

CHINA AND A NEW ERA

—The Latest Twist in an Enduring Pattern?

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham
and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom

Has a “New Era” in China’s modern history begun? Will historians of the future, looking back on 2018, single out a recent event as so pivotal that it divides time into a clear before and after? Might that event be an economic phenomenon, such as China displacing Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy? A social one, such as China becoming for the first time in its history a place where the majority of people live in cities? A geopolitical one, such as this being the first time when it seems an open question during summits between China’s leader and an American president who is the more powerful person?

Or might it be instead a political development that has gotten an enormous amount of attention of late—namely, the rise to power of Xi Jinping, who in November 2012 became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in March 2013 was installed as President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and continues to hold both those posts, along with many others? Is Xi a novel kind of Chinese leader? Or should he be seen as a “new emperor” or a “new Mao”? If he is one of these things, does this mean that what we are seeing in China is less a “New Era” than a rebooted version of a past one?

There are good reasons to ponder these questions. Inside the PRC, Xi himself claimed in a major 2017 speech that a distinctively “New Era” had started. Party members attend sessions to study Xi’s addition to Marxist–Leninist theory, which bears the appellation “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Xi has also invoked precedents from the past in ways that bring the idea of a reboot to mind, calling for a New Long March and a “rejuvenation” of the nation. Foreign journalists and scholars have begun to refer to a shift between epochs, a regression to old patterns, or both these things happening at once. Two tellingly

titled recent examples are “China’s Great Leap Backward” by journalist James Fallows (which appeared in the December 2016 issue of *The Atlantic*) and *The End of an Era* by legal scholar Carl Minzner (Oxford University Press, 2018).

There is also widespread agreement both inside and outside of China that Xi is in some ways a markedly different kind of leader than his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. He operates less as a first among equals and, due to an early 2018 change in the Constitution that eliminated the term limits that stipulated a leader could only serve two five-year stints as president, unlike them he is not bound to step down from power after a decade at the top. Xi has also been the focus of a propaganda push that far exceeds anything done for Jiang, Hu, or even



Source: *The Economist* May 2013 cover at <https://tinyurl.com/y7phte>.



Source: *NewStatesman America* June 2015 cover at <https://tinyurl.com/y98xjn3t>.

© July 2017. Xi Jinping in Berlin, Germany. Source: © 360b / Shutterstock.com.

Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), who until recently was nearly universally considered the most powerful and highest-profile Chinese leader since Mao Zedong (1893–1976).

On the other hand, clearly not everything about China has changed under Xi. It is still run by the same Communist Party that has governed since 1949. The policy of “Reform and Opening” initiated by Deng has not been abandoned—to the contrary, the fortieth anniversary of its beginning is being celebrated, though with less focus on Deng’s leadership than on previous anniversaries. Many of the countries China is allied with, such as North Korea, and competed with, such as the United States, are the same ones now that they were ten, twenty, thirty, and more years ago. Might it be best to say that China is less in a “New Era,” whether novel or a reboot, than just in a different stage of a long Communist period or a shorter Reform or Post-Mao one?

Our goal in this essay is not to offer definitive answers to any of the questions posed above, but to put them all into perspective by moving between the past and the present. We have several basic claims to make. One is that there is a very good case for seeing the current period as a distinctive one, and there is more than one reason to do so. We argue that the transition did not take place at a single point in time. China’s economy surpassing Japan’s in 2010, Xi’s rise in 2012, the end of term limits five years later—these and still other developments, such as Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics in 2008, were all notable turning point moments, but none represents a total rupture with the past. We also feel that it is misleading to say that China is now simply continuing on a familiar trajectory, moving into unprecedented terrain, or becoming more like it once was, for China is doing all those things at once. What is most useful is to try to figure out *in what ways* there is continuity, novelty, and a return to the past.

This assertion that we should be wary of fixing on one turning point moment and picking among continuity, novelty, and rebooting is based on our work as historians of China and also as world historians. In China, as in many other places, fixing a definitive starting point for a “New Era” is often a chimerical thing, as there can be multiple moments that are key. Even the most dramatically transformative events that seem to divide history into “before” and “after” often turn out on closer inspection to be events in which it is possible to see elements of continuity with what came just before and symbolic or practical restorations of things from an earlier time in the mix as well. We will focus on illustrating these points with Chinese examples, but the phenomenon is a more general one, as a look at some of the most famous revolutions and wars



Puyi, the Last Emperor of China (reign: December 2, 1908, to February 12, 1912), shown here circa March 1934, when he served as the Kangde Emperor of Manchukuo. Source: [Wikipedia at https://tinyurl.com/zyf8584](https://tinyurl.com/zyf8584).



