

REVIEW ARTICLE

Navigating China's Historic Evolution

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ABSTRACT

State formation is not a decisive process that has had immediate and urgent development before it was transmitted across the world. China's modern state formation developed in a fundamentally different way from the rise of modern states in the West. The state-making logistics of imperial China focuses on society, nation, family, culture that affects decision making following the importance of incorporating cultural values that reflect collectivism rather than individualism. As it is crucial to understand China's long history, locality and culture, this paper intends to explore the theoretical understanding of the Chinese state in present historical juncture, particularly from the perspective of the Global South. Considering culture that includes every aspect of life as an important aspect of state development, the paper focuses on the changing nature of the Chinese state revealing the importance of local culture, the social psychology, role of institutional structure as well as the role of history. The state building of China and the western world has differed in terms of tactics used for state development.

KEYWORDS

• China • Confucius • Culture • Geopolitics • State • Western World

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a recognized state is a process that each nation undergoes through its individual circumstances. Despite its subjective nature, state formation has had instantaneous growth and has been transmitted across the world. China's modern state formation from

an economically underdeveloped country of the 'Global South' into modern socialist country is entirely different from the rise of modern states in the Western world. The state-making logic of imperial China focuses on society, nation, family, culture that affects decision-making following the importance of incorporating cultural values that reflect

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collectivism rather than individualism. The question arises, is China's rich culture the reason for its consistent growth rate or is it the choice of policies and strategies which has made it a developed country. As it is crucial to understand China's evolution, its long history, locality and culture that includes every aspect of day-to-day life as an important aspect of state development, the paper intends to explore the theoretical understanding of the Chinese state in present historical juncture, particularly from the perspective of the Global South. It focuses on the changing nature of the Chinese state in comparison to the West revealing the importance of local culture, the social psychology, role of institutional structure as well as the role of history. The historical perspective is bestowed in order to understand the rise and fall of China over the centuries as history depicts that the economic, political, and social systems have undergone significant changes in China.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CHINA

The concept of nation-state is a modern political entity which has its characteristics such as territorial sovereignty, centralised form of government, nationhood and diplomatic recognition by other states. When it comes to Asia's biggest rising power in terms of economy, China is distinct from the Western countries in terms of both national identity and state formation. There is a dichotomy in the formation of China and the Western model state formation with respect to national identity and governance. As it is evident in the great civilizations, the mankind in age-old China also engaged in agriculture and settled near river banks. China's historical civilization began on the bank of the Yellow river, referred to as 'Yellow River Civilization'. The 'Cradle of Chinese Civilization' began with Xia Dynasty (from 2100 to 1600 BCE) with a more centralised tendency. Rice farming was done primarily at the bank of Huang Ho or Yellow River. However, farming was completely under the control of the aristocracy. Farmers supplied food to nobles in exchange for protection. This very fact highlights a clear social hierarchy, where the majority depended on a small ruling class. This system created an early imbalance of power, as the masses had little control over essential resources like food. Such dependence reinforced the authority of the elites and limited

the ability of common people to challenge or influence political and economic decisions, setting a pattern of inequality that persisted over time. The kings of the Shang dynasty believed that their ancestors could advise them even after death. They carved questions onto pieces of turtle shells in order to ask queries related to agricultural development.

The renowned philosopher, Confucius, was born in the Shandong town of Tsou on the Yellow River (771-478 BCE). As a teacher and philosopher, his impact on Chinese culture, peace and stability was nearly as great as that of the river. Confucianism talks about five relations between individuals i.e., ruler-ruled, friend-friend, husband-wife, old sibling-young sibling, father-son. His teachings taught people to treat each other justly as it is our duty to be compassionate. Similarly, the Yin and Yang, the most well-known Taoist symbol referring to the dark side and the light side, has had an influence in society till date. This symbol shows that the universe is made up of balance between the light and dark side.

