

# Introduction

*Diana Lary*

The Peoples Republic of China claims 22,000 kilometres of land borders, with eight other states, and 18,000 kilometres of coastal borders. How did this vast country come into being? The credo of the Chinese state describes an ancient process of cultural expansion, as less cultivated peoples accepted high culture from China and became inalienable parts of China. Successive governments (imperial, Guomindang, Communist) have held devoutly to the view that the Chinese state reached close to its current extent in the early stages of the Empire (3rd Century BCE). There have followed more than two millennia of unity, broken only by the aberration of periods of disunity. The centre (wherever the Chinese capital was located at any given time) rightfully controls the borderlands, in a paternalist, one-way relationship in which benevolence comes from the centre and is gratefully received by the benighted border peoples, once referred to as barbarians, now known as national minorities.<sup>1</sup>

This credo is not as straightforward or as linear as it seems: it contains fundamental contradictions and is quite obscure. One contradiction concerns the physical extent of the state. There *were* periodic Chinese incursions out from the centre from the foundation of the Empire on, but most of the current borderlands were not fully incorporated into the Chinese state until the eighteenth century, in a process that stretched the centre to its limits – a process usefully described as “imperial overreach.” Even then the process was incomplete. Many of the regions that have been claimed by successive centres as part of China remained outside direct control until quite recently.

A major area of obscurity is the actual location of many of the borders. Some of them follow natural features – the crest of a mountain chain or the coastline – but others are less clear. In the deserts to the north and north-west, tracks through the sand are soon blown away. Even river borders are less fixed than they seem. The line of the Heilongjiang/Amur border in the northeast shifts as the course of the river shifts; in winter, when it freezes, it



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becomes a highway rather than a border. This confusion led to an armed conflict with the Soviet Union in 1969. The Great Wall gives the impression of being the most permanent boundary marker on earth, but for much of its history it has lain well within China, not on the state's borders.

Few of China's borders were marked until quite recently. In Chinese historical accounts, China's southern border was marked in the Han Dynasty with a bronze pillar, but the pillar has not survived (or has not been found); the formal borderline with Vietnam/Indo-China was only established in 1894. The Sino-Russian border is even more recent: the final demarcation was made in 2004.

The communiqué issued at the signing ceremony for this border agreement points up another contradiction: the way in which control of the borders has normally been established. The communiqué sets a high moral tone: "the correct and effective way in settling complicated and sensitive issues like border issues lies in peaceful dialogue, fairness, equal consultation, mutual understanding and concession, and balance in each other's interests."<sup>2</sup> These bland, confident assertions obscure the actual nature of much of China's physical expansion – a heavy dependence on the force of arms. This forcible expansion has often been regarded as permanent only on the incoming (i.e. Chinese) side; on the other side, that of the indigenous peoples of the borderlands, the Chinese presence either remains contested or is seen as an occupation.

Another area of contradiction is the assumption that, since time immemorial, China has existed in a state of unity. Unity is not a natural state of affairs but, rather, a condition that the centre goes to great lengths to ensure. The present centre is assiduous in putting down threats to national unity. The most obvious form that this takes is the putting down of any manifestations of discontent in the border regions.

The centre has another, underlying reason for its stern attitudes towards the border peoples: it is concerned not only with maintaining control over the border regions themselves but also in preventing a loss of power at the borders of the state, which might trigger a general process of regional devolution in the Han Chinese provinces. The threat of devolution is always real. At the moment, some of the citizens (including members of the government) of the putative Chinese province of Taiwan express their belief that Taiwan does not belong in China, and this is a direct threat to the ideal of a united nation. Quieter but equally threatening are the unspoken attitudes and behaviour of some of the most developed regions in China: Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai have evolved strong regional identities, and they use them (and the regional dialects that are part of them) as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. These regions show levels of autonomy that strong centrists can only find to be disturbing.

These contradictions and obscurities take away from the elegance and simplicity of the official credo of an ancient, united state. They imply that the relationship between the centre and the borderlands was and is a conceit, an imperial conceit that disdains the problems inherent to controlling a vast state.

The chapters in this book look at the relationship between the state and the borderlands over a long period of time, and they cover most of the borderlands. Alexander Woodside's overview, "The Centre and the Borderlands in Chinese Political Theory," looks at the continuities between the distant past and the present as well as at how the centre's ambition to control a vast country have influenced capital politics and state administration.

Control of the borderlands demands a large and creative repertoire of tactical devices. Map-making is a key element of border demarcation and is the basis of claims to sovereignty. Benjamin Elman's chapter, "Ming-Qing Border Defence, the Inward Turn of Chinese Cartography, and Qing Expansion in the Eighteenth Century" looks at Chinese cartography. Nicola Di Cosmo, in his chapter, "Marital Politics on the Manchu-Mongol Frontier in the Early Seventeenth Century," looks at how border stability was peacefully maintained. The borders were always major topics of policy debate and factional fighting at court. Timothy Brook's chapter on the great philosopher official Wang Yangming – "What Happens When Wang Yangming Crosses the Border?" – looks at how border issues were manipulated at the centre. Leo Shin's chapter, "Ming China and Its Border with Annam," discusses the creative and multiple solutions the Ming court found to deal with the southern border regions.

The most ambitious expansionists were the Manchu emperors of the mid-Qing dynasty. Their dynasty was a conquest dynasty, and military might continued to be its *raison d'être* under the first four emperors. Their campaigns into the western borderlands were successful and consolidated China's expansion; others, to the southwest, were less successful. In his chapter, "Embracing Victory, Effacing Defeat: Rewriting the Qing Frontier Campaigns," Peter Perdue shows how the impression of successful expansion was constructed and promoted.

Nothing was ever quite settled in the borderlands. The Qing had to deal with borders that were never permanently stabilized (e.g., the border with Korea). Andre Schmid's chapter, "Tributary Relations and the Qing-Chosŏn Frontier on Mount Paektu," looks at a border where tributary relations governed interstate relations, yet the border had a life of its own. Other border regions were beyond anyone's control. One of the wildest was the north-eastern border. In the late Qing it became a focus of Russian interest, a place where Chinese and Russian worlds met. Victor Zatspine's chapter, "The Amur: As River, as Border," looks at the vast, remote, cold border region of the



Amur River Basin. Another kind of interaction, a *metisage*, where Chinese values were transformed through acculturation to accommodate local systems, is described in Van Nguyen-Marshall's chapter, "The Ethics of Benevolence in French Colonial Vietnam: A Sino-Franco-Vietnamese Cultural Borderland."

After the fall of the Qing, and the loss of central power for several decades during the Republic, China's control over the borderlands was drastically reduced. Border relations became the preserve of regional governments rather than of the state. Diana Lary's chapter, "A Zone of Nebulous Menace: The Guangxi/Indochina Border in the Republican Period," shows the relationship between a single province and its neighbour. In the period after its conquest of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government restored Chinese control over many of the border regions and started a campaign (that continues today) to settle Han Chinese in the borderlands. One method of doing this involved forced migration and the use of the borderlands as places of punishment. Wang Ning's chapter, "Border Banishment: Political Exile in the Army Farms of Beidahuang," looks at banishment and exile. Banishment was a traditional practice, as was using borderland leaders as proxies for the centre. Stevan Harrell looks at this issue within a contemporary context in his chapter "L'état, c'est nous, or We Have Met the Oppressor and He Is Us: The Predicament of Minority Cadres in the PRC." Finally, in his chapter, "Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives on the Periphery in Contemporary China," Pitman Potter looks at how the periphery and the centre continue to have great importance for each other.