Sun Yat-sen, founding father of the Republic of China in 1912. Source: [Wikipedia at https://tinyurl.com/y9ldauqe](https://tinyurl.com/y9ldauqe).

suggests. World War II was clearly a breaking point in twentieth-century history, but it can be dated as beginning, depending on one’s perspective, with German actions in 1939 or Japanese ones earlier in that decade. There was continuity as well as rupture across the 1917 divide in Russia, as references to the Czar-like power of Stalin indicate. And so on.

These points will become clearer later as we focus on the Chinese case. We will look first at general issues of periodization, continuity, and returns to old patterns relating to various eras that have been proclaimed at the time as bracingly or scarily “new.” Then, we will focus on them in relation to the “Post-Mao Era” or “Reform Era” that some now say has recently ended. And finally, we will return to the current period.

Periodizing Is a Slippery Business

When teaching modern Chinese history, we tend to structure our courses around big blocks of time. We then organize lesson plans that zero in on much shorter periods: the events of a pivotal turning year, for example, or the decade or two that a movement lasted or a specific leader governed. If a class is devoted to the sweep of a “modern” period defined as lasting well over a century, one lesson may focus tightly on 1911 as the year when the imperial system ended and a Republican one was created, and another on 1949, a turning point year when the country changed dramatically from being led by the Nationalist Party to by the Communist Party, and even got a new name. A sample lesson for a period longer than a year but much shorter than an epoch may cover the Cultural Revolution, which

is often treated as a decade-long upheaval that began with Red Guard rallies in 1966 and ended with the death of Mao.

One thing we routinely do, though, even when using these chunks of time as organizational building blocks, is draw attention to the limitations of treating specific moments as marking clear breaks between before and after. We make sure to note the case that can be made for dividing up time in different ways. We also emphasize that there is continuity across dividing points and that sometimes even very new-seeming things are framed as or can be seen as restorations of things from the past. A good illustration of this involves dating the start of China’s “modern” era. This is often associated in some fashion to the final years of imperial rule and the creation of a “New China,” but there is considerable variation even among those who think in these terms. There are different moments to look to as signaling the beginning of the end of imperial rule, and also different moments to call the start of New China.

When we teach, we like to point out that textbooks in the PRC often approach these issues in the following way. They begin the “modern” period with the Qing dynasty’s loss to Britain in the Opium War (1839–1842). This is presented as the beginning of the end of imperial rule, the first in a series of defeats at the hands of foreign powers that set in motion a downward spiral for the dynasty that, when combined with revolutionary activism, culminated in the 1911 Revolution that toppled the Qing and led to the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) on January 1, 1912, with Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925)



Chiang Kai-shek, President of the Republic of China, 1950–1975. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/yambdj2e>.



Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, 1943–1976. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/pgz6nwh>.

Mao, like Chiang, claimed to be carrying forward Sun’s legacy, and when Mao’s portrait went up looking out from the Forbidden City at Tiananmen Square, it went in a place Chiang’s had been before.

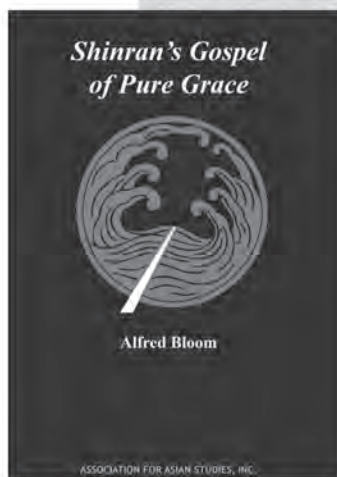
as its first president. This was only a partial revolution, according to this line of argument, which laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party that would eventually carry forward to completion the task of creating a truly “new” China: the People’s Republic of China established in 1949 that Mao ruled.

We do not leave the story there, though, but suggest ways to complicate the narrative. Many Western scholars prefer to go back further when describing the start of “modern” times in China and the unraveling of imperial rule. Some begin “modern” China with the founding of the Qing, or even centuries before that, and many insist that the dynasty’s long decline began with the demographic challenges and domestic rebellions it faced around 1800. The series of defeats by foreign powers—to Britain in 1842, to Japan in 1895, and so on—exacerbated Qing weaknesses, but the roots of the dynasty’s fall need to be sought inside China.

Textbooks now used in Taiwan, meanwhile, focus on 1912, not 1949, as the year when the most important “new” China was founded. This shows through in the calendar that treats 1912 as year one, what happened in 1949 as occurring in the thirty-eighth year of the country, the year 2011 being year 100, and so forth.

