

# IS CHINA BEHAVING LIKE AN EMPIRE?

(AND IF NOT, IS IT GOOD NEWS?)

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The end of the Cold War and the meteoric rise of Chinese power since the 2000s profoundly modified the way China envisions its position in the world. There is no doubt Beijing now has global ambitions, and is projecting – if only to secure energy supply and commercial routes – its might overseas. In terms of territorial ambitions, however, its agenda remains essentially regional, and limited, with the exceptions of the shoals and islets of the South China Sea, to places that once belonged to the Qing empire. It is in these peripheries that Chinese control is most contested (in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong), or even fictitious (Taiwan). One of East Asia's most pressing questions today is thus the way Beijing relates to these territories, how it intends to gain their loyalty, and the place it is envisioning for them within China as a whole.

At a general level, two types of polity – entailing two kinds of legitimizing discourses – can be distinguished: empires and nation-states. The former are defined by J. Burbank and F. Cooper as “large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people. [...]The concept of empire presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently.” The idea of a nation-state, “in contrast, is based on the idea of a single people in a single territory constituting itself as a unique political community.”<sup>1</sup>

Which kind of polity does China want to be? This question calls, at first sight, for an obvious answer: ever since the 1911 revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), it has considered itself a nation-state with a homogeneous identity, exerting unified political control within internationally recognized borders, breaking with both the late empire's national diversity (the Qing, after all, were Manchus) and its pretensions to rule over the whole civilized world (tianxia). Today, nationalism is even the only ideological program that the CPC can still claim as its own. As for China's troublesome peripheries, they are, from Beijing's standpoint, unquestionably part of the unitary Chinese nation, any denial of this idea smacking of either separatism (if it comes from within) or interference with Chinese sovereignty (if it comes from without).

At first sight, thus, China fits perfectly in the classic Western narrative of political modernity: a transition from a multinational and unevenly integrated empire to a nation-

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<sup>1</sup> BURBANK Jane and COOPER Frederick, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010, p. 8

state where political power derives its legitimacy from its claim to represent the nation – whereas in empires legitimacy is located in an overarching principle or individual, to which diverse communities are submitted.

This historical narrative itself, though, is increasingly questioned worldwide, and primarily where it appeared in the first place. In the West, indeed, after a short-lived euphoria for the freedom of nations in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the 1990s – with mass violence in Rwanda and ex-Yugoslavia – produced widespread disillusionment about the benevolence of the nation-state and its inevitable historical triumph. Humanitarian concern, compounded by the widespread questioning of the notion of national sovereignty in the context of globalization and European integration, spurred a renewed interest in the virtues of multinational Empires; the Austro-Hungarian empire for instance, in which peoples of Central and Balkanic Europe coexisted relatively peacefully, at least compared to what followed. In a recent book, J. Burbank and F. Cooper, argue that empires have been around for a much longer time than nation-states and will most likely outlive them. And although they are most often based on force and should not be idealized, they at least “self-consciously [maintained] the diversity of people they conquered and incorporated”.<sup>2</sup> In some way, the European project can be considered as an attempt – successful or not – to retain the best of empire (building an *sui generis* polity that accommodates a high level of political and cultural diversity), without the worst (their authoritarian and hegemonic dimensions).

However, the rehabilitation of “imperial diversity” is also appropriated by (re)emerging powers as a way to express their geopolitical ambitions. In Turkey, in the past decade, the idea of neo-ottomanism has been used to discuss shifts in domestic politics and to a lesser extent foreign policy. In Russia, Alexander Dugin, one of the ideologues of Eurasianism and a powerful if extreme voice on the political scene, explicitly seeks to rehabilitate Russia’s imperial past while vehemently supporting Moscow’s claims on former parts of the USSR, such as Georgia or Ukraine.

For all the bureaucratic dullness of Beijing’s public communication, China is no exception to this trend. No one in the government, of course, claims to aim at the restoration of an imperial polity, if only because the CCP (unlike Erdogan’s AKP and Putin’s United Russia) is still on paper a revolutionary party whose legitimacy stems from a break with the “feudal” past. The imperial model, though, is increasingly referred

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<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p. 2

to when discussing the best way to deal with the aforementioned peripheries and their centrifugal tendencies. Recently Jiang Shigong, a law professor at Beijing University very close to the authorities and author of a white book on future of Hong Kong, has explicitly compared China's specific policy towards it (the so-called One-Country-Two-Systems compromise) to past imperial practices, contrasting the latter favorably to other imperial ventures, like that of British colonialism.

This analogy is in line with Beijing's propaganda about the great "revival" of Chinese greatness. But it is also grounded, to some extent, in historical reality. Indeed, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang have several commonalities:

First, they are relatively late additions to the empire, all except Hong Kong conquered by the Qing<sup>3</sup>;

Second, central control was relatively light: Tibet and Xinjiang were central Asian marches entrusted to non-Han (ethnic Chinese) military commanders, with very limited influence in internal affairs (Tibet & Xinjiang); Taiwan was an under-administered overseas prefecture in a fundamentally continental empire.

Last, all these territories escaped Beijing's reach for long periods in the age of Western and Japanese imperialism (19th-20th century).