The Qin ruler Shih Huang-di began the construction of the Great Wall of China (longer than the distance from New York to Milan). Poor peasants worked to build this wall of protection and rebellions followed. The main Chinese export was silk. The Han dynasty began trading with the Western world through the Silk Road, a trade route from China to the Mediterranean Sea. Europeans were not used to such smooth and soft material. Silk was highly prized in ancient Rome, where it became a symbol of wealth and social status.

As silk was rare and expensive, wearing it publicly allowed individuals to display their wealth, power, and sophistication. This early example of fashion as a marker of status shows how clothing has long been used to communicate social hierarchy and identity. In many societies, what people wear reflects not only personal taste but also cultural values and social standing. The desire to display status through fashion has persisted over centuries and remains evident in modern cultures around the world. Today, luxury brands, designer labels, and exclusive materials serve a similar purpose as silk in ancient Rome. People use fashion to express their identity, signal belonging to certain social groups, and demonstrate success. Just as silk was a way to impress and differentiate oneself, modern

fashion continues to be a powerful social tool. It influences trends, reinforces cultural norms, and shapes how individuals are perceived in society. Thus, fashion remains deeply intertwined with status and culture, carrying forward traditions from early civilizations into the present.

According to the 'Mandate of Heaven', ancient Chinese rulers believed that they were destined to rule by a command from heaven. The ruler, the connecting link between heaven and earth was expected to please the Gods. Ancient Mandarin and Confucius scholars influenced Chinese kings to honour the mandate by taking care of the people. Family came first in Chinese society. The traditional belief that an individual's greatest responsibility is to their family remains a powerful influence in modern Chinese society. This cultural value emphasizes loyalty, hard work, and sacrifice for the well-being of one's family, which translates into strong motivation to succeed academically and professionally. In contemporary China, individuals often pursue education and career advancement not only for personal achievement but to elevate their family's status and security. This sense of collective responsibility encourages discipline and perseverance, qualities that have supported China's high growth rate. As the second-largest economy worldwide, China's success is partly rooted in this cultural framework, where personal ambition is intertwined with family and social obligations. Moreover, this family-centered mindset supports social stability and cooperation, which are important for maintaining China's centralized governance and long-term development goals. Thus, the traditional idea of family responsibility continues to shape both individual behavior and national progress today. He/she also had a duty to respect the head of the family, parents, elders and ancestors, an idea called 'Filial Piety'. Extended families as much as five generations lived together and practiced ancestral worship.

From 1000-1500, China led the world in economic development. Before World War I, China was focusing wholly on the economy of the nation as it had a weaker economy compared to the major powers such as the USA and Great Britain. In the 1840s, Britain established a trade route with China exporting opium, a highly addictive drug. China knew the dangers of this drug and in order to protect its citizens, China

sent a letter to queen Victoria asking her to stop this trade. Matters took an aggressive turn when England sent more ships of opium and the Chinese dumped chests of opium in the sea. The British responded with aggressiveness and destroyed China's coastal forts. China was blamed for the damages suffered and had to open more ports leading different countries to trade with China. The country was drained of its resources as its ports were always full of traders. This made the Qing dynasty weak, and rebellions followed.

CHINA AS A PIONEER IN STATE ADMINISTRATION

One of the world's most centralised bureaucracies was established by China in 221 BCE. In the seventh century, it became the first country to implement a civil service examination system to recruit bureaucrats instigating a strategy to contract marriage alliances with wealthy segment, exchanging prestige and political opportunity for economic advantage. The examination system then opened the door for locally embedded elites into the central government. These elites became "local advocates" who, in order to influence the government's actions, intervened directly and openly with central officials as a native, with a native's interest in (and knowledge of) local affairs. Max Weber described the Chinese examination in great detail in his definition of a modern bureaucracy, the "Weberian" bureaucracy. Western Europe was going through a major crisis, a rupture in continuity, and widespread displacement at the time. The governing dynasties could not sustain a salaried bureaucracy, and commerce all but vanished. In medieval Europe, power was largely inherited through feudal titles, with social status and government roles passed down by birth. Merit-based hiring was rare and only began gaining popularity in the 19th century with the rise of modern bureaucratic states. In contrast, China developed a meritocratic civil service system much earlier through its imperial examination system, allowing talented individuals to rise based on ability rather than family background. This early emphasis on meritocracy helped China build a strong, centralized state, giving it a long-term administrative advantage and contributing to its elevated position in global history and governance.

