

Understand Xi Jinping's Renaissance, Put it in Historical Context by Hoang Anh Tuan

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The First Session of China's Twelfth National Congress on March 6-17 concluded with official approval of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang for the president and premier posts, ending a once-in-a decade change of the country's top jobs and commencing a new era for China. The outside world and the majority of Chinese are as uncertain as Xi and his Politburo colleagues as to what the new era will bring.

Xi's 25-minute-long speech to about 3,000 members of the Congress on March 17 neither shed any light on his thinking about the future nor clarified his views of the nature and characteristics of the "Pax Sinica," though 8 of 17 paragraphs in his speech mentioned the "China Dream of Renaissance" – a reference to the glorious times of past dynasties such as the Han (206 BC-220 AD), Tang (618-907) or Qing (1644-1912), during which China prospered economically and succeeded in unifying and incorporating vast areas into its territories. Thanks to these developments, China took the name of the Middle Kingdom, considered itself the center of the universe, and established a wide network of tributary relationships with its neighbors, a system that ceased to exist with the demise of the Qing.

The "Dream of the Renaissance" of a powerful China has preoccupied China's leaders since 1949. During the 1950s, Mao Zedong, resorting to utopian and illogical measures, unveiled the Great Leap Forward campaign with an aim of transforming China from an agrarian economy into a modern society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. In the end, the campaign was disastrous economically and socially, resulted in the Great Famine, turned into the Great Leap Backward, and brought China to the brink of social collapse.

Deng Xiaoping started reforms in 1978 with four ambitious modernizations with less focus on ideology and greater importance to pragmatism, captured in his famous axiom: "it doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black as long as it catches mice." Deng's economic reforms transformed China from a backward and isolated society into a global power, creating every favorable condition for Xi to invoke a Great Renaissance of the Chinese nation.

Xi Jinping, too, has indulged this penchant for grand dreams. Unlike Mao's utopian dream, however, Xi's vision of

China is more realistic and couched in a more reasoned sense of China's historic past and its presumed destiny for at least four reasons.

First, after surpassing Japan to become the second largest economy in 2010, China continues to maintain strong economic growth. If China is able to maintain the growth rate of the past 20 years, China will become the world's largest economy by 2030. The emphasis on the Dream of Renaissance on Xi's watch, seen in this context, is aimed at reminding the Chinese nation of the glorious past and asking for more sacrifice from the people to realize this great ambition.

Second, Xi's vision, insofar as we can tell from his public comments, reflects a sense that being a big economy by no means assures China of long-lasting global power and status. Moreover, as illustrated by China's model of economic growth in the past decades, Xi seems to sense that putting emphasis on economic growth alone, while neglecting sustainability-related issues such as quality of development, corruption, gap in income and development, pollution, etc, has resulted in social tension as the economy expands. That is why China's double-digit growth rate in the past decade is admired throughout the world, but many Chinese consider this period a "lost decade."

Xi has not pushed aside basic economic realities. Currently, the Chinese economy accounts for 9 percent of global GDP output, and by the time China surpasses the US as the world's No. 1 economy, its GDP may account for 20 percent of world GDP – but national leaders such as Xi seem to have grasped that this is still small when compared to the 58 percent of global GDP China accounted for during the peak of its power under the Tang Dynasty. China maintained its economic dominance until 1830 when its GDP accounted for "only" 30 percent of the world's total. However, it did not protect China from being attacked and torn apart by smaller powers of the West during the Century of Humiliation. That was due to the fact that China was a big state, but a weak nation that was not well armed and which failed to master advanced technology of the time.

Third, while details of China's Dream of Renaissance are being developed by China's top leaders, ordinary Chinese are crafting little dreams of their own. These include the desire to live in a prosperous and democratic society, free from pollution and corruption, and with access to the benefits of a Chinese economic renaissance in an equitable manner. The big question – how the state's and people's Dreams of Renaissance can be enforced harmoniously – remains unanswered. Xi comes to power as these "little dreams" are becoming more politically consequential for China's leadership.

Finally, the international community has every reason to welcome a peaceful and prosperous rising China. What

China's neighbors don't want to see is this Dream of Renaissance used as a cudgel to make China the dominant force at the center of the international economic and political system of the 21st century, while leaving neighbors in a semi-dependent position reminiscent of the tributary system of the past. Xi's appreciation of the character of international relations in this century, and his sense of China's relations with the countries on its immediate periphery, seem to take into account the sensitivities of these links and the realities that are likely to confront China's efforts to managing complex relations during the new leadership's tenure.

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