

# The Legacy of the Chinese Empires *Beyond “the West and the Rest”*

By Magnus Fiskesjö

It is commonplace in the West, and especially in America, to hear people talk about the world as “the West and the Rest,” with the “Rest” at the receiving end of Western imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation. There is a lot of truth to this, but it is also a misleading view of how the world works. Not only are imperialism and colonialism not new, they also are not confined to the West.

This is very much true of Asia, where imperial Japan’s late nineteenth- and twentieth-century quest for empire was itself preceded by a long history of empire-building and colonialism, above all the long history of successive Chinese empires that were built by military conquest, expansion, and settler colonialism on the Asian continent itself. From this perspective, Asia is postcolonial not just with reference to Western powers or to Japan, but with reference to the Chinese empire.

Any discussion of imperialism and the postcolonial must involve China. It also requires a global perspective and a longer view that recognizes how empires come and go. Too often, educators lack this perspective, especially for Asia. I believe it would be no exaggeration to say that the problem of how to understand the legacy of empire and colonialism in Asia is one of the most underplayed questions in teaching about Asia. This also has a lot to do with how difficult it continues to be for the new, post-imperial, modern nation of China to come to terms with its own history as an empire that was in many ways like other empires, and how, in so many ways, modern China has not been able to shed the legacy of the empire.

The history of China is not the story of some enduring essence. It is the story of living and changing cultural traditions and, also, simultaneously, the story of an expansive empire. The first Chinese states were small kingdoms (Shang, Zhou) in the first millennium BCE, each ruling only a part of today’s north-central China. By the last few centuries BCE, an international system of culturally Chinese states had come into existence in this area.<sup>1</sup> Then, an empire was launched, for the first time, on the ashes of this system of smaller states, which was obliterated in a series of cataclysmic wars in the third century BCE. The new Qin Empire was roughly contemporary with Roman and Indian empires to the West, and like them, it expanded through massive new conquests. The Qin conquered much of what is today southern China, laying the foundation for what has become known as “China Proper,” meaning the culturally sinicized eastern part of the East Asia mainland. The Qin imperial framework (the military and bureaucratic tools for seizing and administering huge multiethnic areas) was inherited by the empires that came after. They used it to make further conquests, incorporating parts of Central and Northeast Asia, and creating a vastly larger territory under imperial control. For example, the empire doubled in size under the last dynasty, the Qing—one of the largest land empires the world had seen. It lasted until 1911, and today’s China inherited its scope.

Just as elsewhere in the world, the framework of empire could be usurped by ethnically distinct people, as in the case of the Manchu who ruled the Qing. For comparison, think of the

succession of empires over several millennia in ancient Mesopotamia, in the same area but under a succession of ethnically distinct people. One unique aspect of the Chinese case is the persistence of older ideas of what the empire should be like: the emperor described as the “son of heaven” and so on. This was made possible by the continuity of the written Classical Chinese language, which was adopted for administrative purposes even by non-Chinese rulers taking over the imperial framework, such as by the Mongol world empire of which China formed a part (1279–1368) and by the Manchus (1644–1911).<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the two millennia of Chinese empires, the framework itself collapsed and fell completely apart multiple times. This was not the disintegration of Chinese culture, only of the imperial machinery. The idea of empire was, however, resuscitated again and again, often mimicking the image of past glory and ancient statecraft gleaned from the received classics.

And in the process, millions of non-Chinese people were slowly assimilated, causing the loss of multiple native languages and cultures under the expanding imperial project of conquest and colonization. Many “Han Chinese” today have ancestors who were not culturally Chinese; conversely, people still recognized as distinct “minorities” in China today are people who had not yet been caught up in this process of assimilation during the long centuries of empire.

In contemporary China, it can sometimes seem that the preferred attitude toward this history of imperial expansion is to ignore it and pretend that China was always the same culturally and geographically. There are also some (both inside and outside China, and both inside and outside academic circles) who try to deny the fact that China was built as an expansionist empire, which itself practiced settler colonialism in the lands it conquered.

However, not that long ago, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which today rules China, condemned the Chinese empires of the past as unjust, unequal, and oppressive. This occurred in the 1930s, before they took power in China. The CCP was not just critiquing social and economic inequalities in traditional Chinese society. They were critiquing the Chinese empire as empire—that is, the gobbling up of others. At the time, the Chinese Communists recognized today’s “minorities” such as the Uighurs, Miao, and Tibetans as oppressed nations unjustly conquered by the Chinese empires of the past for the sake of exploitation. They argued that these nations deserved national liberation and promised that they as Communists would champion this cause.

