

March 2023

## Kowtowing and Paying Tribute to China: How China's Self-Perception and the Mandate of Heaven Shapes China's Foreign Policy

Brock Bellinger  
*Liberty University*, [bbellinger@liberty.edu](mailto:bbellinger@liberty.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Bellinger, Brock (2023) "Kowtowing and Paying Tribute to China: How China's Self-Perception and the Mandate of Heaven Shapes China's Foreign Policy," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History*. Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol5/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu).

---

## Kowtowing and Paying Tribute to China: How China's Self-Perception and the Mandate of Heaven Shapes China's Foreign Policy

### Abstract

Throughout the course of history, the ancient Chinese notion of the Mandate of Heaven has played a fundamental role in guiding China's foreign relations. The Mandate of Heaven is based upon the idea that the ruler of China has the authority to reign from Heaven. However, the Mandate of Heaven could be revoked if the Chinese leader did not adhere to strict moral guidelines, as evidenced by the fall of numerous dynasties throughout China's history. To better understand 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign relations with China, it is instructive to explore and recognize how China views itself historically. Through an improved understanding of China's self-perception and history, observers can apply these lessons to future foreign relations. It is also beneficial to view recent events in American foreign relations with China through the lens of Chinese self-perception, examining the impact of the Mandate of Heaven on American relations with China. By claiming the Mandate of Heaven, China subscribes to the viewpoint that their leaders have a divine right to rule and that other nations should be subservient to their divinely appointed leadership. If a diplomat is faced with the opportunity to negotiate, they would do well to consider the history of China and the Mandate of Heaven. Recent foreign affairs including Tiananmen Square and the debate over Taiwan's sovereignty likewise reflect the importance of understanding the Chinese perspective in conducting Sino-American relations.

### Keywords

China, Kowtowing, Foreign Policy, Mandate of Heaven

Kowtowing and Paying Tribute to China: How China's Self-Perception and the Mandate of  
Heaven Shapes China's Foreign Policy

Brock Bellinger

Liberty University

### **Abstract**

Throughout the course of history, the ancient Chinese notion of the Mandate of Heaven has played a fundamental role in guiding China's foreign relations. The Mandate of Heaven is based upon the idea that the ruler of China has the authority to reign from Heaven. However, the Mandate of Heaven could be revoked if the Chinese leader did not adhere to strict moral guidelines, as evidenced by the fall of numerous dynasties throughout China's history. To better understand 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign relations with China, it is instructive to explore and recognize how China views itself historically. Through an improved understanding of China's self-perception and history, observers can apply these lessons to future foreign relations. It is also beneficial to view recent events in American foreign relations with China through the lens of Chinese self-perception, examining the impact of the Mandate of Heaven on American relations with China. By claiming the Mandate of Heaven, China subscribes to the viewpoint that their leaders have a divine right to rule and that other nations should be subservient to their divinely appointed leadership. If a diplomat is faced with the opportunity to negotiate, they would do well to consider the history of China and the Mandate of Heaven. Recent foreign affairs including Tiananmen Square and the debate over Taiwan's sovereignty likewise reflect the importance of understanding the Chinese perspective in conducting Sino-American relations.

Throughout the course of history, the ancient Chinese notion of the Mandate of Heaven has played a fundamental role in guiding China's foreign relations. The role of China and the Chinese emperor, or leader, is emphasized by Puranen, who reports that China's worldview was based upon the concept of "tianxia, roughly translated, means "all under heaven".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Puranen accounts that tianxia, "points to an ancient Chinese conception of the world in which everything – literally all under heaven – was considered to be under the authority of the Chinese Emperor, the Son of Heaven."<sup>2</sup> Due to China's perception of itself and its leaders, it is therefore crucial to understand the significance of the Mandate of Heaven.

