Reintegrating China into the Global Community: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

China maintains the most enduring and uninterrupted cultural tradition and civilizational system among major ancient civilizations (Fairbank, 2011). As a unified multi-ethnic nation since ancient times, its vast territory has been jointly developed by all ethnicities, its history collectively authored, its culture co-created, and its national spirit mutually cultivated (Shambaugh, 2013). This shared heritage has forged an inseparable community of the Chinese Nation, bound by commonalities that serve as a crucial catalyst for fostering communal consciousness among its members. Conducting rigorous research into Chinese history, particularly regarding the formative processes of the Chinese Nation, requires adherence to the correct historical perspective (Fairbank, 2011). However, under the influence of Western cultural hegemony, exogenous historiographies and theories such as the "New Qing History"—presented under the guise of theoretical or discursive innovation—systematically deconstruct China's historical narratives and its national discourse (Wang, 2025). These perspectives often attack or undermine a correct understanding of Chinese history, creating challenges to comprehending ethnic relations and the construction of the Chinese national community. Through critical analysis of the "New Qing History" and similar paradigms, the historical and logical flaws of these approaches are revealed, emphasizing the importance of upholding an accurate perspective of the Chinese Nation (Shambaugh, 2013).This article also examines the historical process through which China reintegrated into the global community after a prolonged period of isolation and marginalization (Wang, 2025). Early reintegration efforts focused primarily on economic opening and institutional participation, allowing China to adapt to global systems while rebuilding its national strength. Contemporary engagement increasingly emphasizes governance reform and norm-shaping, reflecting a proactive role in global affairs. Initiatives such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) exemplify China's strategic approach to global integration, balancing international cooperation with national sovereignty and global responsibility (Fairbank, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013). Rooted in historical experience, pragmatic leadership, and strategic adaptation, China's pathway demonstrates a distinctive model of engagement in the international system.

Introduction

China has maintained the most enduring and uninterrupted cultural tradition and civilizational system among major ancient civilizations (Fairbank, 2011), and as a unified multi-ethnic nation since ancient times, its vast territory has been jointly developed by all ethnicities, its history collectively authored, its culture co-created, and its national spirit mutually cultivated

(Shambaugh, 2013). This shared heritage has forged an inseparable community of the Chinese Nation, bound by commonalities that serve as a crucial catalyst for fostering communal consciousness among its members (Hou, 2012). To conduct rigorous research into Chinese history, particularly regarding the formation of the Chinese Nation, adherence to the correct historical perspective is essential, as exogenous historiographies such as the "New Qing History" have sought to deconstruct historical narratives, distort facts, stir up ethnic tensions, and disrupt ethnic affairs, posing challenges to understanding historical ethnic relations and the construction of the Chinese national community (Wang, 2019). Leading scholars of the New Qing History School, including Evelyn S. Rawski, Pamela K. Crossley, and Mark C. Elliott, portray the Qing Dynasty as a colonial expansionist empire comparable to Britain and Russia, asserting that the Qing Empire was not Chinese but Central Asian, that "Chinese" referred exclusively to Han people, and that Manchus, Mongols, and Tibetans were excluded from Chinese identity; however, these arguments have been systematically refuted, demonstrating their lack of academic rigor and exposing their deceptive allure (Wang, 2019; Yin, 2019; Tian, 2019). The intellectual genealogy of the New Qing History reveals its roots in Japanese and Anglo- American scholarship, including Inner Asia-centric perspectives and the "conquest dynasties" theory, initially formulated by Karl Wittfogel and expanded by Japanese scholars such as Tamura Jitsuzo, Egami Namio, and Matsuda Hisao, and later adopted by Anglo-American historians including Morris Rossabi, Naomi Standen, and Denis Sinor, all of whom sought to separate northern ethnic-minority regimes from Han Chinese dynasties while framing Central Eurasia as an independent historical subject (Zhong, 2019). The modern Chinese concept of