In part, this was to create a contrast to the Communists’ then-contemporaries in the Republic of China, the ruling Kuomintang (the Nationalists), who had the opposite policy—a unified Chinese citizenship based on the map of China as it was at the time of the downfall of the last empire in 1911. That’s why the Kuomintang has insisted on including Mongolia on their own maps of China, even though Mongolia became an independent country in 1921.<sup>3</sup>

Before the Communists took power in 1949, in their draft Constitution for a future

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revolutionary state (drafted in 1931 for a “Union of Chinese Soviets”), they promised justice for these conquered nations—including their right to full separation and political independence from China.

Article 14 of the text enumerated rights for minorities: “All Mongols, Muslims, Tibetans, Miao, Yao, Koreans, and others living on the territory of China shall enjoy the full right of self-determination, ie, they may either join the Union of Chinese Soviets or secede from it, and form their own state as they prefer.”<sup>4</sup>

After Mao won the Kuomintang–Communist Civil War and came to power in China in 1949, he discarded the policy notion of liberating the nations in chains. There would be no more anti-imperialism directed at the Chinese empire of the past, except in terms of denouncing the socio-economic inequalities of class, wealth, etc., that had also existed there. The oppressed nations were no longer to be defined as such, and they would not be free to leave the new People’s Republic of China.

Instead, today’s system of ethnic administration was imposed. The peoples once seen as conquered nations were defined as “minority nationalities” integral to China. They are not allowed to secede, but instead receive a limited and closely supervised autonomy within the new nation of China. The Chinese Communists thus changed their view, and just like the Kuomintang before them, they embraced the footprint of the empire as the map of the modern nation. At the same time, in contrast to the Kuomintang—and in a nod to the Soviet Russian example that was one major inspiration for the Communist draft 1931 Constitution—the Chinese Communists retained a recognition of “minority nationalities.”

What is even more crucial is the ideological justification mobilized to implement this new system. Ever since their new designation as minority nationalities, these peoples are officially described as always already a part of China, as if they somehow naturally belonged on this map and did not end up as part of China by being conquered. The history of the conquest of these minority nationalities is not allowed to be in focus when the history

of “Chinese-minority” relations is written. For example, in China, it is very difficult to seriously discuss the abandonment of the ruling Communist Party’s own past commitment to the national liberation of these peoples.

The new ethno-political arrangement works through the creation of two levels of terms for “Chinese”: one is the all-encompassing “Zhonghua” (= “Chinese”), a term that refers to all the domestic “nationalities” supposedly sharing one identity—not just politically, but historically, and supposedly even biologically and genetically!—and the other level is the fifty-six “nationalities” (“zu”), including both the majority “Han zu” (“Han Chinese”) and the fifty-five “minority nationalities” (such as Miao, Uighur, etc.) who together number over a hundred million people today.

One formidable effect of this formulation is that it equalizes all the minorities and thereby erases the huge differences between those who built their own states and empires in the past, such as Tibet, which could easily, like Mongolia, fulfill the criteria for being recognized by the modern world as independent states with their own seat in the United Nations and on the other hand, those minority peoples who never engaged in any such state-building in the past.

The idea that the fifty-five non-Han minority nationalities *always* were Chinese—in the sense that they supposedly always shared in the Zhonghua identity, dwelling on this territory—does not, of course, square with the facts of history. In fact, it rather serves to cover up that history and the very conquests and expansions that marked the growth of this “China.”

Perhaps most dramatically, it omits how the last Chinese empire, the Qing, doubled in size during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—see, for example, Peter Perdue’s *China Marches West*—creating the present-day map of China and its frontier “minorities,” mainly through military conquest.<sup>5</sup> I have engaged in research on what happened to the Miao people in what is today south-central China during this period; those who resisted domination and taxation, and rebelled against the expanding imperial administration, were subjected to large-scale, murderous



Painting from 1795, showing the imperial army using artillery to kill Miao resistance fighters. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/moa08jk>.



