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different points of view.*

The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This September 2021 edition explores the question:

***"Why does China act in the way it does?"***

*Authors, alphabetically by surname:*

- *Paul Gladstone, Professor of Contemporary Art, The University of New South Wales*
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*"Why does China act in the way it does?"*

*Pushing the Limits: Tianxia ('all under heaven') and Beijing's seemingly flagrant disregard for internationally recognised frontiers.*

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September 2021

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A recurring news feature in recent years has been Beijing's seemingly flagrant disregard for internationally recognised geopolitical frontiers both politically and militarily. This disregard extends to numerous locations bordering mainland China including, the South China Sea – an area now subject to heightened tensions between the People's Republic of China and other states regarding territorial controls and maritime rights of way, the Republic of China Taiwan – since 1949 a self-governing island-state recognised as the inheritor of imperial China under international law which Beijing considers integral to the PRC, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region – whose government and economy were guaranteed autonomy for fifty years after the region's handover to the PRC from British rule in 1997 under the principle of "one country, two systems", but which are now subject to increasing intervention by Beijing, and the line of actual control between the PRC and India at Ladakh – uncertainties over which have resulted in persistent conflict involving



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actual/perceived incursions over the line by both sides.

Beijing's seemingly flagrant disregard for geopolitical frontiers in each of these cases can be readily explained, if not entirely justified, in socioeconomic and political terms. During the so-called "century of shame" from the second half of the nineteenth century, an economically, technologically and militarily weak China found itself unable to successfully resist European, Japanese and US colonialism/imperialism in South-East and East Asia. From the turn of the twentieth century to the founding of the PRC in 1949, China was also riven by protracted civil conflicts. Since the introduction of post-revolutionary reforms at the beginning of the 1980s and the onset of neo-liberal

globalisation at the end of the decade, the PRC's economy has grown exponentially, becoming second only to the US in terms of GDP. Growing economic power and influence has given the PRC increased confidence on the world stage. Moreover, it has enabled the country to strengthen the regional dominance and international reach of its military.

Beijing's island building in the South China Sea is therefore understandable, for example, as a means of protecting the PRC's vital economic interests – 80% of the country's energy imports and 39.5% of its total trade passes through the South China Sea (1) – as well as asserting sovereignty over valuable fishing rights and identified fossil-

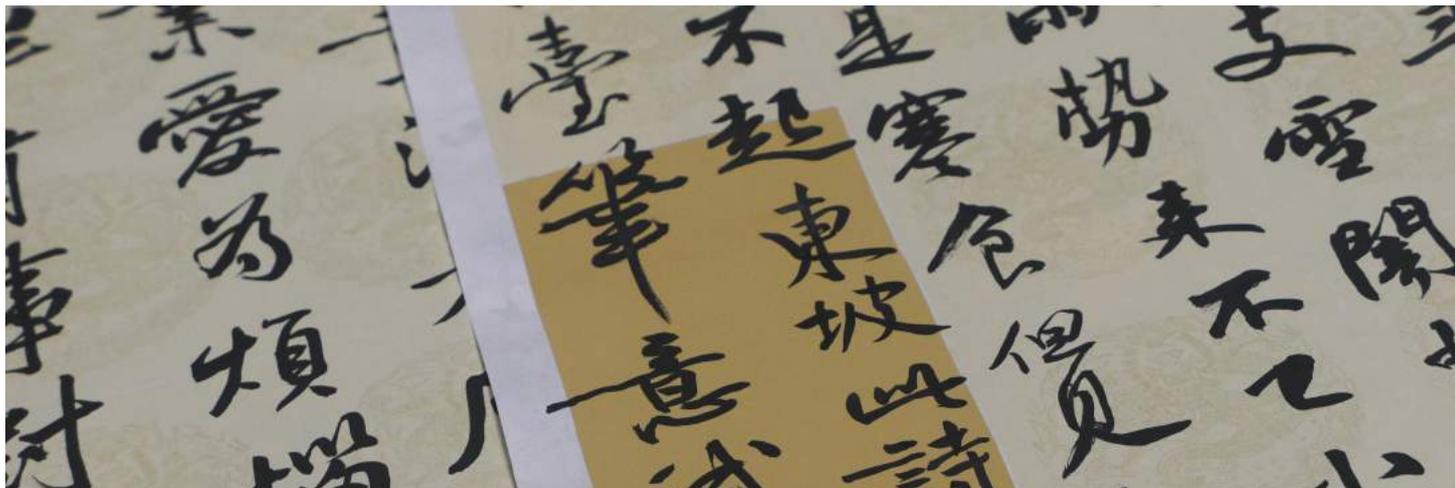
fuel deposits; albeit in ways viewed with justification by competing states as force majeure.