"minzu" (民族), introduced from Japan by Liang Qichao and further shaped by Joseph Stalin's definition of nationhood, reflects a combination of historical legacy, state-led ethnic identification, and cultural unity across China's 56 ethnic groups, contrasting with Western postmodern "ethnic group" (zuqun) theories, multiculturalism, and nation-state discourses, which risk flattening the historical complexity of China's unified multi-ethnic state into reductive frameworks and can exacerbate ethnic tensions when applied uncritically (Pang, 1996; Xu, 2002; Zhu, 1996; Watson, 2005; Wang, 2010; Lei & Guo, 2022). Emerging multiculturalism theories, particularly those institutionalized in Canada, Europe, and the United States, while emphasizing cultural equality and anti-discrimination, have faced practical limitations, failing to reconcile diversity with national unity and sometimes being exploited to advance postmodern identity politics and market-driven inequalities (Wang, 2000; Ruan, 1989; Wang, 2010). Historically, China occupied a central position in Asia but remained largely disconnected from the modern global system dominated by Western powers, with nineteenth-century colonial pressures, internal decline, and foreign interventions weakening its traditional order and fostering mistrust toward foreign powers and international institutions (Fairbank, 2011; Vogel, 2011). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, revolutionary isolation further limited participation in global institutions and foreign relations (Johnston, 2008; Shambaugh, 2013). By the late twentieth century, domestic challenges and global realities, including economic stagnation and technological gaps, prompted a reconsideration of China's role in the world (Vogel, 2011). In the twenty-first century, China's reintegration into the global community has progressed from cautious adaptation to proactive engagement, emphasizing participation in international institutions, governance reform, and norm-shaping, exemplified by initiatives such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), reflecting China's growing confidence and strategic adaptation to balance international cooperation with national sovereignty and global responsibility (Wang Yi,

2025; Fairbank, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013).

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on China's reintegration highlight both internal and external factors. Western historians and international relations scholars argue that China's re-entry into global affairs was driven largely by economic necessity, globalization, and the constraints of an interconnected world (Ikenberry, 2011). Integration into global markets and international institutions was considered essential for China's development (Shambaugh, 2013).

Chinese scholars, by contrast, emphasize internal reforms, national revival, and historical learning as key drivers of reintegration (Fairbank, 2011). They note that China's engagement with the global community has been selective and strategic, shaped by historical experiences of colonial exploitation, foreign intervention, and Cold War exclusion (Vogel, 2011).

More recent scholarship adopts a balanced approach, suggesting that China's reintegration resulted from the interaction between domestic reforms and changing international conditions (Johnston, 2008). These studies increasingly examine China not only as a participant in global governance but also as a contributor of ideas and initiatives. In particular, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) has generated debate regarding China's evolving role as a norm-shaper within the international system (Wang Yi, 2025).

Additional analyses expand on both historical and contemporary factors influencing China's global integration. Fairbank (2011) emphasizes that China's historical memory of sovereignty, colonial encroachment, and regional hegemony has guided cautious engagement with international institutions. Shambaugh (2013) argues that China's strategy is one of **selective adaptation**, prioritizing national interest while adopting international norms that support domestic objectives. Ikenberry (2011) highlights the structural constraints of globalization and the economic imperatives compelling China to participate in multilateral institutions, while Johnston (2008) demonstrates that domestic reform trajectories, technological development, and state capacity were equally decisive in enabling China to engage globally.

Vogel (2011) underscores the historical distrust of foreign influence that shaped China's conditional integration, while Wang Yi (2025) provides a contemporary perspective, showing China's active participation in norm-setting, global governance reform, and international cooperation. Recent studies also explore **sector-specific integration**, including participation in global trade regimes, climate agreements, technology governance, and infrastructure initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, suggesting that China's approach combines **pragmatism with proactive leadership**. Comparative scholarship situates China's reintegration within a global context, contrasting China's selective and strategic engagement with Western liberal models, postcolonial states, and emerging powers, highlighting a unique pathway that balances domestic priorities with international responsibilities (Shambaugh, 2013; Fairbank, 2011; Vogel, 2011). Overall, the literature suggests that China's reintegration is neither purely externally imposed nor solely domestically driven, but rather the product of a **complex interaction between historical experience, strategic reforms, and global systemic factors**.

In the twenty-first century, China's reintegration has progressed from cautious adaptation to proactive engagement, emphasizing participation in international institutions, governance reform, and norm-shaping, reflecting China's growing confidence and strategic adaptation to balance international cooperation with national sovereignty and global responsibility (Wang Yi, 2025; Fairbank, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013).

Chinese Policies into Global Reintegration

China's reintegration into the global community can be understood through multiple historical phases, reflecting both strategic adaptation and domestic priorities.

1. Early Years of the PRC (1949–1970s) – Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country adopted a revolutionary path and largely remained isolated from the Western-led international system. China's foreign policy during this period was characterized by ideological alignment with socialist countries, limited engagement with non-socialist nations, and restricted participation in international institutions (Johnston, 2008). The Korean War (1950–1953) and tensions with Western powers reinforced China's cautious approach, emphasizing sovereignty and national security over global cooperation.