The chapters in this book cover a millennium. Though the parallels from one period to another are often striking, the chapters show how, over time, the richness and diversity of the interactions between the central state and the borderlands evolved. This is a field of research that offers great possibilities to better understand not only China but also the borderlands of other large states.<sup>3</sup>

### **Terminology**

Any work that covers a long time span and uses more than one language is bound to present terminological difficulties. In our case this is exacerbated by the fact that many of the terms commonly used to discuss China are anachronistic, starting with the word "China" itself. The term "Zhongguo," the current translation of "China," has only been in common use since the nineteenth century; the term "China" has been used in Western languages dating from the same period.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge the anachronism but, for the sake of convenience, continue to refer to "China."

Another terminological confusion concerns place-names (toponyms). Place-names have changed frequently over the millennia. A whole subset of historical writings in Chinese is devoted to the study of place-names (*diming*). This variability occurs just as much with the names of provinces as it does with the names of individual places. We are quite aware of these variations, but in most cases, again for the sake of convenience, we employ the names in use at the moment.

Equally confusing is the naming of peoples. The dominant people, the Han, have only been known as such since quite late in the imperial period, while the names of the various non-Han peoples have changed repeatedly over time. Over seven hundred different ethnonyms are found in Chinese sources for different periods; there must be high levels of overlap within this group of names, but these are confusions that are almost impossible to resolve, in spite of the valiant efforts of Chinese scholars to do so.<sup>5</sup>

English terms give us problems that Chinese terms do not. In English there are various ways of referring to the edges of a state, the ends of a state's claim to territorial sovereignty. The term "marches" was once a useful one, suggesting regions where states and cultures connected to each other in ways that were sometimes hostile (often a stand-off) and occasionally amicable. But this term is so out of date that using it might give the impression that we ourselves are stuck in the past. The term "frontier" has much greater currency. It has more than one meaning, yet these meanings are not contradictory. "Frontier" may refer to a zone without clear boundaries, where cultures meet, overlap, and compete, as in Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" or in Owen Lattimore's notion of the "inner Asian frontiers of China." "Frontier" may also mean a fixed, clearly demarcated line on the map or even an actual, physical barrier between two states. The same dual meaning applies to the word "border." A border may be an actual line, as in the line guarded by the Canada Border Service or the US Border Patrol (or the line crossed by cross-border shoppers). It may also be a zone of transition, a zone in which two or more states meet – and where a distinct society emerges. "Border" also refers to non-physical entities, as in the term "border-crossing," which is now popular in the study of cultural and social issues, with the idea of transcending previously fixed and restrictive limits.

The distinction between "frontier" and "border" is not a hard and fast one. In fact the two are often used interchangeably. In French the international medical aid agency is *medecins sans frontieres*, in English "Doctors without Borders." In Chinese there is less of an issue with terminology. The common terms are *bianjiang* and *bianjie*, the first translated fairly indiscriminately as frontier or border, the second as frontier zone or border zone. The neologism *guojing/guojie* is used in formal contexts, such as immigration and emigration procedures.



We have chosen to use the term “border,” without giving it the implication of a fixed line but, rather, a gradual break, a transition between two entities, the end of one and the beginning of another. It is implicitly permeable, flexible, and interpenetrable. Our usage includes the conception of border zones, places inhabited by people who do not recognize border divisions, moving across them as though they did not exist.

### **Discourses on the Borderlands**

#### **The Centre of Civilization**

In China, all history is official, constructed to provide proof of the state’s right to rule. The state has often been successful in getting non-Chinese to follow its interpretations, and this success is reflected in many academic and popular writings on China. *The Chinese State at the Borders* breaks with the dominant view in political and academic discourses on the Chinese state, in which centre/borderlands relations have been seen as *de haut en bas*, with the borderlands being inferior, benighted places, their darkness lit by the distant rays of the brilliant centre. Versions of this view have been prominent in several fields of study: ethnicity, state economic development, China’s relations with neighbouring states, and cultural absorption. All have put the centre on a higher level than the borderlands. These views have also been widely accepted by national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In academic circles this acceptance is becoming less standard as lessons have been learned from the transformation in our views of indigenous peoples in North America, once referred to as “Indians” but now known to themselves and others as First Nations peoples.

In China, this change has not occurred. Though the term “barbarian” has quite disappeared, and the use of disparaging written characters with the dog radical is gone,<sup>6</sup> the centre describes China’s border peoples as ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*). They are made up of fifty-five officially designated peoples who live mainly in the border regions and who account for about 8 percent of the population. The rest of the Chinese population is Han. This description stresses the word “minority.” The border peoples are numerical minorities, and they are also minorities in the sense of being different, strange, exotic, at a lower level of cultural evolution than the Han. They have picturesque cultures, well suited to attracting tourists and to providing colour (unlike the rather dour Han). The exotic depiction of minorities finds its ultimate statement in the “minority theme parks” now found in many parts of China, the largest one being the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park in Beijing, where all the minorities are lumped together in a saccharine display of unthreatening cuteness.<sup>7</sup>

### The “Under-Developed” Peoples

The assumption that the border peoples are backward is underlined by the recognition that many of them are poor. The borderlands are seen as less developed, either because the terrain they inhabit is hard (deserts and mountains) and the climate harsh or because the peoples themselves lack interest in material culture, being steeped in “backward religions” that value faith above material accumulation. The efforts of international aid agencies and NGOs are now concentrated in the border regions, while the centre implements the “Develop the West” policy that aims to integrate the western border regions into the rest of China, an effort blurred by the fact that the “West” now includes provinces normally considered to be Han, such as Sichuan and Shaanxi. What is not mentioned is the fact that the border regions may be poor because of long-term economic changes, such as the decline of traditional trading patterns (e.g., the ancient decline of the very prosperous Silk Road economy, the impact of China’s international rivalries, and the damage caused to the Xinjiang-Central Asia trade by the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s).

### Threats from the Borders and at the Borders

The view from the centre gives the impression that the ethnic minorities belong only in China and that they live at the ends of the world. Many of the border peoples in fact have long historical connections across the borders and are parts of ethnic groups separated from each other by a fairly artificial state border. The Korean, Kazak, Mongol, and Russian minorities in China are all tied to states dominated by their own ethnicity. Other peoples are parts of ethnic groups represented in several countries; the Uigurs have close connections right across Central Asia to Turkey, their languages mutually intelligible. These ancient connections are treated with some nervousness at the centre. A good knowledge of history brings with it a knowledge of the might of the Mongol Empire and of other great centres of power in Central Asia. China’s nightmare would be the revival of these conglomerations of power.

The borderlands may be seen as *potential* threats to the centre. They were quite clearly the places where China has confronted imperial expansionism, from well before the Mongol Empire to the modern era. From the mid-nineteenth century on, China confronted France across the borders of Indochina in Yunnan and Guangxi. In the northeast, in the Heilongjiang/Amur region, China had to deal with Russian expansion. In the high mountains in the west, China was drawn into the Great Game between Britain and Russia. In remote Kashgar, the Russian and British consuls kept their lonely vigils, collecting intelligence about the schemes of the other’s masters for regional dominance. Most dangerous of all for China was the new

imperialist power, Japan; from 1895 on, Japan annexed Korea, detached the island of Taiwan, pushed in on Manchuria, and eventually threatened the heartland of China. The threats of imperialism came not in the heartland of China but on its borders.