The PRC's recent exponential domestic economic growth has been accompanied by an increasingly ardent nationalism promoted by the Chinese government as a focus for social coherence at a time of destabilising post-revolutionary reforms and as a closing of ranks against outside interference in the PRC's domestic affairs. This increasingly ardent nationalism is strongly informed by a desire to re-establish a historically unified 'Greater China' divided by the combined violence of colonialism/imperialism and civil conflict. In a recent speech commemorating the centenary of the Communist Party, President Xi Jinping asserted that the era of China being "bullied" is over.(2)

Seen from that perspective the PRC's claims over the South China Sea, the Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan and territories bordering India at Ladakh are simply rightful projections of a pre-existing sovereignty. Crucially those claims are now supported by credible economic and military might. The horizon of a 'post-West' world order at the closing of the American era would appear to be hovering rapidly into view.

Less immediately obvious, perhaps, are the intersections between Beijing's present claims regarding the extent of the PRC's national sovereignty and China's dynastic-imperial cultural traditions. The ideas of national sovereignty, self-determination and non-interference between nation states upon which the current, rules-based, international order is founded are relatively recent in origin.





Some scholars have traced their emergence to two related treaties known as the Peace of Westphalia which brought the Thirty Years' War and the Eighty Years' War in Europe to a close in 1648.(3) Since the seventeenth century the construction of autonomous nation-states with determined geographical boundaries has spread worldwide – in no small part through the metastasising of Euro-American colonialism/imperialism and the accompanying impact of Western(ised) modernity. China did not become a recognised nation-state until the collapse of its last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1912) and the founding of modern republican China in 1912. Prior to that, China was an empire whose reach extended without determinate limits to a constellation of surrounding suzerainties and culturally Chinese diasporic communities.

Underpinning Chinese dynastic-imperial sovereignty was the unifying concept of *tianxia* ('all under heaven'), first fully developed during China's Zhou Dynasty (c.1046-256 BCE). *Tianxia* signifies all the lands under the jurisdiction of the Chinese emperor, which in principle encompass the globe.

It also conceives of a concentric geopolitical order, with Chinese civilisation, closest to imperial power, at the centre of the world, and differing levels of influence radiating out to non-Chinese speaking 'barbarians' at the periphery.

This vision contrasts with recent post-colonialist conceptions of national geopolitical division and self-determination where distinctions between centre and periphery have been pervasively deconstructed. In practice, Imperial China's frontiers were subject to continual alteration, like those of republican China, because of invasion, civil conflict and territorial divisions.

Historically, *tianxia* was closely associated with Chinese Confucian conceptions of social order, morality and aesthetics. China's dynastic-imperial administrative class, known outside China as the Literati, upheld an idealising and morally driven Confucian vision of a harmoniously ordered hierarchical society under imperial rule. That vision intersected from its inception during the fifth century BCE with immemorial conceptions of a non-rationalist

reciprocity between individuals and between humanity and heaven in spontaneous accordance with the way of Nature signified by the now internationally iconic Daoist *yin-yang* symbol or *taijitu*. In addition to administering the Chinese dynastic-imperial state, the Literati were also expected to show their adeptness at a range of arts including poetry writing, calligraphy, and painting. The ability to depict landscapes through ink and brush painting on silk or paper in aesthetically balanced ways, was, for example, considered indicative of the Literati's wider moral obligation to administer the Chinese dynastic-imperial state along harmonising Daoist-inflected Confucian lines. Imperial authority and Confucian morality and aesthetics thus became intimately conjoined in the Chinese cultural imagination.

Recently, *tianxia* has made a comeback as part of Chinese intellectual life. The contemporary Chinese scholar Zhao Tingyang has, for example, argued for *tianxia's* (re-)instatement as a form of global governance based on the harmoniously reciprocal co-existence of differing societies replacing the existing Western(ised) world order of competing nation-states.(4)