CONCEPT OF SOVEREIGNTY: TREATY OF WESTPHALIA AND THE CENTRALISED TENDENCY OF STATE

The concept of sovereignty originated from the historical treaty signed in 1648 known as the "Treaty of Westphalia". The treaty embarked on the principle of modern statecraft most importantly the recognition of the sovereignty of the state. Hence, the concept of nation-state emerged in Europe and beyond the globe. In the 17th century, the Qing dynasty (1644) had already established the centralised imperial authority. China's notion of sovereignty developed on the historical imperial and dynastic system and the idea of a unified Chinese civilization. The timeline showed no direct influence of the 'Treaty of Westphalia', but the principle of non-intervention and territoriality became important for diplomatic relations with Europe. The Qing dynasty saw itself as the Kingdom of the East (middle Kingdom), maintained limited relations with the West. However, in the 19th century during the opium wars (1839-42, 1856-60), the foreign intervention by the combined western powers i.e., Britain, France and US challenged China's sovereignty. The imposition of the western principle and extraterritorial rights made China a 'semi-colonial' state of Asia. Unlike the European notion of state formation where there was a decline of feudalism and the rise of a modern nation-state based on the centralising tendency, China's imperialistic and dynastic rule had already developed the strong centralised state structure in the 17th century. Therefore, the idea of state sovereignty which was formulated in the West was not central to Chinese thinking until the 19th and 20th century. The treaty of Westphalia has indirectly influenced Chinese nationalism during the 20th century when China sought to reclaim its territoriality after "centuries of humiliation". The idea of sovereign equality and non-intervention policy became central to Chinese nationalist discourse when China under Mao Zedong focused on reclaiming its territorial integrity.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

Historical events influences a society's culture, each era reflecting the ideas and society of its time. Culture and history are intertwined to shape social norms like unwritten rules,

shared beliefs, values, norms, customs, To understand the development of the nation-state of China and the West, we need to delve into the study of ethnic identity and nationalist discourse. The theoretical understanding of nationalism and identity can be understood from the work of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined communities". He argues that nations are not based on personal connections, but rather are "imagined" communities - groups of people who feel a deep sense of unity even though they have never met each other. This sense of belonging is made possible through language, newspapers, education, and shared national stories. According to Anderson, nationalism is a modern idea that became stronger as older systems like religion and monarchy lost power.

This imagined connection can shape people's behavior both inside and outside the country. Inside the country, nationalism can create unity by giving people a shared identity. However, it can also lead to exclusion. When the national identity is built around one culture, language, or ethnic group, those who do not fit, such as minorities, may feel left out or even face discrimination. For example, in China, the national story often focuses on Han Chinese culture, while ethnic groups like the Uighur or Tibetans may be seen as outsiders, even though they are citizens of the same country. In Europe, similar issues exist with migrant communities or regional minorities who are not always fully accepted into the national story. Outside the country, Anderson's idea helps explain how nations define themselves by comparing with others. National identity often grows stronger when people feel they are being threatened or disrespected by other countries. This creates a division between 'us' and 'them'. For instance, China's nationalism today often refers to past humiliation by Western powers. By remembering this history, the country strengthens its sense of unity in the present and positions itself against foreign influence. In Europe, nationalism has sometimes taken a similar form, building identity through contrast with other nations or immigrants. In both cases, Anderson's theory shows how imagined communities are powerful. They can bring people together, but they can also create boundaries between groups inside the nation, and between the nation and the outside world. Nationalism, as Anderson sees it, is not just a feeling; it is a shared idea built through culture,

history, and communication. This idea can shape how people treat others, both neighbors and strangers and how they see their place in the world.

