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Xi Jinping is not making history – history is making him

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Tom Plate says China's current leader, whom many believe is at least as great as Mao and Deng were, must never forget that while his country's significance will last, his may not



To what does [Xi Jinping](#) truly aspire? Who does China's "paramount leader" think he is? Xi doesn't need fawning media coverage to mislead him into believing something he may or may not be. Whether China's president is crowned person of the year by a self-important US magazine (such as *Time*) is of no importance. Xi himself must understand that he is arguably unimportant. He should not require cover stories to bolster his self-image.

Xi is not making history; history is making him. There was no way China was going to remain down and out forever. It has always been a potential force majeure – stormy when stormy; calm, but usually superficially, with undercurrents below spiralling to emerge as history's next great wave.

For decades, perhaps our most astute geopolitical weather forecaster has been Kishore Mahbubani, who is stepping down this month as the founding dean of the highly regarded Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. His first book (essays and speeches) hit the [United States](#) in the 1990s and was titled (ironically enough), *Can Asians Think?* Its theme was that, with Asia coming into its own, if Westerners think the 21st century will prove a repeat of the American century, they had better think again.

Mahbubani sincerely doubts the US is psychologically prepared for that, but like it or not, China is back and we had better figure out how to deal with it or face hitting the great Chinese brick wall of history. Large as well as small nation states need to do that big rethink now. It may prove painful. Brainy [Singapore](#), ever thinking forward, is not alone in its anguish over how to proceed. (By the way,

Singapore friends: be not cranky. Heated public debate on vital issues is a sign of cultural strength, not weakness.) Other governments are into the deep think: Australia (with its panoply of think tanks and universities); Japan (missiles suddenly overhead); South Korea sometimes so small-town, suddenly on big-time red alert.



Singapore is not alone in its anguish over how to deal with a China on the rise. Large and small nation states needs to rethink their relations with the Asian giant, now back on the global stage.

Photo: Reuters

Xi has been pushing modern China outwards, perhaps in the hope of kingdoms to come. But he undoubtedly knows that his most serious worries nest at home.

The rich-poor gap is huge and growing (including in Hong Kong, of which Xi is now the ultimate landlord). This is an explosion waiting to happen. And the government's evident ideological clampdown on universities seems inimical to the need for innovation and further globalisation.

Note that China rarely misses the chance to blame foreigners and their interventions for past troubles, and with stubbornness avoids looking deeply inward for fear of understanding itself better. This is not healthy. As the late historian and critic Simon Leys (aka Pierre Ryckmans) suggested, the embrace of ideology blinds one to reality.



Women take selfies in front of a portrait of Mao Zedong at the Tiananmen gate in Beijing, on November 8. The late historian Pierre Ryckmans reminded us that China had done more harm to itself in the 25 years prior to 1984 "than had the combined forces of all foreign imperialists in one hundred years of endemic aggression".

Photo: Reuters

It was back in 1984 that he first reminded us that China had done more harm to itself over the prior 25 years "than had the combined forces of all foreign imperialists in one hundred years of endemic aggression". (In all fairness, America was also similarly guilty of amazing memory lapses, such as the ethnic cleansing of Indian natives; but, then again, we have Indian casinos to remind us that something must have happened.)

Confucius is denoted as a key thread in China's DNA tapestry. Yet, one of civilisation's greatest philosophers was wont to worry about the dangers of leaders who talk too much and take themselves too seriously. Alas, at the 19th Communist Party congress in October, Xi did not mention this particular Confucian insight in a [speech that required more than three hours to hear in full](#). On ideology, Xi is hard to figure, but as the proclaimed third man in the "trilogy" alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, it is everyone's hope that his nature proves more Deng-ish than Mao-ish.

What must be kept in mind is that China today stands on the cusp of universal relevance not only economically – but environmentally and geopolitically as well. In fact, placed side by side against our US president, this man of many titles (general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, president of the People's Republic of China, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and so on) presents a political profile far more global than yokel. (One could further say that Xi is actually less nationalistic than Donald Trump.)



US President Donald Trump on the south lawn of the White House on December 2. America has survived mediocre presidents more than once. Photo: Bloomberg

Is the US definitively washed up as a great nation simply because its current leader is obviously not a great one? If in fact we are in decline, surely this is a complex phenomenon and is not due to only one factor or actor. America has survived mediocre presidents more than once. And so with China: the fiercest US anti-Communist will admit that China is special no matter what.

Must it require a "Deng-plus" to remain on course? If China is ruled by the Communist Party because it is axiomatically the people's authentic voice, heart and soul, then why is one man (note the paucity of top women leaders in China) so utterly essential? Is

another "Great Helmsman" so necessary if the Chinese people are not to sink anew?

The Tang poet Li He wrote: "The poet's brush completes the universal creation: it is not Heaven's achievement." Before Xi's next five years are complete, let us hope that he can find a secure and respected place under China's heaven for all its poets and painters. They are the ones that are truly eternal, as is China. As for its current president, he is only of this moment, just like the rest of us. Keeping that in mind can keep us humble.

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