Former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger succinctly explains both the role of Chinese leadership embodied historically in an emperor and the concept of the Mandate of Heaven. According to Kissinger, the emperor "combined the spiritual as well as the secular claims of the social order"<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, Kissinger finds that from a political perspective, "the Emperor was conceived as mankind's supreme sovereign".<sup>4</sup> Kissinger also notes that, from a spiritual viewpoint, the emperor's "role was his status as the "Son of Heaven", the symbolic intermediary between Heaven, Earth, and humanity"<sup>5</sup>. In ancient China, having an

---

<sup>1</sup> Matti Puranen, (2019). "All under heaven as one family" Tianxiaist ideology and the emerging Chinese great power identity. *Journal of China and International Relations*, 7(1), 1-19, p. 3.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5278/jcir.v7i1.3450>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* Penguin Books, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

emperor who adhered to ethical standards was imperative. If the Emperor failed to adhere to moral principles, “the existing dynasty would seem to have lost the “Mandate of Heaven” by which it possessed the right to govern”.<sup>6</sup> China experienced a series of dynasties which rose and fell, and according to Chinese tradition, the fallen dynasties no longer possessed the Mandate of Heaven.<sup>7</sup> Due to the deification of the Chinese leader by the Chinese citizenry, strict guidelines for approaching the emperor were implemented. “Chinese protocol insisted on recognizing his overlordship via the kowtow- the act of complete prostration, with the forehead touching the ground three times”.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is instructive to evaluate how China has perceived itself from both a historical and modern perspective.

To better understand foreign relations with China, it is instructive to explore and recognize how China views itself historically. Through an improved understanding of China’s self-perception and history, observers can apply these lessons to future foreign relations. Kissinger describes Chinese perception of itself in this way. “Chinese elites grew accustomed to the notion that China was unique-not just a great civilization among others, but civilization itself”.<sup>9</sup> In their relations with China, the United States and other nations have experienced a tumultuous relationship. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, China chose to remain relatively isolated from

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* Penguin Books, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

the rest of the globe.<sup>10</sup> According to Kissinger, the “Chinese believed that the most valuable possessions and intellectual achievements were to be found within China”.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the Chinese people viewed foreigners as “barbarians” or “foreign devils”.<sup>12</sup> As further identified by Puranen (2019), “instead of converting them, China believed in a patient “transformation” of the barbarians. This meant that, given time, the barbarians would witness the cultural supremacy of the center, and would slowly adopt its civilized ways”.<sup>13</sup> During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British relied on China for their tea supply. However, China did not import British goods, contributing towards a trade deficit for Great Britain.<sup>14</sup> Due to the immense wealth accumulated by China, Bradley identifies that the Chinese “people thought it natural that outsiders would come to China to learn from their superior culture”.<sup>15</sup> While outsiders were occasionally welcomed, a series of formalities were required for foreigners to adhere to, which included kowtowing, or “kneeling in front of the Son of Heaven... and touching their foreheads to the floor”.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, “barbarian merchants could access China’s market only by making clear they knew their place in

---

<sup>10</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* Penguin Books, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Puranen, M. (2019). “All under heaven as one family” Tianxiaist ideology and the emerging Chinese great power identity. *Journal of China and International Relations*, 7(1), 1-19, p. 11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5278/jcir.v7i1.3450>

<sup>14</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015, p. 15.

the pecking order and following the tribute system”.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, China “had no foreign affairs office because it shunned official relationships with barbarian countries. Instead, the emperor managed trading relations with foreign devils through his Barbarian Management Bureau”.<sup>18</sup> Puranen further asserts that, “China’s foreign relations were arranged hierarchically around a “tributary system” in which the smaller political entities acknowledged China’s supremacy (at least rhetorically) and received autonomy and economic benefits in return”.<sup>19</sup> Despite these formalities and China’s perception of outsiders, American and British traders continued to enter China, often using illegal methods to sell opium. Warren Delano, the maternal grandfather of Franklin D. Roosevelt, “made a dynastic fortune in the illegal opium trade” in China.<sup>20</sup> Throughout its history, China’s self-perception as the center of the universe created obstacles for foreign relations and trade which are instructive for future foreign policymakers to consider.