When the Republic of China was founded in 1912, its leaders put forward a definition of the nation centered on Han ethnicity, as opposed to Manchu dynastic rule. Nevertheless, they found no contradiction in claiming as parts of China the very conquests of the Qing, settled or not by Han Chinese – Xinjiang and Tibet were mainly not, and Taiwan was colonized by Han migrants from the 17th century at the expense of Melanesian aborigines. To bridge the gap between the ideology of the nation-state and the reality of this imperial legacy, Chinese nationalists put forward the idea of a single "Chinese nation" blending different ethnic groups together; non-Hans, of course, were not asked for their opinion. But the Republic's ambitions were greater than its actual might. Xinjiang and Tibet took advantage of the weakening of the Chinese state to gain qualified independence within the British or Russian spheres of influence. As for Hong Kong and Taiwan, they were respectively colonized by Britain and Japan by the end of

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<sup>3</sup> Taiwan was taken over in 1683, Xinjiang over the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet was occupied at the end of the same century; Hong Kong has a different history but was little settled before the British colonized it.

Qing rule already. Ironically, thus, only the Communists after their 1949 victory were able to reclaim the boundaries of the old empire, with the exception of Taiwan, still de facto independent.<sup>4</sup>

Like its predecessor the Guomindang, the CCP had to explain how it was possible for a (Chinese) nation to inherit the borders of a (Manchu) empire. Their answer was roughly the same: basing themselves on Stalin's theories on nationality, they declared that China was a multinational unitary state, with a majority of Han people and 55 "national minorities". Although the idea of a federation was anathema to a power whose worst fear was dismemberment, the authorities felt that Xinjiang's and Tibet's special situations had to be acknowledged in some way. They were thus declared "autonomous regions". Later, in the 1980s, the regime devised the idea of "One Country, Two Systems" to arrange for the reabsorption of Hong Kong (1997) and Taiwan (?), apparently accepting the idea that integration to China was compatible with the preservation of a specific political and economic system – incidentally, the Hong Kong compromise might very well be inspired by the 1951 "17 point agreement" between the Tibetans and the central government.

This patchwork of political arrangements is indeed reminiscent of the multilayered structure of empires. Talk of empire in China, however, happens precisely at the time when the country is fraught with peripheral unrest: Xinjiang has experienced renewed violence since 2008, mainly because Beijing cracks down on any pacific form of dissent as "separatism"; in Tibet, since the 2008 protests, the phenomenon of self-immolations by monks has not ceased, with comparable grievances over Han colonization, oppression, and destruction of local culture. In Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement of the fall of 2014 revealed a massive distrust of Beijing's intentions. Although few protesters frontally contested Chinese sovereignty, Beijing's reactions have been intransigent and generally brutal, although markedly less violent in Hong Kong than in the Western margins. This partly explains the deep anxiety that prevails in Taiwan about the prospects of rapprochement with China, expressed in the spring 2014 Sunflower Movement. The problem, thus, is not that China has resorted to the toolbox of empire in the managing of its peripheries. It is rather that these "imperial arrangements" turned out to be fragile, not to say phony. In the Western autonomous regions, although the local administration does have a measure of leeway, the Party remains tightly controlled

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<sup>4</sup> And of Outer Mongolia, which became independent under Soviet patronage and is not claimed by Beijing – it is, however, by the Taipei-based Republic of China, at least on paper.

by Han Chinese – and the Party controls the state. Autonomy is thus mainly a façade, and colonization accelerating. As for the “One Country, Two Systems” principle, recent evolutions in Hong Kong shed a worrying light on its future applications.

The meaning of recent references to the diversity of the empire therefore takes on a clearer signification. For if Jiang Shigong asserts that “One Country, Two Systems” is a kind of return to China’s imperial ways, he interprets History in a very peculiar manner, claiming that autonomy always was but the first step towards cultural assimilation and eventual complete unification. Critical voices from Hong Kong have good reasons to fear that “the “one country, two systems” formula for Hong Kong is just a tactical and transitional arrangement. What awaits Hong Kong is what Tibet has seen since 1959: forced assimilation and tight direct control by Beijing.”<sup>5</sup> At the very same moment the idea of an imperial past is revived in some circles, actual policies are increasingly oriented towards suppression of diversity by political coercion, cultural assimilation and migration.

Today’s China does not seem to fit neatly in the nation-state/empire alternative sketched above. As an avowedly multinational state encompassing a diversity of administrative units that correspond to (relatively) recently conquered or recovered lands, she differs from the classic model of the nation-state. On the other hand, Beijing’s policies do not show the flexibility and the acceptance of “multilayered” sovereignty characteristic of, say, the Manchu Empire. The imperial idea rather serves as a source of prestige and as a legitimization device for Chinese claims over restless or contested peripheries, and for countering these peripheries’ own discourses about self-determination. This approach can be said to be that of an imperial nation. To some extent, China can afford it thanks to its vast population, which allows for tactics of control by settlement like in Xinjiang, and to the enormous discrepancy of sheer military might between the center and the margins. But for the sake of international prestige and peace at the borders, Beijing might have a lot to gain from a closer study of the reality, and not the myth, of the Chinese and Manchu empires: not a homogeneous territory inhabited by grateful subjects, but a diversified polity where different people could be governed in different ways.

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<sup>5</sup> HUNG Ho-fung, « Three Views of Local Consciousness in Hong Kong 香港地元の意識、三つの視点 », *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue. 44, No. 1, November 03, 2014.