### **Homes for the Han**

From the beginning of the empire, the centre has periodically looked for ways to solidify its partial control of the borderlands. Brought in by conquest, they could only be held securely by force of arms or by permanent settlement. The early dynasties achieved control by setting up civilian government in the wake of military conquest, sending out officials, and settling demobilized soldiers. Neither of these tactics was ever very successful in the long run. The officials felt (usually quite rightly) that they were being banished, while the soldiers (who were single men) married local women and were absorbed into the indigenous populations. After each period of conquest, civilian control gradually withered away. Not until the mid-Qing did serious settlement start. The pace has speeded up in more recent times, especially since 1949. But the forms of migration have seldom been positive: the continuing practice of settling unwilling migrants, demobilized soldiers, famine victims, and prisoners means that there is no excitement or enthusiasm for migration at the sending end, and even less at the receiving end. The common observation that vast borderlands are the ideal place to settle China's surplus population, heard now for many decades, will not become a reality until the lack of enthusiasm for Han settlement, on the part of borderland peoples and the Han themselves, changes. Even now, when millions of Han have moved to the borderlands, few regard their settlement as permanent; they are sojourners, making money so that they can eventually go back to their own homes.

### **Recurrence and Evolution**

The issues that confront the state in the borderlands often recur, but these recurrences are offset by continuous evolution. The ebb and flow of Chinese influence that characterized the early dynasties has given way to a much more permanent, concentrated Chinese presence. Changes within the borderlands and beyond them have altered the nature of the relations between the centre and the borderlands. The rise of nationalism has made the peoples of the borderlands more aware of their own identities at the same time that their incorporation into China has become an integral part of Chinese national identity. Other changes have happened far away. The 911 events have had a huge impact on western China in that they have made it possible for the centre to associate those who want greater autonomy for the Uigurs with terrorism. There are undoubtedly more changes – perhaps



equally unexpected ones – to come. The centre will never be able to take the borderlands for granted.

Centre-border relations are never static. In many ways, the current relationships between the border regions and the centre are different than they were in the past. The centre is acutely aware of the importance of the borderlands and their inhabitants to its vision of China's future, for traditional but also for new reasons, particularly resource extraction:<sup>8</sup>

- 1 *Resources*: the borderlands contain large quantities of untapped mineral deposits, most of the forest land, and over 80 percent of the country's animal products. These resources are very important for China's economic development.
- 2 *Geography*: though small in number, non-Han groups occupy 63.7 percent of the land area of China. The less densely populated minority regions may provide an avenue for relief from China's overpopulation problem.
- 3 *Strategic*: non-Han inhabit over 90 percent of China's border regions, making minority issues vital to national security.

Modern technology has had major impacts. It is now a five-hour flight from Beijing to Urumqi rather than a four months' trek across the desert. It is possible to travel from Beijing to Lhasa by train. Television programs from Beijing are broadcast in all parts of the nation at the same time: Beijing time. There is no recognition of the east-to-west time lag, no official time zones (as there are in North America). The borders are integrated into the state in other ways and are no longer anything like as isolated as they once were. Border guards are issued with phone cards so that they can keep in touch with their families. The Internet reaches all parts of China – though sites that discuss autonomy or religious freedom for peoples in the border regions are quickly closed down.

These technological innovations make control easier, but they have not managed to destroy the consciousness of many of the people of the borderlands that they are not Chinese.

In this book, we see the border regions as places in their own right, as places that have given the centre great problems and have sometimes dominated state policies because of the centre's self-imposed need to dominate them. Our approaches tend to share the following ideas:

- that the present extent of China, and the consolidation of the state, dates from the eighteenth century rather than from time immemorial;
- that there was an ebb and flow to Chinese control in the border regions rather than a long, continuous process of expansion and absorption;

- that the borderlands were brought into China by military conquest rather than cultural conquest (i.e., by a benevolent “civilizing” mission);
- that permanent Han settlement in the borderlands, so far from bringing high culture often brought people who were convicts, demobilized soldiers, and famine victims;
- that the peoples of the borderlands were and are closely connected – by ethnicity, history, religion, and economic ties – to peoples beyond China rather than constituting the ends of the Chinese world.

The current centre goes to great pains to present China as a stable, multi-cultural, multiethnic state – a model of harmony, equality, and unity for other states. In tandem with these upbeat views goes an intolerance of those who do not accept Han rule – “religious zealots,” “feudal thinkers,” “splitists,” “terrorists.” This toughness appears to contradict the form of government that exists in many of the borderlands. Many of the border regions are administered as “autonomous regions” (Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi). Until the present, in practice “autonomous” seems to mean its opposite – that is, a high degree of direct control. This notion of autonomy has no room to accommodate the persistent desire of many of the peoples of the border regions for real autonomy or actual detachment. The challenge for the near future is to see whether there can be some evolution, whether the centre can recognize that there may be means of governing the borderlands that are less painful than force, and less demanding of its time and attention. In meeting this challenge China might look to Canada, which has one of the world’s most stable political systems. Canada balances federal and provincial powers, and, although the threat of separation is a constant concern, no one contemplates resolving the problem through force.

#### Notes

- 1 Stevan Harrell, *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).
- 2 *Peoples Daily*, 15 October 2004.
- 3 For new views on the frontier in North America, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States and the Peoples in between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, 3 (1999): 814-41.
- 4 Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 132, 753.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 710-12.
- 6 The word for the Zhuang, the people of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, used to be written with a dog radical to the left of the character for a child. It is now written with a homophone meaning “strong.”
- 7 Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China; Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28-29, 32-48.
- 8 Wang Bing, “Multiculturalism in China,” *Canadian Diversity Canadienne* 3, 3 (2004): 36.



# 1

## The Centre and the Borderlands in Chinese Political Theory

*Alexander Woodside*

### **The Quixotic Nature of China's Political Centre**

During his presidency in Russia in the early 1990s, Boris Yeltsin asked Russian thinkers to engage in a contest to create a new concept of the Russian nation-state. A newspaper close to the Yeltsin government, noting that both communism and Russian Orthodox Christianity were too weak to supply useful ideologies, even offered a US\$2,000 reward for the most acceptable new conceptualization of the Russian polity. To the apparent satisfaction of Chinese observers, the prize went unclaimed; and the “spiritual crisis” in Russian politics remained unresolved.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to imagine a Chinese newspaper offering any such prize in China. Some sort of notion of a Chinese state, as based upon an eternal civilizing political centre, committed to the unification of ever-widening areas and the peoples around it, has survived for several millennia. It continues to influence the People's Republic of China (PRC). The notion of an imperial centre was originally mythic and pre-bureaucratic, preceding the actual centralized emperors of China created in 221 BCE. In the Chinese classics, the political culture's “Central Domain” (*zhong zhuo*) was one of the nine regions into which legendary rulers like the Yellow Emperor or King Yu of the Xia dynasty had divided the ancient world, with the other eight regions offering tribute to the region at the core.