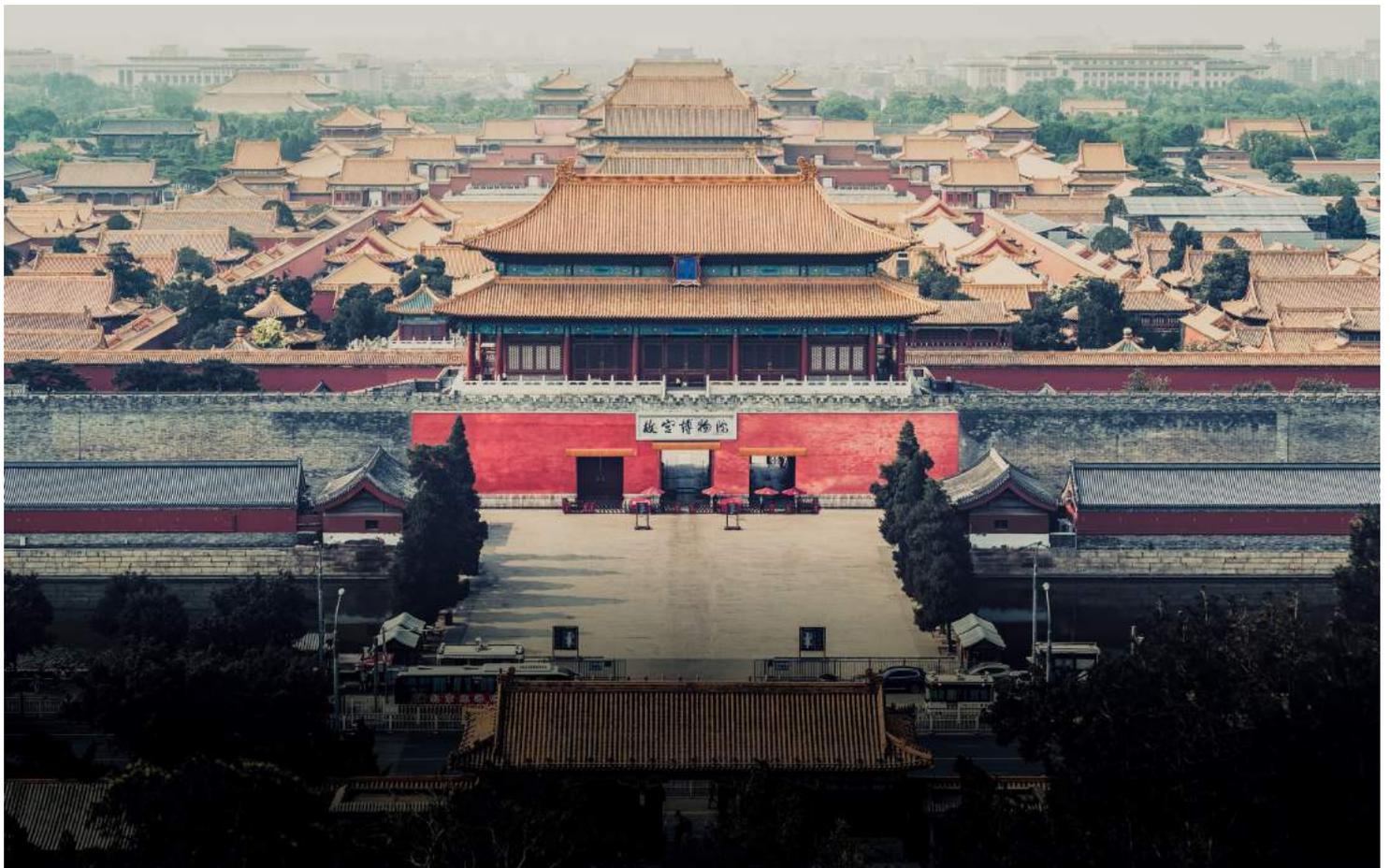
The inherent contradiction of this ostensibly counter-cultural, 'peace, love, and understanding', argument is all too clear. The historical meaning of *tianxia* leaves it inescapably bound to the traces of historical Chinese dynastic imperialism. As such, the idea of *tianxia* can be readily deployed to give ethical and aesthetic justification to the PRC's present-day geopolitical assertiveness via the back door.

From the point of view of a currently emboldened nationalistic China such a contradiction is, of course, trifling. Indeed, traditional Chinese Daoist-Confucian thinking would uphold its place as part of the inherently non-rational, harmoniously reciprocal, way of Nature.

It is important to note in this regard that government supported nationalism within the PRC since the 1990s has been informed by an official rededication to Confucian ideas of social harmony after the damaging iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution.

The PRC should not be viewed simply from the point of view of discontented others as a rogue nation-state which plays fast and loose with the established, rules-based, international order. Its actions are also informed by an ingrained and newly assertive cultural habitus. Contrary to Martin Jacques' unduly binary definition of present-day China as a civilisation-

state rather than a modern nation-state(5), a more precise observation is that, when it comes to sovereign state borders and other geopolitical frontiers, the PRC shuttles continually, in theory and practice, between those two imaginaries as a matter of expediency. On the one hand, Beijing defends the newly empowered PRC's national integrity against outside interference in line with conceptions of the modern nation-state. On the other, there is a reprising of *tianxia* as a natural, morally, and aesthetically legitimised, underpinning to the PRC's place within the emerging post-West world (dis)order. Either way, it has become necessary to relinquish our established certainties and enter a new state of global realpolitik.



