very large swathes of its current territories were only annexed by the foreign Manchus from the 17th century or later. Taiwan was only incorporated within the Manchu Empire in 1885, then ceded in perpetuity to Japan, in 1895. The Japanese ruled it for the next 50 years and developed it systematically. Its inhabitants rebelled against the imposition of Chinese Nationalist rule (from 1945) in 1947.

Myth 5: Chinese mariners sailed all around the world long before the Europeans, discovering the Americas and igniting the Italian Renaissance. This is Gavin Menzies’ fantasy. No serious scholar gives any credence to his confabulation, but Hu Jintao tipped his hat to it. Addressing the Australian Parliament, in 2003, Hu stated:

Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China's Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores. For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today's Australia. They brought Chinese culture to this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia's economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture.

These statements are entirely without historical foundation. They should not be indulged or given any credence.

Menzies took up the well-authenticated fact that seven Ming fleets, under Adm. Zheng He, sailed via the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea and the coasts of East Africa, between 1405 and 1433. That was it. Under Emperor Zhengtong these voyages were abruptly ended, so that the threatened Ming could concentrate on fighting off the Mongols. Even that

didn’t work. They (not the ancient Qin) built the Great Wall, but dissident generals let the Manchus through it and Ming China was conquered.

Myth 6: The Chinese Communist Party has ‘lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty’ in the past 30 years. This claim, so widely repeated, credits the Party with something that the Chinese people, once unshackled from communism, have largely done for themselves. In some ways, the claim echoes the lie of decades gone by that the Party saved the Chinese people from natural disasters in 1959-61, averting famine. In fact, the Party’s policies caused the greatest famine mortality in recorded history: some 35 to 45 million deaths.

The Party kept China poor for 30 years under Mao Zedong. Then it opened up to market forces and foreign investment, whereupon hundreds of millions of their people lifted *themselves* out of poverty. This began in the 1980s with the peasants being told that, over and above their grain quota for the state, they could grow cash crops. Food supplies trebled in short order. Who lifted whom out of poverty here?

When Deng Xiaoping decided to experiment with special economic zones to bring capital and technology into China, he reached out to survivors of the old Chinese capitalist elite, many of whom had been on pig farms during the Cultural Revolution. He asked them, in exchange for seed capital, to reach out to their diaspora relatives and tell them that China was opening for business again. Within a few years, foreign direct investment began pouring into China. Who lifted whom out of poverty here?

The OECD countries worked hard, in the 1990s, to draw China into the global trading order and the World Trade Organization, while retaining its status as a ‘developing’ nation and before it had privatized its strategic industries or financial system, or created a working, open stock exchange. It *still* has not done these things. Who has been lifting whom out of poverty here?

Myth 7: Liberal democracy is incompatible with Chinese culture. It is certainly incompatible with the Chinese tradition of centralized imperial rule and it is certainly incompatible with Marxist-Leninist or

Maoist totalitarianism. But it was also incompatible with the Japanese imperial shogunate system until the late 19th century or with Korean culture until the late 20th century. Both Japan and South Korea are now thriving democratic polities.

Taiwan is the test case. Systematically developed by Japan between 1895 and 1945, it was taken over by the Chinese Nationalists in 1945 and ruled so badly that the Taiwanese rebelled. They were crushed by Chinese military forces, many thousands of people were executed and martial law imposed for 40 years. In the late 1980s, Chiang Chingkuo opened up the political system, choosing to do what Deng Xiaoping, his old Leninist classmate from the 1920s in Moscow, refused to do on the mainland in those same years. Chinese culture was not the issue, nor was Leninism an insuperable obstacle. What was required was political leadership and strategic choice.

Good history has always been about refuting myths and getting realities clearer. Regardless of the propaganda coming out of Beijing, we should apply that principle to our understanding of Chinese history, politics, economics and strategic culture. Let Xi Jinping dream. We should be clear eyed.

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