During the Chinese Empire itself, the centre received its tribute from the provinces and expelled convicts, deserters, and dissidents to its outer regions, as in the First Emperor's use of banished prisoners more than two thousand years ago to colonize what is now the south Chinese province of Guangdong. But if Guangdong as a convict colony anticipated the much later history of Australia under British rule, there was no Australian-type romance about this in later Cantonese writings, no celebration of the liberating frontier through which the convict colony would become freer than the metropolis. The historical heroes in Guangdong, for great Cantonese poets like Qu Dajun (1630-96), were two strongman emperors – the First

Emperor (221-209 BCE) and Han Wudi (140-86 BCE), who, from a northern power base, had forcibly created Chineseness in the south.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese leaders have found great comfort over the centuries in embracing a cluster of fictive historical continuities concerning a unifying political centre. The ideal of the unifying centre was and is self-validating: its very persistence is taken to be proof of its rightness and objectivity. In September 1999 the Chinese State Council in Beijing published a detailed justification of China's ethnic minority policies. This text argued that a unified multiethnic state had existed in China since the unification of the empire in 221 BCE and that such unity had been the "main trend" of Chinese history. What's more, non-Chinese peoples themselves had contributed to this trend. The great Mongol Yuan government of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had refined China's system of "provinces" (*sheng*) as centre-dependent secretariats, and the influence of the Mongol province had survived to the present. China's Mongol rulers had also established agencies of military control in Tibet, which from this point on had become an "inalienable" part of Chinese territory and had set up patrols to manage the affairs of the Pescadores islands and of Taiwan. The Manchu Qing Empire (1644-1911) had made Xinjiang into a province; had imposed central bureaucratic control over the selection of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas in Tibet; and had introduced centrally appointed officials into the lives of the minority peoples of the southwest. The "mutual dependence" and "common development" of China's ethnic peoples, furthered by such statemaking, had in turn created "Chinese civilization."<sup>3</sup>

In 1999, the State Council's seductive grand narrative placed its faith in the existence of a time-transcending structure inherent in the past, which non-Chinese as well as Chinese agents served. The benefits of the structure supposedly remain available – without needing any complex strategy of accommodation – to contemporary Chinese politicians. Yet it is the centre that really transcends time in this narrative, not the borderlands or their peoples. Their identities fluctuate. The same 1999 justification of China's ethnic minority policies conceded, without embarrassment, that, after 1948, the Chinese political centre had not been able to make up its mind about the number of ethnic minorities in China. It had decreed 38 official ethnic minorities in 1954; 15 official ethnic minorities in 1964; and 55 official ethnic minorities in 1979. If the centre is eternal and the borderlands and their minorities are far less certain, there is seemingly less need to study the minorities' impact upon Chinese culture itself, apart from their service to the centralizing ideal. Not until well into the twentieth century did Chinese scholars begin comprehensively to examine the obvious subject of Central Asian influence in the Chinese core, as in the pioneering effort of the historian Xiang Da (1900-66) in the 1930s to uncover the connections

between the Tang dynasty capital of Changan and the “civilization of the Western region.” Significantly, Xiang Da relied heavily upon the research of the British Central Asia specialist Aurel Stein (1862-1943), whose works he translated into Chinese.

The problem with the ideal of the unifying centre is that, even since the first century of the common era, when Han dynasty leaders talked of pacifying the fifty-odd “countries” of pre-Islamic Xinjiang, China’s borderlands have been too big and too various for any political centre, even a semi-mythic one, to control. The quixotic nature of the political centre’s all-encompassing image of itself, and the discrepancies between the self-image and the almost impossible scope of its ambitions, explains why the political problems of the borderlands, in Chinese theory, have so often been disguised versions of political problems at the centre. And political problems at the centre were frequently pressing: in the two thousand years between the First Emperor and the Opium War in the 1800s, China had no real semblance of unity for almost half that time.

There are parallels in European history to the Chinese disjunction between the teleological approach to political power (attributing to the state an inherent ideal purpose) and the functional approach (concerned with the state’s more modest actual behaviour in the exercise of its tasks). The German scholar Ernst Kantorowicz once noted the “double truth” in the Aristotelian formula that, for centuries, European lawyers tirelessly applied to the often ineffectual empires associated with the “eternal city” of Rome. As the formula presumed, the Roman and the Holy Roman Empires remained unchanging in their ideal essence, even if they were mutable and corrupt in their dispositions. Western writing down to the 1800s preserved this theme, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s double vision of Rome as a timeless model of human civility and a time-bound place of corruption and squalor.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Chinese version of such a “double truth” has survived longer and been more potent than has the European version. Unlike the latter, the Chinese version could celebrate centralization without so much attachment to a specific city; and it did not have to mediate the competing claims of politics and religion. This gave it a flexibility that disguised its weakness: the underdevelopment of any critical intuitions that there could be polities that were united without being centralized. If it survives today, it finds its context in the life of an emerging superpower that has land borders with fifteen countries and maritime frontiers with six more (ranging from Korea to Brunei). Indeed, China now claims a coastline of 18,000 kilometres plus territorial waters – two-thirds of them disputed with other countries – covering 3.6 million square kilometres.<sup>5</sup> And, as the first round-the-world voyage of Chinese warships in 2002 suggests, the whole notion of a limited oceanic “borderlands” for China may rapidly be becoming obsolete.

### The Psychological Symbiosis of Centre and Borderlands

Both foreign and Chinese critics of the overweening political centre in Chinese political theory have taken its apparently absolute claims at face value, and they have stressed the malignant effects of the ideal upon China's development. The sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt, in a stimulating 1978 book about "revolution and the transformation of societies," proposed that the Chinese political centre, with its strong "Confucian orientation," was more "monopolistic" and more "rigid" than were equivalent political centres in Western Europe. Its alleged "rigidity" even accounted for the supposedly greater violence of the Chinese revolution compared to the English and French ones. The more extreme Chinese revolutionary violence was a response to the frustration that "major strata" in China suffered from their political centre's coerciveness.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese critics of the centre ideal have been even more severe. At the outset of the People's Republic of China, in 1951, the long-time Qinghua University ethnologist Pan Guangdan (1899-1967) published a newspaper article assessing what he called the historic ethnic chauvinism of the Chinese people. Pan attacked the "chronic disease" of the Chinese people, their boastful view of themselves, expressed in the fantasy that their polity contained everything "under Heaven" and that their rulers could convert the entire world into a family. The strong political centre was a necessary accompaniment of this notion of the legitimate conversion of the world into a household. Such a centre had to be all-encompassing in its view of itself, comprising definitions of its identity that were at once geographical, patriarchal, cultural-ritualistic, and military. But – Pan wrote in 1951 – the geographical element in the centre's definition of itself was a fabricated value that would become increasingly problematic once it was discovered that the earth was round; and as the Chinese political centre's fictive geography, patriarchal emotional foundations, and cultural mobilization ambitions hardened over time, that centre would require more and more military force to repress opposition to it.

In Pan's perspective, the borderlands minorities would be the principal victims. The political centre's language, in talking about these minorities, resembled the language with which parents "humbled small children." The centre's policy towards its minorities, who were regarded as though they were children, could be described as a policy of "mama-ism" (*mama zhuyi*) (Pan's Chinese rendering of the then fashionable American term "momism," which was popularized by the writer Philip Wylie). The Chinese Communist Republic was as guilty as was the Empire. Pan scathingly observed that all the new PRC had done, in dealing with its minorities, was to change the bottle in which the anti-minority "medicine" came. The "medicine" itself remained unchanged: the PRC's Mongolia-Tibet Commission of 1951 was nothing more than the Qing dynasty's old Court of

Colonial Affairs (*Lifanyuan*), which had administered the peoples of central Asia from the 1600s to the 1800s, in a different guise.<sup>7</sup>

Up to a point there were, indeed, bloody collisions between the “rigid” political centre and the peoples of the borderlands, whose ethnic and cultural and political boundaries (including those of Han Chinese settlers) were shifting and negotiable. When the bureaucratizing centre did try to impose its ideas of administrative integration upon the mutable and pluralistic border world, the result could be something like the Guizhou killing fields of the Ming and Qing dynasties. This was the great slaughter of aboriginal peoples in the Chinese southwest that began roughly about the time of the initial slaughter of aboriginals in the Americas in the aftermath of Christopher Columbus’s voyages.