It is also beneficial to view recent events in American foreign relations with China through the lens of Chinese self-perception, examining the impact of the Mandate of Heaven on American relations with China. One of the foremost events in recent Sino-American relations was the Tiananmen Square protests and the Chinese response in 1989. A group of student protestors held a memorial for a Chinese official who was viewed as more open to liberalization,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Matti Puranen, “All under heaven as one family” Tianxiaist ideology and the emerging Chinese great power identity,” *Journal of China and International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-19.

<sup>20</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015, p. 5.



at Tiananmen Square. The memorial turned into a protest, with calls for change and democracy. After several weeks of protests, the Chinese government responded by sending armed forces.<sup>21</sup> Kirkpatrick argued that the United States should have responded differently to the events of Tiananmen Square.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, members of Congress with diverse political views such as Democratic Representative Nancy Pelosi and Republican Senator Jesse Helms favored a stronger approach.<sup>23</sup> In describing the response to Tiananmen Square, President George H.W. Bush stated that “the Chinese are extremely sensitive to anything that may be interpreted as interference in their internal affairs, the legacy of many decades of damaging intrusion”.<sup>24</sup> Bush further recognized that the Chinese viewed foreigners as “barbarians”.<sup>25</sup> According to Bush, “foreign criticism (from peoples they still perceived as barbarians and colonialists untutored in Chinese ways) was an affront”.<sup>26</sup> President George H.W. Bush recognized that considering China’s history and culture was fundamental in improving relations with the People’s Republic of China. Bush was familiar with China from his service as chief of the United States Liaison Office under President Gerald Ford. Bush requested the appointment by President Ford, because Bush saw China in 1974 as “the big new challenge.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Former Secretary of State James A.

---

<sup>21</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State: And Other Surprises* AEI Press., 1990.

<sup>23</sup> James A Baker and Thomas M DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy* G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

Baker III found that “the Tiananmen massacre was without question the greatest blow to normalization since Richard Nixon’s historic 1972 overture began the process”.<sup>28</sup> The Tiananmen Square protests provide evidence of the persistence of the Mandate of Heaven in Chinese society. “During the modern era China has seen a number of rebellions and revolutions when leadership of the country was perceived as illegitimate and questioned by the people”.<sup>29</sup> As this trend continues, Rarick and Firlej assert that the Mandate of Heaven may impact China’s future. “If the significant problems facing China cannot be resolved and the welfare of its entire people cannot be maintained, the Mandate of Heaven may once again be invoked.”<sup>30</sup> For the protestors, unless reforms were implemented, their officials did not have the authority to rule. The events at Tiananmen Square highlight China’s self-perception and serves as one example of the impact of the Mandate of Heaven on contemporary Sino-American relations.

A second foreign policy challenge faced by the United States in relating to China in which the Mandate of Heaven can clarify the Chinese position, is with respect to China’s stance on Taiwan. In 1949, faced with the challenge of Mao Zedong’s revolution and the Mandate of Heaven apparently turning against Chiang Kai-Shek, Chiang fled to the island of Taiwan.<sup>31</sup> Mao Zedong took control of mainland China, and his takeover indicated that the Mandate of Heaven was

---

<sup>28</sup> James A Baker and Thomas M DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy* G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Rarick and Kasia Firlej, “Leadership and the Mandate of Heaven: Political risk in China.” *Journal of Economics and Political Economy* 3, no. 2 (2016): 183.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> James Bradley, *The China Mirage* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015.