## About the Author

Paul Gladston is the inaugural Judith Neilson Chair Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He is co-editor of the forthcoming book, *Visual Culture Wars at the Borders of Contemporary China*.



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## About the UKNCC

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*"Why does China act in the way it does?"*

*One answer: its own modern history.*

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Look at the list of the top 10 economies in the world. Almost every one – the US, UK, France, Germany, Japan – has been a liberal democracy since 1945, or 1947 in the case of India. Even those countries – Germany and Japan among them – that were decidedly authoritarian before World War II changed their politics fundamentally after that conflict. The only exception is the second-placed country on the list: China. A Chinese person born in 1945 would have lived through the end of World War II, a vicious three-year civil war, the trauma of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the highs of the era of “reform and opening” (massive economic growth, new lifestyle choices and freedoms) and lows (the 1989 Beijing killings), and the rise of China to an unprecedented position of geopolitical, military and economic influence while maintaining an ever-tighter control on dissent at home. And in that historical trajectory through the post-war era lies a significant, but underappreciated fact:



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for China, modern history matters, and the turbulence and unpredictability of that history shapes the way that it acts at home and in the world. One important element in Chinese views of the world comes from the repeated experience of invasion and occupation from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. These experiences begin with the Opium War of 1839-42, when British traders forced China's doors open to trade drugs and bring in Bibles and international law texts. Britain, France, the US, Japan and a range of other actors all took slices of Chinese territory or extraterritorial rights over the next century. For much of that period, China's tariffs were set by an institution set up by a Briton, Sir Robert Hart, and run largely by Brits – the Imperial Maritime Customs Service. The Service was technically a Chinese government institution,

largely well-run, and Hart regarded himself (and was regarded by many Chinese) as a servant of China, not Britain. But the fact remained that – for instance, unlike the EU, whose members are there through democratic consent to pool borders and tariffs – China was forced into a significant cession of sovereignty on trade. It would be wrong to suggest that every time a Chinese trade negotiator says No to an American or European counterpart, they are thinking of Sir Robert.

But that wider imperial legacy is still strongly felt in China, even while there is a huge amnesia about that part of history in much of the west.

One particular event provides a powerful historical reference in terms of foreign invasions.

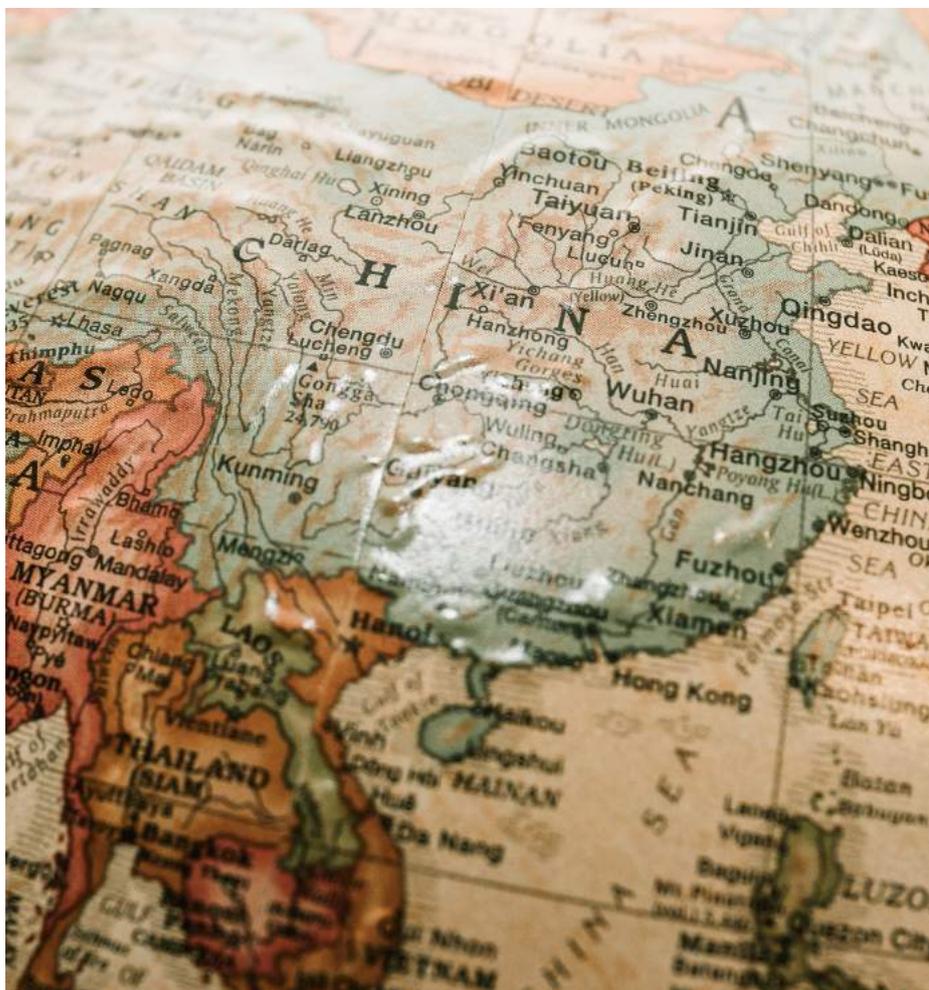
It is the event that China's leaders call "the first complete victory in a recent war where China resisted the invasion of a foreign enemy": the Second World War.