But the sheer ecological variety of the borderlands dictated that there would be variety in the interaction of central designs and local histories. Of all the border wars conducted by China’s imperial centre in the 1700s, the campaign that lasted longest, cost the most, and probably involved the mobilization of the greatest number of Qing troops, was Beijing’s struggle to subdue about thirty thousand Tibetan Khamba hill people in the mountains of west Sichuan. The terrain here made central Asia’s, by contrast, seem ideal for warfare; and the centre’s effort to control the relative handful of west Sichuan Tibetans – the Chechens of eighteenth-century Asia with regard to their skill at humbling a bigger opponent – probably cost it more than twice what it had cost Beijing to conquer all of Xinjiang in the same century.<sup>8</sup>

Nor were ecological limits the centre’s only problem in managing its borders. The central realm and the borderlands realm were locked into a psychological symbiosis. In this symbiosis, the borderlands might compel institutional change at the centre (as with the creation of the Qing dynasty’s secretive “Grand Council”) or raise subversive questions about the political centre’s own inconsistent bureaucratic culture. In the 1700s and 1800s, for example, the Beijing government’s great project to reduce the hereditary power of almost eighteen hundred minority chiefs (*tusi*, “local officers”) in the south and southwest inspired academicians in the court to ask why the political centre itself tolerated so many haughty hereditary clerks in its own Six Ministries.<sup>9</sup> The borderlands, in other words, compelled the centre to confront the tensions between its own publicly universalist, but privately counter-universalist, political tendencies.

It was not just the borderlands whose boundaries were shifting and negotiable; it was also the boundaries of what the political centre itself was supposed to be or to mean. To put it in social science language made famous by Pierre Bourdieu, the centre tried to concentrate different types of political capital: military, fiscal, cultural-informational, and moral-symbolic.<sup>10</sup> But it did so in varying degrees, with the needs for the concentration of one type

sometimes colliding with those for another. As the paymaster of one of the world's oldest bureaucracies, the imperial centre was often insolvent. (Things are better now; but two experts recently calculated that, at the end of the 1980s, the Chinese central government administered a smaller percentage of China's GNP than did the central governments of India or Indonesia for their countries.)<sup>11</sup> The centre's shifting boundaries of action and meaning ensured that borderlands political theory would be part of a long Chinese debate about bureaucracy as a whole. Such theory was not just a relentless project to impose demeaning ethnic and cultural categories upon non-Chinese peoples.

The centre's obsession with the utopianization of place-names was no doubt part of its effort to reconcile the two parts of the state's "double truth": the teleological and the functional. The names of countless Chinese administrative bailiwicks, ranging from Changan to Nanning, included vocabulary elements (*an, ning, ping*) that evoked peace or tranquillity. (Pan Guangdan thought that, in 1951, about one-quarter of Guizhou's counties had traces of the "pacification" ideology in their names.) In contrast, the naming procedures under European colonialism were far more miscellaneous, being a welter of saints' names (San Francisco), borrowed aboriginal terms (Toronto), transposed European place-names (New York), sailors' names (Vancouver), and a small number of names with utopian implications (Philadelphia). But if the Chinese centre's hope for "tranquilized" borderlands contrasts with the more heterogeneous naming practices of European colonialism, it is clear that its naming game encoded needs at least as much as it did facts. And the primary need was, through subliminal persuasiveness and with little cost, to enable a chronically weak imperial core to achieve an idealized administrative model of space. Significantly, the Chinese state intellectuals who helped make the names were frequently accused of taking an insufficient interest in China's borderlands.

### **The Borderlands and State Intellectuals' Imperial Amnesia**

The criticism that Chinese thinkers were indifferent to their borderlands is current in China today. But it also has a long genealogy. If we sample its genealogical layers by beginning in the present and working backward, the first stop must be the China Borderlands History and Geography Research Centre that was set up by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1983. Its purpose was to produce a series of encyclopedic anthologies under the heading "China Borderlands History and Geography Library." Something of the energies behind this project is suggested by one of its first works, a 1992 anthology of documents concerning the history of the boundary between China and Vietnam, which runs to over 1,100 pages and translates into Chinese roughly 3 million words' worth of French language materials found in France and dating back to Vietnam's French Indochina period.



The general preface to anthologies like this one charges post-1949 China with suppressing research about China's frontiers, declaring it for a long time a "taboo area." Coming close to substituting a borderlands explanation of Chinese history for the old Maoist class warfare explanation, the preface claims that borderlands crises, and their management, have determined the problem of order and disorder in China as a whole. And the recent suppression of Chinese borderlands research has played into the hands of China's near neighbours, whose own research momentum on this subject is great.<sup>12</sup> The preface stops just short of proclaiming the cognitive equivalent of a missile gap in armaments.

But it is all old stuff. In 1934, the well-known professor and nationalist journalist Lin Tongji (T.C. Lin, 1906-80) told the readers of a celebrated journal that, for several thousand years, Chinese elite education had been an "anti-frontiers education." The orthodox literature that Chinese schools had taught had reviled the frontier-developing feats of the First Emperor and of Han Wudi. As a result, attitudes hostile to the frontiers, which were considered to be "rustic and unlivable," had become second nature for the Chinese people.<sup>13</sup>

Elite indifference to the borderlands was also a staple complaint in the pre-1911 empire. In 1820, the reformer Gong Zizhen (1792-1841) had attacked people whom he called "stupid literati of shallow experience" and "rustic students down in the villages" for questioning *both* the Qianlong emperor's intelligence and his humanity because he expanded China's borders by conquering Xinjiang.<sup>14</sup> Even earlier than that, in the Ming dynasty, the scholar-official and iconoclast Lü Kun (1536-1618) had denounced the Chinese elite strategists who did think about the frontiers for the complacent staleness of their theories of frontier defence, which privileged the building of brick walls and more brick walls. Women and children all "laughed" at the futility of such schemes, Lü said, yet "border ministers" declined to abandon them.<sup>15</sup>

In fact the criticisms were exaggerated. Major Chinese elite thinkers, including Gong Zizhen and Lü Kun, did pay attention to the borderlands. But it is worth looking at Chinese state intellectuals' alleged avoidance of the topic of their expanding empire and its borders from a global history perspective. As a general rule, all imperial powers have intellectuals who tend to avert their gaze from empire.

In the sixteenth century, when Spanish America was taking shape, Europe's imperial new world was hardly mentioned in the European chronicles and memoirs of the time; European schools continued to use classical cosmographies that the new world had rendered outdated.<sup>16</sup> During the heyday of the British Empire, in the 1800s, J.R. Seeley advanced the claim (in his *The Expansion of England*, 1883) that the British had conquered half the world "in a fit of absence of mind." While the British were seizing much

of Asia and Africa, “we did not allow it to affect our imaginations or in any degree to change our ways of thinking.”<sup>17</sup> More recently, in 2002, the American historian Thomas Bender complained that, “save for what I will call the William Appleton Williams era, empire has been invisible in American history,” despite empire’s “centrality” in that history.<sup>18</sup>

What David Armitage usefully calls the “imperial amnesia” of intellectual elites is a widespread phenomenon. The reflex has less to do with pacifism than with the ways in which imperial expansion threatens or subverts the principles of the political theory in circulation among the elites at the time the expansion occurs. The French Enlightenment tribune Denis Diderot made this point in the 1700s, when he warned Dutch republican theorists that predatory Dutch trade monopolies in Dutch colonies would eventually undermine the chances for democratic republicanism in the Netherlands itself.<sup>19</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the Spanish Crown feared its borderlands conquistadors (like Hernan Cortes) because their tendency to create their own feudal estates in Mexico and Peru seemed to contradict the Spanish government’s own political centralization efforts in Spain itself. Surely one of the reasons that British thinkers of the 1800s “absented their minds” from the British conquest of half the world lay in their commitment to the Whig theory of British history as one of expanding constitutional liberties. What the British were actually doing in Burma and India was hardly compatible with pictures of British history as being about the growth of liberty. And as Bender observed in 2002, the American elite’s denial of empire was part of their immersion in a general view of the United States as being politically exceptional rather than as resembling the “old” and decadent European powers.