2. Reassessment and UN Recognition (1970s) – A turning point occurred in 1971 when the People's Republic of China regained its lawful seat in the United Nations, replacing the Republic of China (Taiwan) (United Nations, 1971). This marked a major step toward international legitimacy and recognition. During the 1970s, China pursued normalization of diplomatic relations with several countries, including the United States (1979), reflecting its willingness to gradually engage with the international community while maintaining strategic autonomy.

3. Economic Reforms and Global Integration (Late 1970s–2000s) – Under Deng Xiaoping, China implemented the Open Door Policy, promoting foreign investment, trade, and technology transfer. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in cities like Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Xiamen became laboratories for market-oriented reforms and international engagement (Vogel, 2011). China gradually shifted from an isolated planned economy to an active participant in global trade networks. Joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 was a landmark move, solidifying China's integration into the global economic system and allowing the country to influence international trade norms (World Trade Organization, China Trade Policy Reviews).

4. Institutional Participation and Diplomacy – Beyond economics, China actively engaged in international institutions, including the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and regional organizations like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China's participation in peacekeeping missions, global health initiatives, and climate change agreements reflects a multifaceted strategy combining soft power, diplomacy, and international responsibility (Shambaugh, 2013; Wang Yi, 2025).

5. Global Governance Initiative (GGI) and Norm-Shaping (21st Century) – In the contemporary era, China's global engagement emphasizes governance reform and contributions

to shaping international norms. Initiatives such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) seek to address perceived deficiencies in global institutions, promote inclusivity in decision-making, and advocate a multipolar world order (Wang Yi, 2025). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further exemplifies its strategic vision for global connectivity, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Vogel, 2011).

6. Strategic Balancing of Sovereignty and Global Cooperation – China's global policies demonstrate a careful balance between international cooperation and the protection of national sovereignty. While embracing globalization and participating in multilateral frameworks, China retains a selective approach toward engagement, ensuring that domestic priorities, territorial integrity, and historical sensitivities guide international interactions (Fairbank, 2011; Vogel, 2011). Recent efforts include promoting digital governance standards, international financial cooperation, and environmental sustainability frameworks, highlighting China's evolving role as both a stakeholder and norm-shaper in global governance.

7. Future Directions – Scholars note that China's reintegration strategy continues to evolve, with emphasis on proactive contribution to international systems, knowledge-sharing, and leadership in areas such as climate change, global trade, and multilateral security mechanisms (Shambaugh, 2013; Wang Yi, 2025). This reflects a shift from passive adaptation to strategic global influence, underscoring China's long-term objective of fostering a stable international order that aligns with its domestic development and geopolitical interests.

From Institutional Participation to Governance Initiatives

In recent years, China's reintegration into the global community has evolved beyond mere participation in international institutions toward actively shaping governance frameworks. The **Global Governance Initiative (GGI)** represents a key milestone in this strategic transition, aiming to reform global governance mechanisms to make them more representative, effective, and equitable (Wang Yi, 2025). By proposing reforms to the United Nations, international financial institutions, and global development frameworks, China demonstrates its intention to move from being a rule-taker to a **rule-shaper** within the international system.

China has also leveraged **regional and multilateral platforms** to enhance its governance influence. Initiatives such as **BRICS** and the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)** provide mechanisms for policy coordination, economic cooperation, and security dialogue among emerging economies and regional powers. Furthermore, China has strengthened international financial institutions such as the **Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)** and the **New Development Bank (NDB)**, offering alternative and complementary structures to existing global financial governance dominated by Western-led institutions (World Bank, China Development Reports, 2022). These platforms reflect China's strategic approach to creating multilateral networks that address both regional and global challenges while increasing its normative influence.

Beyond institutional frameworks, China has actively promoted **initiatives in global development, climate governance, and digital cooperation**. Programs under the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** demonstrate China's emphasis on connectivity, infrastructure investment, and economic integration across Asia, Africa, and Europe, contributing to the establishment of new international norms in trade, investment, and sustainability (Vogel, 2011). Simultaneously, China's engagement in **climate diplomacy**, including leadership in the Paris Agreement and promotion of renewable energy cooperation, illustrates its commitment to addressing transnational challenges while strengthening its global governance credentials (Shambaugh, 2013).