Complicating things still further, we point out to our students that the establishment of the Republic of China, though celebrated by the Nationalist Party throughout its history as the starting point of a new era, was also framed by that organization’s founder as a restoration of sorts. Sun spoke of both the creation of a “New China” and of returning the country to rule by

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members of the Han ethnicity after a period of Manchu domination. He flagged this idea by going to perform rituals by the tombs of the Ming emperors, the leaders of the pre-Qing ethnically Chinese dynasty that fell in 1644, soon after he was inaugurated as provisional president of a new Republic of China.

And while 1949 clearly was and is treated by scholars in the West, the PRC, and Taiwan as a breaking point, we note that there were nevertheless continuities between the governing methods of Mao and of his predecessor, Nationalist Party leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975). This can be seen in symbolism—Mao, like Chiang, claimed to be carrying forward Sun’s legacy, and when Mao’s portrait went up looking out from the Forbidden City at Tiananmen Square, it went in a place Chiang’s had been before. There were pragmatic continuities between the rulers, too—the Nationalists, like the Communists after them, claimed to govern a multiparty country, but it was one in which the ruling party had tight control and limited dissent.

While a timeline of modern Chinese history, then, will organize years and decades into tidy eras, the boundaries between those eras are not as sharply defined as a textbook’s chronology and chapter breakdown might suggest. This is true of the period we turn to next, the Reform Era, which is officially dated to 1978 and may—or may not—have ended within the past decade.

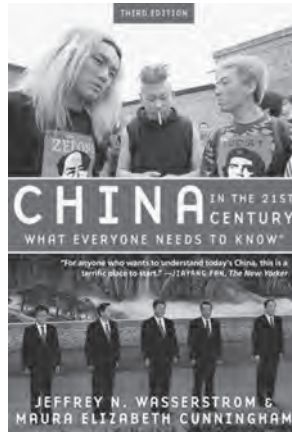
What Was the Reform Era?

Before talking about what is new in present-day China, it is important to first establish the chronological parameters and characteristics of the previous period—and note again how the themes of novelty, continuity, and restoration blend together. Conventional wisdom holds that between the late 1970s and early 2000s, the PRC was in the Reform Era. This was a period most closely associated with Deng’s policy of *gaige kaifang* (“Reform and Opening Up”), which involved a dramatic break from Mao-Era political, social, and economic mandates.

That, at least, is one soundbite version of the Reform Era. But in terms of both periodization and content, the reality is far more complicated. There is more to when it started and how dramatically it broke from Mao-Era trends than the soundbite suggests.

Many scholars, journalists, and CCP officials date the beginning of the Reform Era to 1978—the year when Deng maneuvered aside Mao’s chosen successor, Hua Guofeng (1921–2008), assumed control of the CCP, and began to usher in a series of economic reforms designed to spark economic growth. While economic reforms are nearly synonymous with Deng, however, the first moves toward market liberalization had begun before he became paramount

China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know (Third Edition)



By Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom
and Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Wasserstrom and Cunningham encourage readers to see parallels between China and the United States, and to cultivate more empathy and less arrogance in their understanding. The beginning of empathy is getting to know the other. China in the 21st Century provides a great resource for that quest.

—Karen Kane, *Education About Asia*

Readers are encouraged to read Karen Kane’s complete review of *China in the 21st Century* from the fall 2018 issue at <https://tinyurl.com/yb5m34fv>.



Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), the paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China from 1978 until his retirement in 1989.
Source: *Biography* website at <https://tinyurl.com/ya6yrup0>.

leader of the PRC. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 had sent China’s economy reeling, and the following years were marked by economic stagnation. But according to new research by historians, the country started to recover in the early 1970s, as citizens surreptitiously (often with the tacit assent of local party officials) began to move away from collectivized agriculture and toward an open market. Hua, too, sought to promote economic growth by encouraging modernization of industries and allowing foreign investment into the country.¹ Deng’s announcement of Reform and Opening Up, then, was in part placing an official imprimatur on processes that were already underway.

In the arena of international relations, one of the landmark events of the early Reform Era was the normalization of relations between the PRC and United States on January 1, 1979. Again, this

is an event closely linked with Deng, but it had roots earlier in the decade. The United States and China had been working toward normalization since the ping-pong diplomacy of 1971 and President Richard Nixon’s visit to the PRC in early 1972. Throughout the following years, delegations of scholars, athletes, and cultural performers had traveled between the US and China, laying the groundwork for the reestablishment of relations at a higher level.