So if there is any truth in the accusations that Chinese state intellectuals did not celebrate China’s expanding borderlands, we have to ask which important political theory traditions in China appeared to be the most imperilled by the Ming Empire’s huge frontier armies or by the incorporation into China of Xinjiang in the 1700s. There were at least two, one of which was the welfare-based approach to political obligation. It went back to the reciprocity principle of the classical pre-imperial period of small political jurisdictions in China, when the people, according to legend, obeyed their rulers because “they ate their princes’ food and wore their princes’ clothes.” The numerous thinkers who wrote about poverty in the Ming-Qing period were quick to blame poverty not on the sinfulness or the shortcomings of the poor but, rather, on the excessive administrative scale of the empire and its corresponding decline in feudal political intimacy. It was thought to foster alienation and to frustrate proposals for the effective redistribution of wealth.

The second tradition that was contradicted by China's expanding borders was that of the empire's faith in a salaried bureaucracy that could employ poor but talented officials who lacked private fortunes and that, through its law of "avoidance," proved its principled indifference to local family or geographical loyalties. The law of avoidance, continuously elaborated since the Han dynasty, compelled officials to serve in government positions far from their homes. It was – when it was enforced (which was not always) – one of the most physically and economically exacting public interest principles ever devised, even if it was a bureaucratic rather than a constitutional one. The bigger the empire, the further officials might have to travel, on inadequate salaries, to their appointments.

Lü Kun, the Ming scholar-official already mentioned, significantly linked the two concepts of "border planning and popular distress" in his dissection of the Ming border crisis at the end of the 1500s. Lü insisted upon looking at the administrative space of the Ming Empire from the viewpoint of its postal relay stations' sedan chair bearers and horse coolies. They were the suffering peasants conscripted to leave their families in order to move promoted or transferred bureaucrats hundreds of miles or more in compliance with the law of avoidance. (Lü's writings anticipated George Orwell's later look at the British Empire's frontiers in Burma from the perspective of its clerks and policemen.) To reduce the misery of the empire's conscripted coolies, Lü thought, the distance its promoted officials had to travel must be reduced. His scheme for doing this was to shrink the law of avoidance by subdividing China into three bureaucratic appointment zones (South, North, and Centre) and by stipulating that no civil officials (with his conscripted servants) should have to cross more than one zone to take up an appointment away from home.<sup>20</sup>

Lü Kun – like the other mandarins of the Ming and Qing dynasties who proposed China's conversion into multiple bureaucratic appointments and travel zones – reflected Chinese political theory's quest for subimperial forms of administrative space. In comparative terms, this was looking for a bureaucratic equivalent of the more feudal low-cost "composite monarchies" of Europe, with their patchwork juxtapositions of realms with separate laws, immunities, and even ecclesiastical establishments. The concern with cost-cutting forms of subimperial space creation clearly worked against the emergence of Chinese Horace Greeleys or John Buchans – mandarins with an urge to incorporate distant borderlands. But the high rates of indebtedness of the Chinese civil officials who did have to travel great distances to their posts, without being able to acquire feudal estates (like Spanish officials in the Americas) when they got there, does make their distaste for the borderlands more understandable. And there was another threat to the well-being of mandarins that encouraged them to see the borderlands as a breeding ground of

potential catastrophes, whose management – even at the best of times – was a Sisyphean enterprise. This was the threat of imperial overstretch.

### **The Imperial Overstretch Fear in Views of the Borderlands**

The political theory of China's Ming dynasty (1368-1644), much of it still unexplored, is probably one of the greatest repositories we have of preindustrial wisdom about the only too enduring subject of imperial overstretch. Ming China apparently mobilized something like 4 million soldiers (ranging from hereditary army troops to auxiliary mercenaries) with varying degrees of dependency on the centre's budget. Globally, at that time, this was probably a unique situation. Even Europe's dominant ruler, Louis XIV of France, commanding the biggest armies in French history at the end of the 1600s, only had to pay for about 400,000 soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

Frontier armies' endless drain on the centre's resources only reinforced the civil elite's borderlands hypochondria, for reasons both obvious and not so obvious. In 1605 the Ming grand secretary Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), Paul Xu to Chinese Christians, publicly asserted that the two greatest dangers to the stability of China were its monarchy and its frontiers. What they had in common was runaway spending: it was bound to lead to a terminal financial crisis.

To save the empire, Xu told the Ming court in 1605, the tens of thousands of descendents of the polygamous royal house would have to have their stipends cancelled and be returned to self-supporting occupations like farming (a not very reasonable remedy). As for the extended frontiers, they could only be sustained by the resurrection of self-sufficient military colonies whose soldiers also farmed.<sup>22</sup> But military state farms on the frontiers were a Han dynasty practice, making the idea more than seventeen centuries old in 1605. Not surprisingly, frontier-based state farms were unpopular in the 1600s. They had high desertion rates, anticipating the current flight of able personnel from their obvious successor in Xinjiang – the Production-Construction Army Corps (*bingtuan*) created by Mao Zedong in the 1950s. Changing values made Chinese not only less willing to work land they did not own but also to be both farmers and soldiers.

But as with the law of avoidance, the general issue of the performance of China's civil service was also what was at stake in this frontier-hating debate. The borderlands got absorbed into battles over the theorization of consumption standards in the Chinese core itself. To high officials like Xu Guangqi, only "rich frontiers" – by which they meant economically self-sufficient ones – would permit the political centre to pay salaries to its officials (who were spread all over China) that would be decent enough to keep them free of corruption. The elite's borderlands hypochondria therefore stemmed from its view of the borderlands as being part of a fiscal zero-sum

game. Increased costs on the frontiers were thought to undermine the material upkeep, and thus the behaviour, of the political centres' administrators. Here there was a sharp contrast between the Ming Empire and more capitalist modern empires like the British Empire of the 1800s, whose London money markets had surplus capital to export and whose elite was dominated not by impecunious salaried mandarins but by the richest hereditary aristocracy in Europe.<sup>23</sup> The greater theoretical contingency of consumption standards, in a Chinese empire ruled at least in part by poorly salaried officials, influenced Chinese elite views of borderlands space. For Chinese political theorists, until recently, the problem was not an imperial centre that created underdevelopment on its borderlands but, rather, imperial borderlands that threatened to create underdevelopment at the centre.

