

Historical Echoes in Contemporary Diplomacy: Analyzing Xi Jinping Administration's Policy Toward Taiwan Within the Framework of China's "Century of Humiliation"

Shiqing Xiao^{1,a,*}

¹*Leiden University, Rapenburg 70, 2311 EZ Leiden, Netherlands
a. S3989933@vuw.leidenuniv.nl*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper investigates the complex interplay between historical narratives and contemporary foreign policy, with a particular focus on China under Xi Jinping's leadership. It is structured into several sections, each delving into different aspects of this relationship. Section II integrates IR and history, discussing presentism and contextualism methodologies. Section III examines the "Century of Humiliation" (CH) narrative promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its impact on China's national identity and foreign policy. It explores how this period, marked by foreign invasions and loss of territories, influences China's current assertive stance on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Section IV focuses on the rise of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy during Xi Jinping's tenure, highlighting a shift in Chinese foreign policy towards a more assertive and aggressive approach, fueled by a revived nationalistic sentiment. Section V uses Taiwan as a case study to illustrate the impact of the CH narrative on Xi Jinping's foreign policy, including the triangular dynamics of U.S.-PRC-Taiwan relations. In conclusion, the paper underscores the significant influence of historical consciousness in shaping China's foreign policy.

Keywords: International Relations and History, The Rise of China, Cross-Strait Relations, U.S.-China Relations, Century of Humiliation

1. Introduction

The intersection of international relations (IR) and history is a critical lens through which the complexities of contemporary global dynamics can be understood, especially in China's evolving position on the world stage. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between historical narratives and their influence on the formulation and execution of foreign policy, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping. As China asserts its resurgence as a global power, it becomes imperative to analyze how the nation's historical experiences, especially those encapsulated in the "Century of Humiliation" (CH), shape its current foreign policy strategies and diplomatic engagements.

This research paper is structured as follows. Section II discusses the role of history in studying IR, examining the dual methodologies of presentism and contextualism. Section III subsequently addresses the official narrative of the "CH" promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its implications for China's national identity and foreign policy. Section IV explores the rise of "Wolf

Warrior” diplomacy during Xi Jinping’s tenure. Section V uses the case of Taiwan to illustrate how the “CH” influences Xi’s foreign policy, focusing on the post-2016 period.

The case of Taiwan can fulfill the purpose of this research paper because it serves as a focal point for understanding how historical narratives intertwine with contemporary foreign policy objectives, illustrating the complexities of the PRC’s territorial claims and the ongoing tension in cross-strait relations.

2. The Interplay of IRs and History

The integration of IR with other disciplines, such as history, has gained increasing importance for a novel interpretation of IR. In recent decades, many IR scholars in China and worldwide have been developing theories of IRs with “Chinese characteristics” drawing on China’s long and unique history. This approach is often referred to as “Chinese exceptionalism” [1].

There are two primary methodologies for integrating IRs and history: presentism and contextualism. Presentism interprets historical events and figures through the lens of contemporary norms and values. It posits that history can be understood by referencing a continuous tradition from classical Athens to the present. The IR literature frequently refers to the epic traditions of international thought that have led to coherent schools or paradigms such as realism and liberalism. However, Schmidt criticizes this approach, arguing that many attempts to reflect on the history of IR are conducted primarily for presentist purposes rather than to accurately reconstruct the past. On the other hand, contextualism emphasizes understanding historical events within their specific context. It assumes that history can be explained by considering exogenous events in IR. A challenge with contextualism is that context is often defined retrospectively in a way that aligns with the field's dominant narrative at a particular time [2]. This research paper adopts a contextualist approach to its analysis.

3. The “CH”: The Official Narrative

The CCP refers to the “CH” as the period between the First Opium War in 1839 and the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. This era saw China subjected to several foreign invasions, including the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the invasion of the eight allied powers (1900), the invasion of Manchuria and the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945). During this time, foreign powers forced China to cede territories and grant trade and commercial privileges, as well as extraterritoriality rights, to foreign citizens through unequal treaties. This period stood in stark contrast with China’s former status as the “Middle Kingdom”, a time when it considered itself the center of the world [3-4].