Both Reform and Opening Up, then, actually began before Mao’s death in 1976, albeit on a small scale and without the full force of the CCP supporting these shifts. But it is important to be aware of the Reform Era’s fuzzy boundaries—as we will see, the end point is similarly unclear—and to note the contributions of CCP leaders other than Deng.

There were also some developments during the Reform Era that were throwbacks to earlier periods. There were stretches of the Mao decades, for example, such as the years between the disastrous Great Leap Famine and start of the Cultural Revolution, when Deng had a good deal of influence and economic pragmatism was the order of the day. This made it natural for Deng and other officials to speak of some of the Reform Era’s specific economic policies as completely novel but others as reboots of initiatives undertaken during those earlier periods of pragmatism.

In addition, there was a less openly acknowledged element of restoration in the revival of interest in and respect for Confucius and his ideas that began in the late 1980s and became especially intense early in the twenty-first century. Early in the twentieth century, many progressive intellectuals, including a young Mao, criticized Confucius as promoting ideas, including viewing women as inferior to men, which



In 1978, some Beijing citizens posted a large-character poster on the Xidan Democracy Wall to promote the fifth modernization-political democratization. Source: *Besieged* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yc3yxwdu>.

were misguided and held China back. Once in power, Mao followed up on these earlier beliefs from his youth by promoting an official view of Confucian ideas as “feudal” ones that had prevented China from progressing. Chiang Kai-shek, by contrast, had—while he was in power on the mainland and after 1949 in Taiwan—celebrated the sage as a kind of national saint whose philosophy could aid a modernizing one-party state. This was how the CCP treated Confucius during the second half of the Reform Era, when the PRC opened cultural centers dubbed “Confucius Institutes” around the world and the sage’s hometown of Qufu was treated again as a hallowed site.

In terms of policy changes, while the three decades that followed Deng’s rise to power generally saw a move toward less state control in society and the economy, that trend was not an all-encompassing or continuous one. The One-Child Policy, while novel in its particulars, carried forward a tradition from the Mao years of the state micromanaging some of the most intimate decisions made by families. During the 1980s, there was both a flourishing cultural sphere and periodic campaigns, albeit less intense than those of the Mao Era, that pushed for restraint under the guise of combatting “spiritual pollution” (1983’s watchword) and “bourgeois liberalization” (the key term in 1987). Political activism, if it grew too wide-reaching, invited crackdowns as well. This happened first during the Democracy Wall movement of 1979 and then, more notoriously, during the Tiananmen Square protests ten years later.

It is undeniable that the Reform Era was a period of vast change in the Chinese social and economic landscapes. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the country saw unprecedented periods

of economic growth, which led to the emergence of a new middle class and the rapid movement of people from the countryside to the cities. Educated youths had permission to study abroad, while foreigners learned Chinese and moved to the PRC in search of career opportunities. After an inward turn immediately following 1989’s June Fourth Massacre, the PRC began to play a larger role on the international stage, though its leaders routinely spoke of China as a developing country and asserted that it was not yet ready to take a leadership position comparable to that of the United States.

The Chinese Communist Party still hovered above it all, its leaders ever watchful and wary of any social or political movement that might undermine their position at the helm of the country. But compared with the Mao decades, the CCP was somewhat less visible in daily life, and while one man stood at the head of the party, it was not entirely subject to his decisions and dictates. Under Xi, much of that has changed.

What Era Are We in Now?

When Xi speaks of a *xin shidai* (“New Era”) for the PRC, he clearly wants this to be viewed as a positive shift. He presents the country as entering a period when it can and will play a leading role in international affairs and move to the forefront of global technological innovation and development. This is all being accomplished, Xi emphasizes, under the guidance and oversight of the Chinese Communist Party. In recent years, the CCP has tightened its control over the media, the economy, educational institutions, the legal system, and many more elements of the social and political spheres.

This reassertion of Communist Party authority is one reason that beyond China, scholars and journalists are now speaking of the country’s

“Post-Reform Era.” They point out that the party has rolled back the liberalization of the Reform Era and reasserted its hold over daily economic and social life in ways reminiscent of the Mao years. The propaganda campaign promoting Xi—which includes music videos, published volumes of his speeches and writings, tourism to places he has lived, and more—also contains strong echoes of the celebrations that glorified Mao during the decades he ruled the PRC.

The Post-Reform Era is not necessarily co-terminous with Xi’s time in office, even though, like the Reform Era and Deng, general trends and a leader’s rise are often fused together. The move to tighten policies and reassert CCP control began during the decade of Hu Jintao’s administration (2002–2012), though it has expanded in scale and intensity under Xi. Likewise, the PRC’s increased prominence on the world stage is closely tied to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, which the leadership approached as the debut of the modernized, globalized China that had been built over the two decades of Reform and Opening Up.