China's approach to governance initiatives reflects a **strategic balance between sovereignty and international cooperation**. While advocating reform and participation in global decision-making, China carefully ensures that its domestic development priorities, territorial integrity, and historical experiences guide its engagement. This selective but proactive strategy underscores China's evolving role as both a **contributor to global norms** and a defender of **national interests**, signaling a shift toward a more **assertive and responsible global presence** (Fairbank, 2011; Wang Yi, 2025).

Analysis

China's reintegration into the global system was a **deliberate and strategic process**, shaped by both domestic imperatives and international circumstances rather than being accidental or reactive. Historically, China's prolonged isolation stemmed from a combination of internal decline, foreign interventions, and ideological choices after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Fairbank, 2011; Johnston, 2008). This historical memory of colonial exploitation, semi-colonial domination, and Cold War exclusion informed the leadership's cautious yet purposeful approach to global engagement, ensuring that any reintegration would preserve sovereignty and policy autonomy while leveraging international opportunities for economic and technological advancement.

During the early years of reintegration, China's approach emphasized **selective institutional participation**. The restoration of China's seat in the United Nations in 1971 marked a key milestone in gaining international legitimacy (United Nations, 1971). Subsequent diplomatic normalization with several nations reflected a pragmatic willingness to reengage without compromising core national interests. The economic reforms of the late 1970s, particularly the Open Door Policy and the establishment of Special Economic Zones, laid the foundation for deeper integration into the global economy (Vogel, 2011). China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 further institutionalized its global engagement, embedding China within international trade and economic systems while allowing for **controlled adaptation** of foreign practices to domestic priorities (World Trade Organization, China Trade Policy Reviews).

In the **twenty-first century**, China's reintegration has evolved from mere participation to **active global governance initiatives**. Programs such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) demonstrate China's transition from a rule-taker to a rule-shaper, reflecting a strategic desire to

reform international mechanisms to be more representative, effective, and just (Wang Yi, 2025). Beyond traditional institutions, China has expanded its influence through **multilateral and regional frameworks** such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and financial institutions including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and New Development Bank (NDB) (World Bank, China Development Reports). These efforts reveal a twofold strategy: first, reforming existing global governance structures to reflect broader multipolar participation; second, creating complementary platforms that provide alternative mechanisms for international collaboration and development.

China's approach to global reintegration also reflects a **balance between national priorities and international responsibilities**. While engaging with global norms, China has emphasized sovereignty, cultural continuity, and historical identity. The country's participation in global governance is guided by principles such as multilateralism, opposition to hegemonism, people-centered development, and equality of states within the international system (Wang Yi, 2025). This demonstrates an understanding that reintegration is not merely about compliance with external expectations, but also about actively contributing to shaping the rules and narratives of the international order.

Moreover, China's reintegration strategy exhibits **temporal and thematic adaptability**. It considers historical lessons from periods of isolation and foreign exploitation, leverages economic reforms to drive modernization, and pursues normative leadership through initiatives that influence international policy frameworks. By combining historical awareness, pragmatic decision-making, and proactive engagement, China has crafted a distinctive pathway to global integration that simultaneously safeguards domestic stability, reinforces national sovereignty, and projects influence within an increasingly interconnected world.

In conclusion, China's reintegration cannot be understood as a single event or as a purely economic or political process. It is a **complex, multi-phase strategy** involving historical reflection, institutional engagement, economic modernization, and governance innovation. Through deliberate adaptation and proactive participation, China has transformed from a historically isolated civilization into a **strategically influential actor** in global governance, exemplifying a model of integration that is uniquely informed by its historical experiences and national priorities (Fairbank, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013; Wang Yi, 2025).

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Conclusion

China's reintegration into the global community represents a multifaceted, historically grounded, and strategically deliberate process shaped by internal reforms, international pressures, and centuries of accumulated experience (Shambaugh, 2013; Fairbank, 2011; Vogel, 2011). This reintegration was neither accidental nor unconditional; rather, it emerged from a clear understanding by Chinese leadership that economic modernization, political stability, and global engagement were inseparable and mutually reinforcing. From the early years of the People's Republic of China, through the 1970s diplomatic normalization, to the economic reforms under

Deng Xiaoping and accession to the World Trade Organization, China gradually transitioned from a period of isolation to one of selective engagement with the international system, carefully balancing sovereignty, policy autonomy, and the strategic adoption of global practices (Johnston, 2008; Vogel, 2011; World Trade Organization, China Trade Policy Reviews). In the contemporary era, initiatives such as the Global Governance Initiative, participation in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and international development banks such as the AIIB and NDB reflect China's deliberate evolution from a rule-taker to a rule-shaper, seeking not only reintegration but the reform of global governance structures to enhance fairness, multilateralism, and inclusive development (Wang Yi, 2025; World Bank, China Development Reports).