The loss of territories was the most painful humiliation for China during this period. China ceded large portions of its territory to Western nations and Japan, including Taiwan, during the First Sino-Japanese War. This humiliation was exacerbated in the 1910s and ‘20s by independence movements in Tibet and Mongolia and by the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. China effectively lost nearly a third of its territory, transitioning from a powerful unified state to one whose territory was “carved up like a melon” by foreign powers [5]. This history of the loss of sovereignty partly explains the PRC’s assertive stance on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

A critical lesson China learned from the “CH” is that “the backward will be beaten.” China’s humiliation stemmed from being economically, militarily, and technologically inferior to foreign powers [3,6]. This realization highlighted the harsh reality of social Darwinism in the international system. Consequently, the PRC has focused on improving its economy, military, and technology.

However, the “CH” was retrospectively constructed to justify the legitimacy of the CCP, mirroring the contextualism methodology. During Mao’s period, the predominant narrative was revolutionist

optimism, and the phrase “the backward will be beaten” was not commonly used. After the Cultural Revolution, the CCP crafted a nationalist victim discourse to fill the ideological vacuum and mobilize popular support, leading to the re-emergence and popularization of this term in official discourse to justify China’s “reform and opening up” policy [3-4, 6]. This victim narrative has bolstered the CCP’s legitimacy by positioning it as moving China away from the “CH” and towards reclaiming the glory of the “Middle Kingdom” [7].

Some believe the “CH” persists even after 1949. China, not yet the most powerful nation, appears anxious as long as the power gap with the U.S. exists. For example, the phrase “the backward will be beaten” was frequently used by official media following the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kosovo [6]. Most importantly, China’s goal of unification remains unfulfilled, as Taiwan remains *de facto* independent from Beijing.

4. Xi Jinping’s Era: A Shift in Chinese Foreign Policy

The style of Chinese foreign policy has become increasingly assertive and aggressive since 2013. The CCP has gradually shifted its emphasis from the “CH” narrative to a “great power” narrative. Xi Jinping is endeavoring to officially lead China out of its past humiliation by achieving the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” This shift marks a transition from being labeled the “sick man of Asia” to becoming a global power. Consequently, Chinese nationalism, a cornerstone of the CCP’s legitimacy, has risen over the past decade, fueled by the state’s promotion of the greatness of Chinese civilization [8-9]. This form of nationalism often centered around sovereignty issues, with Taiwan being a key focus [10].

The Xi Jinping Administration also employs harsh actions to demonstrate China’s return to global power status. This new foreign policy style is often called “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy. The 2021 Alaska talk is a prime example of China’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy [4]. In response to what was perceived as U.S. provocation, the Chinese delegation stated, “*The US side is not qualified to speak to China from a position of strength.*” While this remark may not reflect the reality, it resonated with many Chinese netizens and recalled the signing of the 1901 unequal Xinchou Treaty or the Boxer Protocol in 1901. The picture comparing the Xinchou Treaty signing between the Chinese delegation and Western invaders with the Sino-US Alaska meeting went viral at the time [11]. In early February 2020, a *Wall Street Journal* article “*China is the Real Sick Man of Asia*” sparked massive backlash on Chinese social media. Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expelled the journalists involved two weeks later [12]. These incidents highlight the intensity of Chinese nationalism and its direct impact on Chinese diplomacy.

China has been particularly assertive of what the CCP perceives as threats to China’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, a theme resonant with the “CH” narrative. The South China Sea dispute is a notable example. The PRC claims that nearly the entire South China Sea has historically belonged to China [7]. When the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled against the PRC’s South China Sea claims in 2016, Xi Jinping declared, “*China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime interests in the South China Sea, under any circumstances, will not be affected by the award*” [13].

5. Taiwan” A Contemporary Focus of China’s Historical Narrative

From the CCP’s perspective, Taiwan represents the PRC’s “core interest,” being the last remnant of the “CH.” Xi Jinping, in his 2019 speech on Taiwan, stated, “*The Taiwan question originated in a weak and ravaged China, and it will definitely end with Chinese rejuvenation*” [14]. His goal is to mark the end of the “CH officially”, but resolving the Taiwan issue remains a challenging and inevitable task.

5.1. Xi Jinping's Reunification Agenda: A Shift in Taiwan Policy

Xi Jinping's Administration has fundamentally altered its Taiwan policy. In April 2013, when Xi met Vincent Siew at the Twelfth Boao Forum, he advocated for closer economic cooperation between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan without mentioning the future development of the cross-strait political relationship. However, this stance changed two months later when he met Wu Po-hsiung, discussing promoting cross-strait political trust. In October 2012, during a meeting with Vicent Siew in Bali before the APEC gathering, Xi declared for the first time that the cross-strait division should be gradually resolved towards reunification, stating- "*We cannot hand those problems down from generation to generation.*" In February 2014, meeting a Taiwanese delegation led by Lien Chan, Xi emphasized that reunification was a critical part of the "Chinese Dream" [15]. Clearly, Xi has shifted from Hu Jintao's policy of preventing *de jure* independence towards focusing on reunification.