Although the revival of authoritarianism in the PRC under Xi, as well as the creation of something approaching a personality cult around him, has led many commentators to warn of a return to the Mao years—specifically those of the Cultural Revolution—we do not see Xi as another Mao. China changed too much during the Reform Era to revert completely to the ideology-led, isolated society it was under Mao. In addition, whereas Mao claimed that unleashing mass movements and allowing for a degree of chaos and spontaneity were good things, Xi’s mantras have been order and stability. Nor do we regard Xi as a new emperor, though he has centralized control over the government in a way not seen for many decades. His rule, as much as it is tied to him as a person, is still embedded within a political party that could, at least in theory, place a check on his power if other members of the leadership to whom he is not related by blood or marriage felt he had gone too far.

Xi’s New Era is not a complete repudiation of the Reform Era; rather, the CCP is overseeing a reinterpretation of post-1978 governance. While the propaganda surrounding the fortieth anniversary of Reform and Opening Up has diminished the role of Deng (often in favor of elevating the role of Xi’s father, a high-ranking party official but not equal to Deng in prominence), Xi has not shown any inclination to officially discredit or delegitimize Deng’s leadership of the country. Rather, his New Era builds on the Reform Era that came before it—acknowledging its strengths but arguing that China’s conditions have changed and the CCP’s rule must change with it.



Locations of reeducation camps. Source: *China File*, "What Satellite Images Can Show Us about 'Re-education' Camps in Xinjiang," August 2018 article at <https://tinyurl.com/y7tctdfx>. Compiled by Shawn Zhang.



April 2018, Uyghurs in exile rally in Brussels. Source: *National Review* article, "A New Gulag in China" by Jay Nordlinger at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ehwz8r>. Photo: World Uyghur Congress.

During the centuries of Imperial China, foreign observers tended to write about the country in ways that implied it was unchanging and somehow timeless. Depending on the writer, this could convey either respect (China had a deeper sense of history than Europe or the United States) or condescension (China was so mired in the past that it didn't realize it needed to modernize). Since the fall of the Qing in 1911—and even more so since the advent of CCP rule in 1949—the foreign narrative has often tended to speak of China as undergoing complete and irreparable changes, though occasionally the notion of changelessness slips back in.

The reality, as we have shown, is more complicated. We get led astray if we fall prey to thinking in terms of clear binaries and breaking points. It is important to be mindful of how continuity, novelty, and restoration can be present simultaneously within the same system, as we see under Xi Jinping today.

Consider, as a final example of this, a deeply distressing issue that is making headlines as we write this essay late in the summer of 2018: intense repression in Xinjiang. The vast network of internment camps in the region, in which a United Nations commission has just concluded that hundreds of thousands (perhaps as many as a million) Uyghurs and members of other ethnic minorities are presently confined, have been built in just the last few years. They were not there before Xi took power. Some specialists, though, argue convincingly that a shift toward harsher control over the territory began during Hu's time, with some techniques now employed against Uyghurs having been used earlier in Tibet, where the top official in Xinjiang was previously posted. The way the Chinese official press is dismissing criticism of the phenomena also

brings to mind Beijing's response to coverage of human rights issues in the Mao years and the Reform Era. Some of the terminology being used now in Xinjiang, such as references to the camps as centers for "reeducation," are throwbacks to the time of Mao. So, too, is the fact that the current campaign frequently involves guilt by association and the punishment of whole families rather than just individuals. Rather than choose between novelty, continuity, and the rebooting of old patterns, we once again need to refuse to choose and think instead of combinations. ■

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Maura Elizabeth Cunningham. *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Economy, Elizabeth. *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Gewirtz, Julian. *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Minzner, Carl. *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival Is Undermining Its Rise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Niewenhuis, Lucas. "China's Re-Education Camps for a Million Muslims: What Everyone Needs to Know." *SuperChina*, August 22, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9o3te3p>.

Wade, Samuel. "Remaking History as Reform Anniversary Approaches." *China Digital Times*, August 24, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y7cp5jz5>.

NOTES

1. See, for example, the final sections of Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

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JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM is Chancellor's Professor of History at the University of California–Irvine. He writes for newspapers and magazines, as well as academic journals, has published on topics ranging from student protests to urban change, and often places Chinese phenomena into comparative perspective. His most recent books include, as editor, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and, as coauthor, the third edition of *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2018).