

Beyond the "Century of Humiliation"

A book review of "China Resurrected: A Modern Geopolitical History" by Frans-Paul van der Putten.

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01 October 2025

Few countries have undergone a transformation as sweeping as China. From the "humiliations" of the Opium Wars to today's rivalry with the United States, China's modern story stretches across defeat, revolution, reform, and resurgence. In *China Resurrected: A Modern Geopolitical History*, Frans-Paul van der Putten traces the civilization-state's arc, covering nearly two centuries of change.

The book shows how successive generations of Chinese leaders confronted weaknesses at home and pressure from abroad, and evolved their strategies to piece the country back together until it emerged as a major power. At the same time, the book's narration can read a bit too neat, as though history were always moving toward China's inevitable 'resurrection', rather than witnessing messy, uncertain twists and turns.

Van der Putten's central idea is clear: modern Chinese history makes the most sense when viewed as a long, unfinished effort to reclaim sovereignty and respect after what became known as the "Century of Humiliation." He begins with the First Opium War of 1840–42, when Britain's gunboats quickly exposed the Qing dynasty's military and technological backwardness. As he puts it, "*The most fundamental problem was that the Chinese self-image did not match reality. The Qing Empire viewed itself as the centre of the world and its emperor as universal ruler.*" The resulting 'unequal treaties' not only chipped away at China's territory and economy, but also at its confidence and legitimacy.

From there, the book weaves the story from the fall of the Qing, the republican era, Japanese invasion, Communist revolution, Cold War isolation, and market reforms, to today's great-power rivalry with Washington—all seeming to be tied with the same thread of "national revival." And yet here, the book leaves a major analytical question unexplored: what exactly does "sovereignty" mean? In the nineteenth century, it meant ending foreign privileges like extraterritoriality and recovering tariff autonomy. By the mid-twentieth century, it meant strategic independence amid Cold War bipolarity. Today, it extends to technological self-sufficiency in semiconductors, AI, and green energy, as well as military dominance.

The book treats these disparate issues as part of the same story, but never pauses to ask whether "sovereignty" in the age of globalisation and digital interdependence can be equated with sovereignty

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(or ‘suzerainty’) lost to imperial powers a century ago. By flattening these conceptual differences, Van der Putten makes China’s modern history look more linear than it really was.

One of the book’s strengths is its display of continuity across what may otherwise seem like ideologically incompatible regimes. Sun Yat-sen’s republicanism, Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalism, Mao’s communism, and Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatism might appear to have little in common, yet all were aimed at the same thing: a strong, unified, and independent China. By defying both superpowers – fighting the United States in Korea, then breaking ties with the Soviet Union in the 1960s – while pursuing nuclear weapons development despite isolation, Mao ensured that China entered the 1970s as an independent actor rather than a client state. It was this autonomy, however brutally achieved, that allowed Deng Xiaoping to open the door to foreign trade and investment on China’s terms rather than under external coercion.

As Van der Putten writes, “*The resurrection of China as a powerful state was a matter of necessity: it was all or nothing for Chinese civilisation.*” Yet here lies an irony the book could have examined: “necessity” implies inevitability, but an “all or nothing” struggle carries the real possibility of failure. That unresolved tension between historical determinism and genuine contingency shadows the entire narrative.

The early chapters are especially effective in showing how defeat after defeat forced Chinese leaders to rethink their assumptions. The Qing court, for example, treated Britain as ‘a rebellious little country on the far periphery of the Chinese world order,’ refusing to see the industrial and expansionist power it actually faced. Later, the 1895 loss to Japan ‘destroyed China’s reputation as the region’s leading power,’ leading reformers like Liang Qichao to realise that piecemeal reforms — modernizing the military here, tweaking the bureaucracy there — were not enough. By presenting these moments together, Van der Putten gives readers a clear sense of why securing “sovereignty” became the obsession driving China’s modern history.

But framing all this as part of a single “resurrection” narrative sometimes smooths over the false starts and missed opportunities that make history unpredictable. The warlord era of the 1910s and 1920s comes across mainly as chaos – waiting for Chiang Kai-shek to impose order upon it – when, in reality, some regional regimes were pushing their own modernization agendas. Similarly, Van der Putten shows how the Communist Party portrayed its 1949 victory, which was the outcome of complex ideological struggles or international influences and more, as just another step toward national revival. In tracing how the CPC’s own story of 1949 fits neatly into the broader arc of overcoming humiliation, the book sometimes echoes the state’s teleological narrative of history as a straight line toward greatness, rather than a contested process with no guaranteed outcome.

The treatment of foreign powers also invites criticism. Van der Putten recounts how China clawed back elements of sovereignty bit by bit – restoring tariff autonomy in 1931, joining the League of Nations, ending British and American extraterritorial rights in 1943, and finally gaining recognition as one of the “Big Four” Allied powers during World War II. Yet these episodes are told mostly from Beijing’s perspective.

When Nixon visited Mao in 1972 and “*the geopolitical situation was now considerably less threatening*,” we hear little about U.S. domestic politics, Soviet’s dilemmas, or broader Cold War dynamics shaping these choices. Britain’s role in the First Opium War appears largely as the trigger for China’s ‘Century of Humiliation’, with minimal attention to the East India Company’s lobbying, parliamentary free-trade debates, or the opium economy itself—all of which made British policy far more complex than the book concedes. By neglecting the motives and constraints of other powers, Van der Putten sometimes flattens the international context into a backdrop for China’s story rather than a stage of intersecting interests.

The final chapters, covering the years since 2008, do a good job explaining how the global financial crisis, Xi Jinping’s rise, the US ‘Pivot to Asia’, trade wars, and tech sanctions fuelled what Van der Putten calls “*intense geopolitical rivalry with the United States*.” The account of China’s military buildup, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Taiwan issue as a sustaining flashpoint, comprehensively brings the story right up to the present day. Yet, here again, tying everything back to the Opium Wars risks making today’s tensions look like the inevitable climax of a 180-year saga rather than the product of specific, modern-day politics and choices, whose outcomes remain very much contested and uncertain.

Still, there’s a lot the book does well. Its clear structure and straightforward prose make nearly two centuries of complicated history easy to follow, without dumbing it down. For readers new to the topic – or policymakers seeking historical background – it connects the dots between nineteenth-century defeats and twenty-first-century nationalism in a way that helps explain why Chinese leaders constantly invoke the ‘Century of Humiliation’ today.

The focus on continuity across imperial, republican, and communist regimes also opens doors for future research: How did different governments use similar nationalist themes? What role did diplomats, reformers, or educators – not just soldiers and politicians – play in shaping China’s modern identity?

Academic specialists may wish for deeper engagement with historiography or international contexts, but that is not really the book’s goal. *China Resurrected* seeks to provide a big-picture narrative rather than a tightly-argued reinterpretation, and on that front it largely succeeds. By leaning so heavily on the idea of inevitable resurrection, however, it sometimes underplays the contingencies, failures, and contradictions that make China’s modern story more than a straight march to greatness.

In the end, Van der Putten gives readers a clear, thought-provoking account of how a once-weak empire became a global power. The book informs and provokes, even as it leaves major questions open. For anyone looking for a broad, readable history of China’s modern transformation, *China Resurrected* is a solid place to start.

China Resurrected: A Modern Geopolitical History, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 240 pp, \$29.95, ISBN 9781350536616.