The Qing Empire, in its prime, modified this situation without completely banishing it. In the 1700s, Manchu-ruled China much more resembled a successful empire of the sort that a historian like Immanuel Wallerstein would recognize: that is, an empire with a dominant core and the capacity to transfer wealth efficiently from its peripheries to that core. For one thing, there was more wealth to transfer in the Qing Empire than there was in the Ming, thanks to a more rapidly commercializing economy that China's rulers could exploit. Demographic trends also made Manchu-ruled China look more like a modern empire: remarkable population growth encouraged a migration of perhaps 10 million Han Chinese settlers, between 1644 and 1799, to the southwest borderlands, to Mongolia and Manchuria, to Taiwan, and even to Xinjiang.<sup>24</sup>

Equally remarkable, Chinese elite thinkers began to take a more benign view of the borderlands as a place where wars and popular welfare could be reconciled. In 1820 Gong Zizhen previewed more modern forms of the utopian production of frontier space with his proposal to make Xinjiang the antidote to a decadent China. In his reform plan, all the rootless poor people in north China, beginning in Beijing, would be rounded up and moved to Xinjiang to make a fresh start. Gong's version of a mandarin New Jerusalem in the Chinese northwest included the characteristic hope that Xinjiang could be kept pure for such people by restricting the import of corrupting consumer goods from the Chinese core.<sup>25</sup>

But the Manchu emperors themselves still upheld old negative views of the borderlands, and they converted Xinjiang into a banishment site for the officials, both Manchu and Chinese, whom they punished by sending into exile. Even major Chinese scholarly authorities on Mongolia and Xinjiang in the early 1800s, such as Qi Yunshi (1751-1815) and Xu Song (1781-1848), hardly resembled Aurel Stein: both had backgrounds as involuntary Chinese official exiles in the region. Down to the late 1800s, the emerging welfarist definitions of the frontiers coexisted with the old

Sisyphean view that saw them as spaces that generated cycles of crisis and catastrophe. Zuo Zongtang (1812-85), the general who reconquered Xinjiang in the 1870s from Ottoman Empire-backed Islamic rebels, could still write in his old age that only the Han and the Tang dynasties had had winning policies on their frontiers. Zuo also wrote that the Manchu emperors had seized Xinjiang in order to protect Beijing: if Xinjiang became unstable, the Mongols would be disturbed; and if the Mongols became restless, then, in a chain reaction, the political centre itself would be jeopardized.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the whole story of the triumphant conquest of Xinjiang could be made to serve the purpose of a much older, more pessimistic theme: that of the vulnerability of the imperial centre. Zuo's view – if Xinjiang goes, then Beijing goes – has to be one of the most extravagant domino theories ever conceived, at least up until the American war in Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **The Decline of the Catastrophic View of the Borderlands**

At the end of the 1800s, the Chinese elite began to shift its outlook on China's borderlands. The Sisyphean, or cyclical-catastrophic, view of the borders faded in favour of a perspective that might be called linear-providential. This entertained visions of frontier development in which frontiers were seen as part of a willed progress towards some emancipatory goal.

Chinese ethnic nationalism promoted the shift. After the Japanese annexation of Manchuria, for example, in 1932 the young Pan Guangdan warned that what China had lost to the Japanese in its northeast borderlands was not just mineral wealth and an outlet for its surplus population but also a "great garden area" in which the superior, more fit elements of the Chinese people could test themselves and improve the race.<sup>27</sup> (Imported theories of ethnic struggle influenced Pan, most notably those of the Yale University geographer Ellsworth Huntington, who had praised Chinese colonists in Manchuria in a study of "natural selection and Chinese national characteristics.") But Chinese nationalism could combine with another tendency, this one borrowed from Western Enlightenment thought: the tendency to link planned social progress, including the remaking of nature, with ventures in spatial engineering. In this synthesis, frontier space might be imagined more as artificially designed "virtual territory" that could satisfy national needs and less as historically lived space with its own particular identities.

The modern Chinese fascination with Christopher Columbus and his career is surely a symptom of this shift in Chinese views of the borderlands. Reading and writing about Columbus evidently allowed Chinese thinkers to participate vicariously in the celebration of border expansion as positive wealth creation or even as the positive outcome of the maximization and projection of scientific research and knowledge.

About 1902, Liang Qichao began Chinese thinkers' obsession with comparing Christopher Columbus with the fifteenth-century Chinese admiral Zheng He. Liang asserted that Columbus's achievements had created a progressive "new era" in world history and that Zheng He's had not. Between 1900 and 1949, the boom in Chinese Christopher Columbus studies continued, as is seen in Zhang Xiangwen's school geography textbooks of 1901 and 1908, and in books about Columbus written by Lin Wanli in 1915 and by Liu Linsheng in 1921, and by Wu Zhiyi's biography of Columbus written in 1933. After 1949, Chinese studies of Columbus (by, among others, Zhu Huan, Wu Yujin, Yan Zhongping, and Sun Jiakun) began to come closer to resembling the more conflicted interpretations of Columbus that one finds in the Western world itself. Yan Zhongping even called Columbus a "genocidal pirate." But at the end of the twentieth century, the Beida historian and "modernization" specialist Luo Rongqu returned compulsively to the comparison between Columbus and Zheng He, using it to differentiate two types of border expansion: the Columbus type, driven by the search for markets and by constructive government cooperation with private businesspeople, and the more sterile Zheng He type, allegedly driven by the Chinese political centre's desire to flaunt its power.<sup>28</sup>

New models of developmental colonialism accompanied the Chinese elite's abandonment of the old pessimistic "border planning and popular distress" anxieties of the pre-1911 mandarins and its growing interest in prescribing history-accelerating manipulations of borderlands space. Not surprisingly, Xinjiang was especially vulnerable to this trend. In 1910 one of the last Qing dynasty governors of Xinjiang, Yuan Dahua, summarized the disastrous effects, in this newly created province, of trying, in the spirit of the Qing emperors' neo-Confucian universalist creed that "all things are of one body" (*wanwu yiti*), to impose Chinese schooling on a sparsely populated homeland of Turks, Kazakhs, Mongols, and Chinese Muslims. Yuan wrote that the results of forcing the children of Xinjiang's "turbaned peoples" to go to Chinese schools were that their parents hired the children of "beggars" to go to school in their children's place; or sold their property and fled to Russia; or rallied at their mosques and talked of vengeance. Chinese teachers had to put Turkic students in fetters and handcuffs to keep them from fleeing Chinese schools.

Yuan's solution, which was characteristic of the new era, was to borrow a spatial model from abroad. Yuan urged the Beijing court to try to reimagine Xinjiang as a Chinese version of the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. Treating Xinjiang in a Hokkaido-like way would mean separating it from the main body of the empire; scrapping Qing educational universalism in the region; and concentrating on special programs of industrial development and infrastructure creation. Little came of this in 1910; yet the free-floating attractions of the developmental model of Hokkaido have persisted

in modern Chinese thought concerning the ethnic minority borderlands. In 1981, for example, Yu Guangyuan, a state council development expert and Hu Yaobang adviser, proposed that Thai-speaking areas of southern Yunnan be made a pilot project for the transfer of Japan's successful Hokkaido formula to China.<sup>29</sup>

But despite the transition to a more providential view of the borderlands, and the use of foreign developmental models, the Chinese political centre, minus its monarchy, remains intact. China's sufferings in the first half of the twentieth century only strengthened its persuasiveness. Before the 1937-45 Sino-Japanese War, Chinese Communist leaders talked of creating a "Chinese federal republic," or a China that was a "federation of soviets." After the war broke out, they became wary of entertaining the idea of even a nominal federalism – the post-1911 version of subimperial space creation. What Eisenstadt called the political centre's "monopolistic" instincts also remained strong; for example, the PRC's 1995 law for producing and publishing maps gives the Beijing State Council and Foreign Ministry exclusive authority to produce standardized maps of China, going all the way back to 1840.<sup>30</sup> The quixotic nature of the political centre's ambition to impose a single normative managerial framework upon its far-flung borderlands is still apparent. Yet the borderland societies are too complex for such a framework. Their past histories are so diverse as to compel the untidy coexistence of different mentalities, from different periods, even among the centre's own strategists in Beijing (and Shanghai). The contrast between China's northwest and northeast frontiers underscores this point. In the northwest, almost utopian formulations of multi-state cooperation seem plausible to the Chinese centre; in the northeast, at the end of the twentieth century, multi-state cooperation seems very difficult to conceptualize.