bestowed upon Chairman Mao. However, the United States officially recognized Taiwan as the “Republic of China.”<sup>32</sup> During the Eisenhower administration, the United States promised to support Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> “Incapable of taking control of Taiwan by military means, by 1971, the Chinese were eager to see what could be done through negotiations.”<sup>34</sup> In 1972, President Richard Nixon visited the People’s Republic of China, where he met with Chairman Mao Zedong. “At the time of Nixon’s February 1972 visit, the United States still recognized Taiwan as the legitimate government of China; we were, in effect, paying a visit to a capital we did not recognize.”<sup>35</sup> During the meeting, Mao indicated that “Taiwan would not be permitted to stand in the way of Sino-American rapprochement.”<sup>36</sup> Later, President Ronald Reagan noted that the difficulties between China and Taiwan “was a problem to be worked out by the Chinese, but that the United States wanted it worked out peacefully.”<sup>37</sup> Prior to serving as President, George H.W. Bush was the Ambassador to the United Nations under the Nixon administration. During that time, America had not established diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China. During the 1971 UN assembly, questions emerged regarding whether the Chinese Communist Party or the nation of Taiwan should gain a seat.<sup>38</sup> “The Nixon administration supported “dual

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 338.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician* Simon & Schuster, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 370.

<sup>38</sup> George W. Bush, *41: A Portrait of My Father* Random House, 2014.

representation” meaning that both mainland China and Taiwan would have seats.”<sup>39</sup> In recounting his father’s time serving as UN Ambassador, George W. Bush noted that his father “reached out to almost a hundred UN delegates, explaining his concerns about emboldening the Communists and urging them not to turn their backs on Taiwan.”<sup>40</sup> However, the Nixon administration took another course of action, and began to establish diplomatic ties with the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in recounting the events of his presidency, Bill Clinton notes that, “China roiled the waters of the Taiwan Strait by “test”-firing three missiles close to Taiwan in an apparent attempt to discourage the Taiwanese politicians from pushing for independence.”<sup>42</sup> Kirkpatrick feared that China would attempt to take over control of Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> President George W. Bush made clear to Chinese officials that he “opposed any unilateral change to the status quo, including a declaration of independence by Taiwan or military action by China.”<sup>44</sup> During the George W. Bush administration, Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted that while Russia posed a threat to the United States, “the rise of the People’s Republic of China and its implications for American strategy in Asia was perhaps an even

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life* Hutchinson, 2004, p. 703.

<sup>43</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Clinton’s Wobbly Foreign Policy Only Encourages Red China.” *Human Events (Washington)* 52, no. 12 (1996): 10.

<sup>44</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* Random House, 2010, p. 427.

greater and more delicate issue.”<sup>45</sup> “Unlike many Western policy makers, the Chinese made a practice of thinking several moves ahead while they looked to take advantage of current events.”<sup>46</sup> Rumsfeld noted the increasing power of China, and the potential concerns this posed for the United States and its allies, including Taiwan.<sup>47</sup> Rumsfeld also recounted that instead of following the trajectory of the Clinton administration, the Bush administration advocated a foreign policy strategy which cooperated with China where possible without wavering American principles.<sup>48</sup> “President Bush felt that we had an opportunity to work with China’s leaders to try to shape their country’s future by demonstrating firmness, candor, and cooperation.”<sup>49</sup> According to President George W. Bush, “my policy was to engage the Chinese in areas where we agreed and use this cooperation to build the trust and credibility we needed to speak plainly about our differences.”<sup>50</sup> China’s attempt to claim Taiwan as its territory provides further evidence of the impact of China’s self-perception and the Mandate of Heaven on Sino-American relations.

Robert Pape finds that while the United States’ power and influence is declining, China’s global influence is increasing.<sup>51</sup> Snyder reports that China is “developing its military slowly but

---

<sup>45</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* Penguin Books, 2012, p. 310.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>50</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* Random House, 2010., p. 426.