In Europe, identity is closely linked with the idea of ethno-cultural nation often known as ethnic nationalism. Similarly, Anthony Smith emphasised the importance of “ethno-symbolism” and argued that a sense of shared ethnic identity is the backbone of nationalist movements. The rise of “romantic nationalism” in the 19th century emphasised the idea of common language, culture, and ancestry. In China, the concept of nationalism is predominantly based on the civic and state-centred notion emphasising on national unity over ethnic diversity. The idea is rooted in the belief that all the people living within the territory of China despite having different ethnic identity, all belong to the “Chinese Nation”. Scholars like Prasenjit Duara argued that modern Chinese nationalism has built around the concept of civilizational identity which amalgamated Chinese ethnicity, culture, and history as a part of unified Chinese citizens. Another scholar John Fitzgerald argued that ethnic identity in China has been shaped by the top-down approach state model which eventually prioritizes Han Chinese identity and cultural values attempting to integrate a wide range of ethnic groups under one Chinese Nation. The Han Chinese majority has often been seen as the majoritarian cultural and ethnic group in China which defines the idea of Chinese Nationalism. The notion of *Zhonghua Minzu* was initially articulated in the early 20th century especially during the Chinese republic era (1912-1949) later consolidated under the Communist Party of China.

COMPARISON OF IDEAS AND IDENTITY: A CONTESTATION

Since its formation in 1949, the People's Republic of China embarked on large-scale development and nation-building. By this time, Western nations had already undergone centuries of state-building, but they still faced unresolved ethnic challenges, with some countries even experiencing ethnic cleansing and genocide. In contrast, China had only recently emerged from war and had been in the process of constructing a modern nation-state for a few decades. Thus, both China and the West were confronted with significant challenges in addressing ethnic issues. Some

Western countries, despite having made progress in resolving ethnic issues in the past, now face serious challenges related to migrants. Despite having much work still to do, China has achieved historic success through continuous and innovative applications of Marxism, coupled with effective reforms in ideas, systems, and mechanisms.

By comparing the experiences of the Western countries and the PRC in addressing ethnic issues, it becomes clear that the PRC's approach has yielded valuable insights. The PRC's achievements over the years highlight its unique model of solving ethnic issues, which has contributed to the international discourse on these challenges. The Chinese government has promoted the political, economic, and social integration of all ethnic groups, while ensuring the protection of their cultural and linguistic rights. This approach links the development of ethnic minorities to the broader national development, creating a sense of shared destiny for all Chinese people. This stands in stark contrast to the approach of Western countries, where a multi-party system often resorts to a mere “rights protection” strategy to address ethnic minority issues, rather than fostering genuine integration and development.

The practical implications of ethnic policies can vary considerably, even when the legal texts themselves are identical. This discrepancy can be attributed to the differing ideas that inform these policies and systems, which ultimately shape their political and social effects. The emergence of the world system under colonialism brought about increased interaction between different nationalities and ethnicities, leading to the formation of various ideological approaches to managing ethnic issues. Over time, at least five distinct ideas have emerged to guide these interactions: racism, assimilationism, liberalism, multiculturalism, and Marxism. The concept of racism is deeply rooted in the colonial history of the modern world and is intertwined with a racial cultural framework that emphasizes “Eurocentrism,” the idea that European culture and racial identity are the standard against which all other cultures and races should be measured. Racism emerged as a product of European colonial expansion and the systemic marginalization of non-European peoples. In countries where racism has been institutionalized, the social fabric

has often been torn apart, with marginalized ethnic communities suffering from economic, political, and cultural disenfranchisement. The legacy of racism can also be seen in the widespread disparities in wealth, education, and health between ethnic groups, as well as in the continued challenges faced by indigenous populations, people of color, and other minorities. Colonization, slavery, and segregation are all historical manifestations of racism that have shaped the modern world order. Today, the remnants of these practices still influence global power dynamics, as the nations that were once colonized continue to grapple with the lasting effects of colonialism and racial discrimination.