To take the northwest borderlands first, in 1996-97 China joined Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in founding an association of the "Shanghai Five" countries. The "Shanghai Five" were dedicated to multilateral border cooperation, especially in the exploitation of energy resources. (By 1999, imported oil supplied more than 20 percent of China's needs; nearly half of it had to travel by sea from the Middle East.) But it was surely characteristic that the rise of the Shanghai Five generated quasi-utopian enthusiasms among Chinese thinkers that went far beyond technical debates over the location of oil or natural gas pipelines.

One Chinese Russia specialist wrote that the purpose of the Shanghai Five must be to construct a high-tech Silk Road. This new Silk Road would have to be both spiritual and material; visible and invisible; underground, above ground, and in the air; and capable of weakening all frictions caused by differences in ethnicity, religion, and language. China's mission, as the leader of the new Silk Road commonwealth, would be to "congeal," or "coagulate," Central Asian economic life by transmitting Chinese reform experiences to



Central Asians. China would even have to “fill in the historical blank spaces” of countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, whose national identities were weak.<sup>31</sup>

This vision – of a Christopher Columbus-like Chinese political centre heroically constituting a new multicivilizational world on China’s borders – transcended economics. And, in so doing, it failed to capture the sheer technical difficulties of coordinating energy, land, tax, and currency policies among the five countries, let alone the difficulty of coordinating even the different prices in China’s own natural gas market. But, as in the old days, a “double truth” was at work here, with its teleological and functional concerns far from perfectly aligned. And the transposition of Mao Zedong’s old “blankness” metaphor, from the Chinese people themselves to the countries of the Central Asian borderlands, was suggestive on a number of counts: in both instances the metaphor justified the prescriptive activity of a strong central leadership.

After 1978, China’s northeast borders stimulated a long list of proposals for multi-state cooperation. Some Chinese writers even referred to an eruption in China of “Northeast Asia fever.” The fever’s ideas included plans for a Yellow Sea Economic Circle, a Three Seas Economic Circle, and a Northeast Asia Economic Circle (all of which would take in Russian Siberia, north China, Mongolia, the two Koreas, and Japan). Perhaps the most ambitious proposal, made in 2002, was the one to create a Sea of Japan science and technology alliance modelled on the European Union’s Eureka Plan, which had required European countries to pool their science and technology in order to boost their competitive position vis-à-vis the Americans and the Japanese. The two Fudan University economists who proposed the alliance warned that China must use Northeast Asia cooperation – among China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea – to construct a “tripolar” world order instead of a Euro-American bipolar one. Otherwise the “natural laws” of the strong-eat-the-weak global economy might “eliminate” China as a serious competitor.<sup>32</sup>

But differences in the borderlands lead to differences in the Chinese centre’s self-image. Unlike in Central Asia, in the northeast the Chinese centre must deal with other states with global power and few “blank spaces” in their historical national identities. Forms of bilateral cooperation between China and other Northeast Asian states – such as nuclear energy cooperation agreements with Japan and South Korea or a Harbin economic cooperation zone shared with Russia – are achievable. Forms of multilateral regional cooperation of the European Union kind, or even the Shanghai Five kind, have been slow to develop. (The Tumen River regional plan, which involves China, Russia, and North Korea, was originally organized by a non-Chinese centre – the United Nations development planning office in New York.)

Northeast Asia is special. In no other Chinese borderlands does the long shadow of modern history so complicate the Chinese centre's sense of its own capacity to cooperate with other powers. In much of the northeast, serious state boundary creation, at least of the European post-Westphalian type, did not begin before 1858. This was late and, more important, it was virtually on the eve of Japan's prodigious self-modernization. From this point on, Japanese scholars dominated the study of Northeast Asian societies and their histories; a specialized Chinese understanding of the region remained comparatively shallow, and there were no European scholars of the region who achieved for it what Stein, Chavannes, Pelliot, or Kozlov and Oldenburg had achieved for Central Asia. For China now, the Japanese economy remains that of a rival whose power must be overcome rather than that of a neighbour, like Kazakhstan, whose economic activities must be "coagulated" by Beijing. As one Chinese strategist wrote in 1999, China must use Northeast Asia cooperation schemes to smash Japan's hierarchical "flying geese" model of economic progress for Asia. This could only be done by using European investment capital to upgrade China's industrial technology faster than the Japanese lead goose might like, Europeans having fewer "misgivings" than the Japanese about investing in the improvement of Chinese technology.<sup>33</sup> As a Chinese environmentalist complained in 2002, the main reason for the failure to create a borderlands environmental community in Northeast Asia was China's view of itself – in its relations with Japan and South Korea – as a victimized developing country. Influenced by this view, China's only interest was how much financial aid the Chinese government could extract from Japan, its richer counterpart; the Chinese government showed far too little interest in its own managerial and technical contributions to Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation.<sup>34</sup>

As in the past, therefore, different borderlands created mutable "dispositions" at the political centre, even if the centre's teleological "essence" remained constant. The Chinese political centre today is embodied in a much more complex array of formal institutions than it was two hundred years ago: the CCP Central Committee, the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference, and the Central Military Commission. This centre also rules over the most extensively militarized state in Chinese history; its resources and ceremonies include the People's Liberation Army, the armed police, the people's militia, eleven military industrial groups, a state border defence commission (charged with everything from improving roads to television broadcasting in border areas), the roughly 60 percent of Chinese college students who receive some form of military training, and (since 2002) an annual September National Defence Education Day. But China remains, as in the past, a huge country with one political centre and multiple types of borderlands. The sheer breadth of the political engineering required to reconcile the two ensures that, in the minds of the Chinese elite, the

imagining of borderlands space (and the logic of visualization applied to the process of such imagining) will continue to be affected by efforts to resolve perceived problems of power and knowledge – problems that exist quite independently of the real borderlands. Or, to put it another way, elite pictures of the borderlands are, as often as not, displaced forms of more general concerns in political theory – concerns that have arisen elsewhere.

Of course, to some extent, this is also true in the Western world. Frederick Jackson Turner's famously optimistic picture of the American frontier as a source of freedom was designed to celebrate American ideals of economic autonomy and political participation. Gloria Anzaldúa's more recent hymn to the American-Mexican borderlands, as the basis for a new, more flexible and pluralistic Mexican American "consciousness," rewrites this freedom script from the viewpoint of a Chicana feminist.<sup>35</sup>

The difference is that the Chinese teleological sense of life as having a developing purpose uses China's borderlands but remains tied to faith in a commanding political centre. And if the catastrophic view of the borderlands has gone, the centre's borderlands hypochondria has nonetheless enlarged its rhetorical character. As changes in missile development and information technology have increased the spaces the centre must guard (land, sea, air, space, cyberspace), the perceived threats to those spaces have also increased. Now border threats are defined as including "terrorisms, separatisms, and extremisms" (in the words of the State Council's December 2002 paper on national defence). Here is a potential border defence overstretch problem such as the Ming dynasty critics of imperial overstretch could scarcely have imagined.

#### Notes

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- 2 Qu Dajun, *Guangdong xinyu* [New discourses of Guangdong] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 232.
- 3 For the text see *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 28 September 1999, or *Xinhua yuebao* [New China Monthly Report], 1999, 12, 138-47. For a good and different look at the real centre and its borders see, among other sources, Susan Blum and Lionel Jensen eds., *China Off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).
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- 5 You Ji, *The Armed Forces of China* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 160-63.
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