<sup>51</sup> Robert A. Pape, “Empire Falls.” *The National Interest* 99, no. 99 (2009): 21-34.

surely as its economic power grows and avoiding a confrontation with superior U.S. forces.”<sup>52</sup>

Kennedy views the actions of Chinese leadership as a threat to the United States.<sup>53</sup> In the area of cyberspace, China’s capability and influence is advancing.<sup>54</sup> The relationship between the United States and China serves as a historical backdrop for current difficulties in the region.

Understanding China’s perception of itself from a historical and modern perspective impacts American foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Taking account of China’s history and self-perception allows the United States to understand China’s perspective. If two nations do not understand each other, there may be misunderstandings and detrimental consequences.<sup>55</sup>

Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush and some key advisors concluded that continuing diplomatic relations with China and its economic liberalization would result in more freedom for Chinese citizens. Despite this reasonable conclusion, China’s continued communist rule and global influence has expanded. If a nation has a culture in which its citizens subscribe to the notion that outsiders are barbarians who should be kowtowing before the Chinese leaders, this will impact foreign relations. By claiming the Mandate of Heaven, China subscribes to the viewpoint that their leaders have a divine right to rule and that other nations should be subservient to their divinely appointed leadership. If a diplomat is faced with the

---

<sup>52</sup> Jack Snyder, “One World, Rival Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 145 (2004): 52. doi:10.2307/4152944.

<sup>53</sup> Brian T Kennedy, “Facing up to the China Threat,” *Imprimis*, 2020, <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/facing-china-threat>

<sup>54</sup> Ronald J. Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, “Risking Security: Policies and Paradoxes of Cyberspace Security,” *International Political Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2010): pp. 15-32, doi:10.1111/j.1749-5687.2009.00088.x.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): pp. 454-479, doi:10.2307/2009777.

opportunity to negotiate, they would do well to consider the history of China and the Mandate of Heaven. Recent foreign affairs including Tiananmen Square and the debate over Taiwan's sovereignty likewise reflect the importance of understanding the Chinese perspective.

## References

Ambrose, Stephen. *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician*. Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Baker, James A, and Thomas M DeFrank. *The Politics of Diplomacy*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.

Bradley, James. *The China Mirage*. New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2015.

Bush, George W. *41: A Portrait of My Father*. Random House, 2014.

Bush, George W. *Decision Points*. Random House, 2010.

Bush, George, and Brent Scowcroft. *A World Transformed*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

Clinton, Bill. *My Life*. Hutchinson, 2004.

Deibert, Ronald, J., & Rafal Rohozinski. "Risking security: Policies and paradoxes of cyberspace security." *International Political Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2010): 15-32, doi:10.1111/j.1749-5687.2009.00088.x.

Jervis, Robert. "Hypotheses on Misperception." *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): 454–79. doi:10.2307/2009777.

Kennedy, Brian T. "Facing up to the China Threat." Imprimis. 2020.

<https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/facing-china-threat/>

Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State: And Other Surprises*. AEI Press., 1990.



Kirkpatrick, Jeane. "Clinton's Wobbly Foreign Policy Only Encourages Red China." *Human Events (Washington)* 52, no. 12 (1996): 10.

Kissinger, Henry. *Years of Renewal*. Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Kissinger, Henry. *On China*. Penguin Books, 2011.

Pape, Robert A. "Empire Falls." *The National Interest* 99, no. 99 (2009): 21-34.

Puranen, Matti. "All under heaven as one family" Tianxiaist ideology and the emerging Chinese great power identity." *Journal of China and International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-19.

Rarick, Charles, & Firlej, Kasia. "Leadership and the Mandate of Heaven: Political risk in China." *Journal of Economics and Political Economy* 3, no. 2 (2016): 183.

Reagan, Ronald. *An American Life*. Simon & Schuster, 1990.

Rumsfeld, Donald. *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*. Penguin Books, 2012.

Snyder, Jack. "One World, Rival Theories." *Foreign Policy*, no. 145 (2004): 52.  
doi:10.2307/4152944.