

INSIGHT January 4, 2010, 11:51AM EST

In China, Pride Is the Driver

Today, pride in China's history is the "driving force" inspiring the Chinese people to develop their nation's industries and economy

By [Robert Lawrence Kuhn](#)

Although the goal of nearly every country is economic development, China has an extra impetus to achieve that goes beyond material benefits: Chinese people want to show the world that they are in every way a modern nation and in every sense a great power. If this requires material wealth, technological prowess, military strength, a world-class aerospace program, then these are what they must and will achieve. For example, in every industry of importance, China's leaders expect its corporations to become among the world's largest and most successful. Chinese people are not reticent to boast that the stock market capitalizations of their corporations in energy, telecommunications, and banking are among the largest in the world.

The roots of this pride go deep, to the visceral feelings of a people whose civilization led the world for centuries only to be humiliated and oppressed by foreign invaders and then stymied and scourged by domestic tyrants. Pride in China's history "is the historical driving force inspiring people today to build the nation," says Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping, who is odds-on favorite to become China's next president. "Our commitment and determination is rooted in our historic and national pride," he adds. "China's development, at least in part, is driven by patriotism and pride."

Politburo member Li Yuanchao, a rising star in Chinese politics, emphasizes China's national spirit. "Although the Chinese people are not as wealthy as Westerners, and China lags behind developed countries in many areas such as technology, social systems, and environmental protection," Li says, "the Chinese people as a whole are very positive about their country's development and have confidence in their future. We have a sense of adventure and pride and we are ambitious to build our society."

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

My first lesson in how deep such pride runs came in 1992. After the tragic events of June 4, 1989, I had determined not to return to China. About 15 months later, however, appeals for support from reform-minded friends led me to change my mind, and I traveled to Beijing, where I came to know a quick-witted professor with a penchant for criticizing authority. I couldn't recall his ever having said anything nice about China's political system—and so, one fine day on a remote hilltop outside the city, I felt secure in applauding the American action in favoring Sydney over Beijing as host city for the 2000 Olympics. This, I said, was how the U.S. government intended to punish the Chinese government for its armed response in Tiananmen Square.

He and I were alone, and I was fully expecting his hearty support of America's blackball. His response left me speechless. "You stupid Americans," he scolded me sharply. "You insult China and you offend me!" He continued, unsmiling, glaring at me as though I myself had cast the blackballing vote. "How stupid of your country and how insulting to mine!"

It was a verbal stinging I shall not forget, and a searing tutorial of what really counts in China. Don't allow the internal disputes to cloud your vision. Don't assume that derogations of the government, or of communist ideology, indicate a diminished patriotism. The pride of the Chinese people—pride in their country, heritage, history; pride in their economic power, personal freedoms, and international importance; and, yes, pride in their growing military strength—is a fundamental characteristic that one encounters over and over and over again. As I see it, pride is the primary guiding

principle that energizes a great deal of what is happening in China today.

RECENT HISTORY

Chinese pride invites itself into diverse policy debates. Consider China's space program (especially the Shenzhou manned spacecraft and lunar missions), an apparent luxury in a country still grappling with widespread poverty but enthusiastically supported by an overwhelming majority of the people. Why? Pride. President Hu Jintao attends ceremonies for each of China's manned space flights.

This quest for pride is woven into the fabric of much of China's modern history. In the West, for example, the Korean War is remembered as a wretched, miserable conflict, which epitomized the bleak years of the Cold War. For many in China, however, the same conflict is viewed as a crucible of national resuscitation and revival. After three years of hurling wave after wave of human sacrifices, China managed to end the war in a stalemate. It was an exceptional achievement. The U.S., the greatest military power in the world, which less than 10 years earlier had vanquished Germany and Japan, was battled to a draw. Grit and determination, in the Chinese view, thwarted superior military technology.

That "victory" came at a tremendous cost: As many as 1 million Chinese died, including Mao Zedong's own son. However, for many Chinese citizens, the war was all about national sovereignty and national pride. The agreement ending the Korean War was the first in more than a century that was not "unequal." Though Sino-American relations had hit an all-time low, China had stood up.

Such pride was in evidence again 45 years later, as China celebrated the end of British rule in Hong Kong, and the colony's return to Chinese sovereignty. As the Chinese flag reached the top of the flagpole eight seconds after midnight on July 1, 1997, celebrations broke out across China as crowds screamed, jumped, and danced, waving Chinese and Hong Kong flags. Colonial humiliation of 155 years had come to an end.

TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

In 2006, Hong Kong's stock market surpassed New York's as the world's second most active board (after London) in floating initial public offerings. The largest new stock listings were companies from China. If the stock exchange in Hong Kong, with its legions of investment bankers in elegant tailored suits, seems from a different planet than the killing fields of Korea, with its legions of exhausted soldiers wearing filthy military fatigues, they draw together under the rubric of Chinese pride.

In 1964, the mushroom cloud rising into the desert sky in northwest China startled the world, revealing the rapid progress of China's nuclear technology and affirming the country's determination to safeguard its sovereignty and independence. China's pride in its nuclear achievements, like the pride in its aerospace enterprises, made American accusations of Chinese nuclear spying, particularly in 1999, all the more galling. The underlying affront was not so much the spying charge itself but the implication that China was incapable of developing advanced technology on its own. To the Chinese, an independent nuclear and aerospace capability makes the unambiguous assertion that China will never again be humiliated by foreigners, that China will control its own destiny, and that if there is to be peace in the world, an independent China must help guarantee it.

China did of course eventually win the right to stage the Olympics. The 2008 Beijing Olympics opened in spectacular fashion; with dramatic displays of breathtaking pyrotechnics and elaborate traditional performances, China showcased for the world its vision and its artistry, rooted in its 5,000-year civilization and symbolizing its contemporary reemergence. The opening ceremony was commanded by acclaimed film director Zhang Yimou, who on Oct. 1 last year directed China's 60th anniversary extravaganza of song, dance, and fireworks. Critics accused Zhang, once a renegade artist, of selling out by supporting the Chinese government. Others said it was not Zhang who had changed, but China itself, with reform and opening up to the outside world having transformed the country. To Zhang and most other Chinese, the Olympics and the 60th anniversary celebrations were all about patriotism and pride—pride in Chinese civilization and artistry, pride in the Chinese people, pride in China.

Dr. Kuhn, an international investment banker and senior adviser at Citigroup, is a longtime adviser to the Chinese government. He is the co-editor-in-chief of China's Banking and Financial Markets: The Internal Research Report of the Chinese Government and the author of The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin, China's best-selling book in 2005.