5.2. Assertive Measures Against Taiwan Independence: Beijing's Firm Stance

Cross-strait relations took a significant turn with the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. While Taiwan is *de facto* independent, the PRC can tolerate this fact as long as the Taiwanese authority accepts the "92 Consensus" or "One China" principle. Under the "92 Consensus", the PRC can at least incorporate Taiwan into the "One China" framework in principle. However, Tsai Ing-wen rejects the "92 Consensus", implying a stance of "Two Chinas" or "One China, One Taiwan" [16]. At the National Day in 2021, President Tsai Ing-wen explicitly declared "Two Chinas," stating "*the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China should not be subordinate to each other*" [17]. The Taiwanese authority is thus directly challenging the PRC's red line on territorial integrity.

In response, Beijing has taken all possible actions to defend its "One China" red line. Beijing suspended the cross-strait hotline and other formal high-level communication channels set up under President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-16). It blocked Taiwan from its observer role in international bodies such as the World Health Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization. Beijing pressured the East Asian Olympic Committee to rescind Taichung City's right to host the 2019 East Asian Youth Games. By 2023, the PRC has persuaded nine countries to switch their recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) to the PRC. In January 2018, Beijing unilaterally introduced a new civil flight route over the Taiwan Strait. On April 25, 2018, the Civil Aviation Administration of the PRC requested 44 airlines to change the designation of "Taiwan" to "China Taiwan." The three largest American airlines, hotel chains, and Japanese retailers complied with this demand [16, 18-19]. Recently, PRC's Ministry of Commerce issued an investigation report, concluding that Taiwan has placed a barrier on the imports of numerous goods from Mainland China and the current Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) disproportionately favors Taiwan. Some predict Mainland China will suspend all or part of the ECFA, causing a significant shock to the Taiwanese economy and potentially influencing the result of the coming presidential election in Taiwan [20]. Beijing is conveying to both domestic and international audiences that Taiwan is part of the PRC, and the PRC can dictate Taiwan's destiny.

Since 2016, Beijing has increasingly used military means to deter "Taiwan independence force." The "CH" taught China the importance of a strong military in defending sovereignty. CCP concludes that the primary threats to China during that period came from the sea, with foreign powers using gunboats to force open China's doors. The Chinese military, particularly its navy, has seen remarkable advancement during the past ten years under the Xi Administration [3,7]. For instance, the total tonnage of ships and the number of surface ships built from 2014 to 2018 is nearly equivalent to the total size of the Japanese Navy. The essential target of this rapid military expansion is to defend PRC sovereignty in Taiwan [16]. Since Autumn 2016, People Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft have increased military activities around Taiwan. By early summer 2018, the Chinese aircraft carrier had

passed through the Taiwan Strait several times. Later, in 2019, the PLA intensified its military activities by crossing the median line between mainland China and Taiwan. PRC's air and sea forces have normalized patrols around the island [21]. These actions demonstrate that the PRC is effectively treating the Taiwan Strait as its territory and is resolute in defending its territorial integrity, showcasing its military capability to enforce this stance.

5.3. Triangular Dynamics: U.S.-PRC-Taiwan Relations

Effectively, Taiwan is not an isolated issue but an integral part of the U.S.-China relationship. Xi has endeavored to separate the Taiwan issue from the Sino-U.S. relationship, as China cannot tolerate its "core interest" being used as a bargaining chip between the two major powers. Any US involvement in cross-strait relations is perceived by China as interference in its domestic affairs, evoking memories of past humiliation [15]. As bilateral relations have deteriorated to a historic low, Taiwan has inevitably become a focal point in the Sino-U.S. competition, contrary to the CCP's wishes.

The U.S. has been actively supporting Taiwan in the international arena. On March 18, 2016, President Trump signed Senate Bill No. 2426, mandating the Secretary of State to develop a strategy to assist Taiwan in obtaining Interpol observer status. On May 6, 2018, 172 members of the House of Representatives wrote a letter to the World Health Organization advocating for Taiwan's membership. On May 7, 2019, the US House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution called the *Taiwan Assurance Act of 2019* to counter the PRC's prevention of Taiwan's joining of international organizations. On February 28, 2018, the US passed the *Taiwan Travel Act* to ease its interacting policy with Taiwanese people [16,22].