In contrast to racism, other ideologies like assimilationism, liberalism, multiculturalism, and Marxism offer different approaches to managing ethnic relations. These ideologies propose varying solutions to the challenges posed by diversity, ranging from the integration of minority groups into the dominant culture to the celebration of ethnic differences within a pluralistic society. However, each of these ideologies has its own set of strengths and limitations, and their effectiveness in addressing ethnic issues often depends on the historical, social, and political context in which they are applied. The ideas surrounding ethnicity and racial relations have far-reaching consequences for the policies and systems designed to address ethnic issues. Understanding the historical context and practical consequences of racism, alongside other ideologies, is crucial for developing more effective strategies to promote ethnic harmony and social justice in contemporary societies.

CONTRASTING PATHS OF DEVELOPMENT: CHINA AND THE WEST

A comparative study of West and Asia's nation-state development can help understand the development of China as a modern state. In the mid-20th century, both China and the Western world embarked on large-scale construction and reconstruction efforts. The devastation caused by World War II prompted many Western nations to realize that the protection of minority groups was essential for the security of entire nations and the well-being of their citizens. This realization led to a period of reflection on "minority issues" recognizing the importance of dignity, equality, and mutual

respect of all people, while condemning the ignorance and prejudice that had propagated the idea of inequality among races.

During this period, the international legal framework for minority protection was primarily shaped by liberal principles. The UN's approach to minority rights focused on individual rights, guaranteeing the freedom and equality of all people, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion. However, it is important to note that while Western countries, particularly the United States, played a leading role in promoting liberal human rights values internationally, there were significant contradictions within these countries. The United States publicly championed liberal ideals of equality and ethnic harmony on the global stage, while simultaneously engaging in practices of racial segregation and discrimination domestically. Until the 1950s, the United States maintained widespread racial segregation, particularly in the Southern states, where laws explicitly discriminated against African Americans. This paradox between the United States' international promotion of liberal values and its domestic racial inequalities persisted until the mid-20th century. The 'Civil Rights Act of 1964' and the 'Voting Rights Act of 1965' were crucial in addressing racial discrimination and promoting equality for African Americans. During the 1960s and beyond, a new approach to minority rights began to take shape in Western countries. In addition to the broader changes in racial policies, the treatment of Native American communities in the United States underwent significant shifts in the post-World War II period. Prior to the war, the prevailing policy was one of forced assimilation, which sought to erase native cultures and integrate them into mainstream American society. However, after the war, there was a gradual shift towards recognizing Native American autonomy and supporting their right to self-governance. This shift reflected broader trends in liberal thought and the growing recognition of the rights of indigenous populations within both national and international legal frameworks.

Thus, the mid-20th century marked a critical turning point in the global approach to ethnic and minority issues. The post-World War II era saw the international community, led by Western powers, engage in significant reflection and action on the protection of

minority rights. Over time, these countries moved from an assimilationist policies to a more inclusive approach that emphasized multiculturalism and the recognition of cultural diversity. Despite these efforts, the struggle for racial equality and minority rights remains an ongoing challenge, with historical legacies of discrimination continuing to shape social and political realities today. In Western countries, a common approach to enhancing the economic and social development of ethnic minorities is the concept of "state neutrality." This approach allows ethnic minorities and their members to "freely compete" with the majority groups in the market and social spheres, theoretically ensuring equal opportunities. France serves as a typical example of this approach. Regardless of location, whether in regions such as Brittany, Corsica, or areas with substantial immigrant populations from the Maghreb, Yugoslavia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, the French government has adhered to a "universal" civic policy focusing on integration through a uniform national framework, treating all citizens equally. However, despite this theoretical commitment to equality, weak anti-discrimination measures and difficulties in the integration of minority groups have led to widespread marginalization and impoverishment for many ethnic minorities.

In summary, the experience of ethnic minorities in France highlights the limitations of the "state neutrality" approach to managing ethnic diversity. While the French government espouses a policy of universal equality, this has not been sufficient to address the real and deep-rooted inequalities that exist for ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims and immigrant communities. Despite the government's efforts to alleviate these disparities through anti-discrimination laws and social interventions, the persistence of social exclusion, economic marginalization, and systemic discrimination suggests that a more nuanced and targeted approach is needed. Without addressing the structural causes of inequality, it remains challenging to achieve meaningful integration and social cohesion in a multicultural society. Westerners place individuality above all other principles whereas Chinese believe in the power of the majority. Westerners believed in the supremacy of the law whereas Chinese believed in an all-powerful emperor. Materialistic wealth and technological development are rather

important to western society, the Chinese give value to proper relationships.