Equally significant is the centrality of China's historical and cultural foundations in shaping its reintegration strategy. The unity of historical China and present-day China, the integration of all ethnic groups into the Chinese Nation, and the leading role of Chinese culture as a unifying "trunk" exemplify the continuity of civilizational identity and national cohesion that underpin China's domestic and foreign policy (Zhao, 2015; Fei, 1999). The concept of the "Five Jointlies"—joint pioneering of territory, co-building a multi-ethnic state, co-authoring enduring history, collaboratively creating cultural achievements, and mutually nurturing national spirit—demonstrates that the Chinese Nation's pluralistic unity is foundational to its social, cultural, and political vitality, highlighting that all ethnic groups have actively contributed to the enduring development of the Chinese state and civilization (Pang, 1996; Xu, 2002). This historical perspective not only informs China's internal governance and nation-building efforts but also shapes its global engagement, ensuring that foreign theoretical paradigms or imported historiographical frameworks do not undermine China's interpretive sovereignty or distort the understanding of its civilizational continuity.

Furthermore, China's reintegration is deeply informed by lessons learned from historical interactions with foreign powers, including the experiences of colonial exploitation, territorial division, and external intervention. These lessons have cultivated a strategic approach that emphasizes both active participation in global governance and the protection of national sovereignty, enabling China to navigate global pressures while asserting its own developmental model. The integration of domestic reform, historical consciousness, and proactive global engagement underscores that China's reintegration is not merely reactive participation in global affairs but a deliberate projection of its historical, cultural, and political strengths onto the international stage. By simultaneously preserving civilizational continuity, enhancing national unity, and advancing global initiatives, China demonstrates that reintegration can be a transformative process—one that reconciles domestic consolidation with international influence, and pluralistic diversity with national cohesion. In sum, China's reintegration exemplifies a unique synthesis of historical depth, strategic foresight, and civilizational integrity, positioning it as both a participant and a contributor in shaping a more just, multilateral, and cooperative global order, while reinforcing the foundational principles of the Chinese national community (Ikenberry, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013; Wang Yi, 2025).

Recommendations

1. **Learn from Historical Experiences** – China should continue drawing lessons from its historical trajectory to maintain balanced, constructive, and strategic engagement with the global community (Fairbank, 2011). Historical awareness should guide foreign policy decisions to avoid repeating periods of isolation or overreliance on external frameworks (Vogel, 2011).

2. **Promote Inclusive Global Cooperation** – Global institutions should recognize China's unique historical path, multi-ethnic composition, and civilizational heritage. Inclusive cooperation, dialogue, and respect for China's governance approach are essential to prevent confrontation and foster shared development (Ikenberry, 2011).

3. **Contextualize Global Initiatives** – Scholars and policymakers should analyze initiatives such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) within their historical, cultural, and strategic context. This promotes understanding of China's emphasis on multilateralism, sovereign equality, and people-centered development while highlighting its evolving role in shaping global governance (Wang Yi, 2025).

4. **Strengthen Domestic Ethnic Unity** – The Chinese approach to ethnic affairs (民族工作) should continue emphasizing equality, solidarity, and mutual assistance. Institutionalized recognition of 56 ethnic groups provides a model for integrating diversity while fostering social cohesion and a shared national identity (Fei, 1999; Ruan, 2008).

5. **Support Cultural Inclusiveness and Minority Development** – Policies should cultivate ethnic minority cadres, promote regional economic and social development, and strengthen the construction of the Chinese national community. Balancing diversity with national unity ensures the Chinese Nation remains cohesive while respecting ethnic traditions (20th CPC National Congress, 2022; Xi, 2021).

6. **Integrate Domestic Policy with Global Strategy** – By combining historical awareness, domestic cohesion, and proactive international engagement, China can advance national interests while contributing to global reform. Participation in initiatives like BRICS, SCO, AIIB, and the GGI demonstrates China's capacity to shape a more equitable, representative, and cooperative world order (Ejima, 1988; Matsuda, 1987; Yano, 1923).

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