Beyond these symbolic gestures, the U.S. has made substantial moves. In response to Beijing's increasing military activity in the Taiwan Strait, Washington has begun regular transits of naval vessels through the Taiwan Strait [20]. The U.S. arms sales to Taiwan have significantly increased. For example, on August 20, 2019, the U.S. Department of State declared a new round of eight billion arms sales to Taiwan. The U.S. and Taiwan have also bolstered their defense cooperation [16]. In October 2021, President Biden explicitly stated that defending Taiwan is part of its strategy and alliance commitment. At the same time, some reporters suggested the presence of US special forces in Taiwan. Reacting to these US actions, on October 1, 2021, the PRC flew over 100 fighter jets into Taiwan's air defense identification zone on the national day. The US Congress even proposed extending NATO membership to Taiwan under the *Taiwan Policy Act of 2022*. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 escalated the cross-strait tension to an unprecedented high, leading Beijing to launch joint military exercises around the island and suspend or cancel eight official military dialogues and cooperation channels with the U.S [22-23]. The U.S.'s traditional policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan is no longer tenable [24].

Now the Democrats and Republicans have reached a consensus on the approach to Taiwan, which is gradually undermining the "One China Policy." The perquisite of the U.S.-China relationship is "One China Policy". Although the U.S. has officially reiterated its commitment to this policy, the PRC believes the U.S. is effectively hollowing out the "One China Policy" by promoting Taiwan as an independent actor. Washington also accuses Beijing of acting in coercive and aggressive ways towards Taiwan, contrary to Beijing's claim of peaceful unification. The strategic tacit understanding of Taiwan between the PRC and the U.S. no longer exists [16, 25].

6. Conclusion, Implication, and Future Direction

This research paper has systematically explored the profound impact of the "CH" on the Xi Jinping Administration's foreign policy, with a particular focus on the case of Taiwan. The historical narrative

of humiliation and subjugation by foreign powers has significantly influenced the PRC's approach to asserting its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, this legacy has shaped a more assertive and, at times, aggressive stance in international relations, most evident in the evolving dynamics of the Taiwan issue and the broader Sino-U.S. relationship. The PRC's actions regarding Taiwan, ranging from diplomatic isolation to military posturing, reflect a deep-seated determination to rectify historical wrongs and prevent any semblance of foreign interference or division of Chinese territory. This stance is further complicated by the increasing involvement of the U.S., which challenges the PRC's red lines and intensifies the strategic significance of Taiwan in Sino-US competition. However, Xi's foreign policy towards Taiwan appears to have been unsuccessful. Contrary to his intentions, Taiwan has become a central focus in Sino-US competition, and Tsai Ing-wen won the election in 2020. It remains to be seen if the pan-green party will secure another victory in the upcoming January election.

The PRC is committed to maintaining its "One China Principle" and exhibits zero tolerance for foreign involvement in the Taiwan issue. The CCP, as the party that "liberated" China from the "CH," will not tolerate any reminders of that period in history, as it could threaten the legitimacy of the CCP [26]. On April 6, 2023, during a meeting with Ursula von der Leyen, Xi Jinping emphasized, "*If anyone expects China to compromise and concede on the Taiwan question, they are having a pipe dream and would shoot themselves in the foot*" [27].

This research underscores the essential role of historical consciousness in shaping contemporary foreign policy and highlights the complexities and challenges that arise when historical narratives intersect with current geopolitical realities. As China continues to assert its position on the global stage, the legacy of the "CH" and its implications for Taiwan will remain critical in understanding and predicting the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Nevertheless, history is only one of many disciplines that can explain IR. Although the PRC officially claims Taiwan from a historical perspective, history is far from the only factor explaining the PRC's stance on Taiwan. Taiwan possesses invaluable geostrategic interests for the PRC. The ownership of Taiwan would enable the PRC to extend its air and sea space more plunging into the central Pacific and serve as a buffer in defending China's economic gravity. Taiwan also holds significant economic and technological value for the PRC. 80% of advanced chips are manufactured in Taiwan, a sector where Beijing still heavily relies on imports due to its current technological limitations [23, 25]. Therefore, to fully understand the nuances of the current situation in Taiwan and the China-U.S.-Taiwan triangle relationship, it is necessary to consider other factors which merit further research.

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