TOWARDS CONCLUSION

Cultural norms vary widely across different societies and plays an important role in shaping thoughts, behaviour, and social interactions. In the 1950s, the People's Republic of China embraced five Principles of 'Peaceful Coexistence' reflecting how China's diplomatic strategy embodies the traditional value of harmony. As the country continues to navigate the complexities of modernization, the role of culture in shaping its development trajectory has become increasingly significant. China has been developed upon its own social values, codes of behavior and ethics, which permeate its institutional arrangements. The country's history, culture and situational imperatives have shaped its development path, setting it apart from other nations. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have had a profound impact on Chinese culture and tradition, emphasizing values such as social hierarchy, work ethics, responsibility, and obedience. These traditions have instilled in the Chinese people a strong sense of family, social harmony, and respect for each other. The culture has a decisive weight in the economic development. The importance of thrift, morality and self-restraint is deeply ingrained, contributing to the country's remarkable economic growth and social stability. Under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, China transitioned from a state-controlled economy to a more open, market-oriented system, which led to rapid economic growth and rising standards of living. This change expanded personal and cultural freedom, and grew ties with the world economy. Recently, the Chinese government is investing considerable financial and human resources in its promotion of Chinese language and culture, best seen in the expansion of the government-sponsored Confucius institutes worldwide. Chinese literature, philosophy, cinema, and other cultural artifacts around the world is stronger now than ever before. China considers culture is essential in correcting adverse impressions created by its rapid strategic rise. Consequently, culture has emerged as the third pillar of Chinese diplomacy after economics and politics. It is proclaimed that China was the world leader in economics as well as science and technology

until about 1500. Before the revitalisation, Europe was far behind and did not transcend China until about 1800. The tactics that supported the party's success in the mid-twentieth century was that it used propaganda and social movements to neutralize local elites. Meanwhile, a long awaited revolution helped forge a close-knit network of party elites from all over the country and imposed a centralized elite structure. The Chinese experience demonstrates that weakness of the state cannot be cured with the assistance of bureaucracy. When civil service examinations were opted for the recruitment of bureaucrats, the elites started opposing state development. This experience demonstrates that the development of a state requires change in the mind-set of people who are socially relevant which is not prevalent generally.

To sum up, the state building of China and the western world has differed in terms of tactics used for state development. China uses tactics like long-term investment whereas the West believes in quick profits which lead to fluctuation in its growth rate. The development of technology has played a very crucial role in China's evident growth throughout the ages. From being an East Asian country to becoming one of the fastest growing economy in the world, China's transition is very important to understand the role of technology and internet in the making of this strong nation. One of the most important medium in China's growth is however, the television. Financial freedom is fuel of the success in a country like China. Nonetheless, China uses its culture and natural resources as tools for uplifts in its economy. The Western countries preferred individualism whereas the Chinese believed in the power of teamwork and worked as a family inside the nation. Policies and strategies lay the foundation for people to be dedicated to a certain goal. Guided by social conduct, part of history and culture, China's strict policies have encouraged the people to be dedicated to their goal and make China one of the largest growing economies. It is their rich culture that gives each individual a sense of discipline and ambition to work for this Utopian lifestyle.

However, deeply connected to history, philosophy, community, family and friendships, a rising China has become increasingly conscious of its culture using it as

its leverage at home and abroad e.g. Confucius institutes. China must comprehend that building a harmonious world requires making civilizations coexist. The type of a political ideology that should be followed by a country should be based on a sense of rationality that amplifies the potential of its citizens leading them through the route of success and prosperity. A society that grows from being to become through its constant efforts to step out of its comfort zone is one that will certainly reach more milestones than any other.

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