Again, China's role during this conflict tends to be forgotten in the West, but China fought Japan for eight years from 1937 to 1945, suffering 10 million or more deaths, ten times that number of refugees in flight, and not incidentally, holding back over half a million Japanese troops on the Chinese mainland until Pearl Harbor, which only took place nearly five years after the Chinese had begun to fight.

The collective memory of this war has not been entirely straightforward for the CCP to adapt, as it was their Nationalist (Kuomintang) rivals who led the country at the time, and suffered the greatest casualties.

But both the Nationalists and Communists resisted Japan, and the collective memory of that resistance turns up today everywhere from the diplomatic chamber to the cinema. When Chinese negotiators use the terms of a communiqué signed by Churchill, FDR and Chiang Kai-shek at the Cairo Conference of 1943 to demand sovereignty over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, they are drawing on the legacy of China's role in World War II.

When the hit movie "The Eight Hundred" made US\$300 million at the box office in 2020, with its tale of brave Chinese soldiers fighting Japanese invaders in Shanghai in 1937, it drew on the knowledge that contemporary audiences in China still want to hear heroic tales of the country's travails in World War II.





When the foreign minister reminds the audience at the Munich Security Conference in 2020 that China was the first signatory of the UN Charter in 1945 (in San Francisco), he was reminding the world that China claims part of the post-war order as its own creation. China's experience in World War II matters greatly in China's self-presentation at home and abroad.

However, the concentration on the importance of modern history in China has also led the party-state to define what the "correct" view of history is, a process closely linked to political objectives. The Chinese state does not pay for historical research out of an altruistic desire to create a debate over important issues. Instead, and in particular regarding the history of the Chinese Communist Party itself, there are strong boundaries as to what can be researched or discussed. In recent years, there has been ever-stronger criticism of "historical nihilism," a term which seems to refer to history that casts a shade across the record of the Party. This has, above all, affected scholars of communist history in China itself.

Many of these scholars are themselves supporters of the Communist revolution and its legacy; their aim has not been to reject that revolution but rather subject it to the detailed questioning that shows it in all its complexity. But it is harder for such scholars to write and publish today than it was ten or twenty years ago, when academic scholarship in the humanities in China was relatively ringfenced as compared to now.

Why should its own history be such a subject of concern to the Party? As the recent commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the Party show, there is an increasing orientation toward the idea that the century since the foundation of the Party has been one clear upward movement, with few distractions or setbacks.

Most of the era since 1978 has been oriented toward the idea that there was a Mao and a post-Mao era, separated by the slightly artificial date of 1978, when Deng Xiaoping is considered to have gained supreme power.

Today's narrative focuses much more on continuity rather than change, and the turbulence of the Mao period, which included the deadly Great Leap Forward famine and the destructiveness of the Cultural

Revolution, is underplayed in favour of a narrative of the "historical inevitability" of the Party's rise to power. That model, with its Marxist sense of forward progression, is echoed by the increasing interest in China in Marxism itself, which is explicitly namechecked by top leaders in domestic discourse (even if it is rarely mentioned in China's self-presentation overseas).

Modern history is by no means the only force shaping the world-view of China's leaders and the society that they rule. But without some understanding of it, the west misses a crucial element in interpreting actions in the present day.

## About the Author

*Rana Mitter is Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China at Oxford University. A leading expert on China named as one of prospect magazine's top 50 thinkers in 2021. He has written several acclaimed books on the the second Sino-Japanese war and has particular interest in the emergence of nationalism in modern China.*



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