Street poster in Fenghuang, Hunan, proudly advertising a nearby "Military Culture Theme Park," dedicated to Miao resistance to the empire, at Ailikou village near the Southern Great Wall, in 2006. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

suppression. The imperial armies even built a southern Great Wall to fend off those mountain Miao who still could not be conquered—in today's Hunan and Guizhou provinces, where the armed resistance to the conquerors is still fondly remembered. In the summer of 2015, an elderly Miao farmer in Guizhou happily sang me a tune that he said was once sung to the nervous soldiers in the imperial Chinese army camps, warning them not to enter Miao country or it would "become their grave!"<sup>6</sup>

The high point of this expansionist Chinese land empire, in the early nineteenth century, came just before the confrontation with new European imperialist competitors—notably including the British seafaring empire. During the nineteenth century, these new imperialist competitors defeated and blocked the Chinese empire from further expansion and forced it to trade on their terms, as is well-known; this is the story of Western imperialism in China.

In contemporary Chinese education, the prior history of Chinese imperial conquests is not emphasized; rather, the focus is on the "humiliation" of China in that "semicolonial" situation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Britain and other Western countries demanded trading rights and access to trading harbors on China's coasts. In Chinese schools, as in official and mass media today, pupils and audiences are continually presented with the concept that China the nation—itsself a new concept, imported from the West—was an organism that mysteriously endured through time, albeit with glorious ups and humiliating downs, of which the British Opium Wars are held up as the most awful example. This view of an eternal nation-as-organism is crystallized in the mantra of "5,000 years of Chinese civilization" and as a concept effectively excludes any examination of China as one empire among many in history, as well as of the real history of contending empires competing for the world at the expense of those not running or resisting them.

This denial of history is further justified by way of the oft-repeated and complementary idea of a "peaceful China" that never made wars of aggression and expanded only by virtue, not by violence. This is also often

linked to the modern nationalist notion of the nation as a living body. It was recently given a new iteration by Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party's current leader, who—in the context of dismissing the fears that China poses a threat to the smaller nations of Southeast Asia—argued that "in our Chinese blood, there is no DNA for aggression."<sup>7</sup>

This is obviously a new, modern formulation of the nationalist tradition that implausibly regards nations themselves as biological organisms. But at the same time, it also has unmistakable roots in older imperial ideology. This point is very important for understanding China. On the one hand, there is in China a long history of glorifying military might and other coercive means to conquer and expand—and of branding any resisting natives as criminals that are best executed and paraded as warning examples—but, *at the same time*, the same imperial regimes that did these things would prominently tout the innate virtue of the emperor as an even more important explanation and justification for why conquered people would willingly submit to Chinese rule. This built on ancient ideas of the mystic superiority of kings who had their power delegated to them as a mandate from heaven. These ideas were seldom protested. One interesting exception is Zhuangzi, the contrarian Daoist thinker who sought to expose the hypocrisy involved by holding up the example of a wise man who was recruited by a victorious king for the post of governor of a conquered land, but refused.

The infamous First Emperor (ruled 221–210 BCE) cast aside these debates and instead emphasized brute force by which he destroyed the entire group of older kingdoms in today's Northern China, where the Chinese ideology of civilizing conquest had originally been formulated. He named himself emperor instead of king and created the first empire, ruling harshly (burning books, killing scholars, etc.) and proceeding to conquer more neighbors than any of the older Chinese kingdoms had managed to do, thereby creating the first blueprint of the continental Chinese empire that bears a recognizable likeness to the national map of today.

Because of this feat, people in China ever since have tied themselves in knots over whether to denounce his horrible crimes as the imperial

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conqueror or praise him as the “unifier”—even though his “unification of China” in reality consisted of forcing centralized rule onto a loosely culturally homogenous group of kingdoms.<sup>8</sup> This question has never been resolved, though the way he is often lionized alongside other great emperors, such as through the recent global exhibits displaying the terracotta ceramic versions of his brutal army, suggests that for the most part he will continue to wear the crown as expansionist imperial conqueror.<sup>9</sup>

The ideology of a benign emperor was restored after the brief period of the first emperor’s “eternal” reign came to an end. It still endures, suggesting that the superior virtue of rulers radiates down to their people, who then submit to their rule. This ideology of order and civilization emanating from above also had a key role in the colonialism that accompanied the empire’s expansion. It helped justify, as a good thing, the sending out of colonists to settle conquered areas and help “civilize” the natives there. All this is obviously comparable to other examples of colonialism in history, but because of the Chinese ruses of “peace” and “virtue” cited above, the actual history has often received short shrift. Much remains to be written about such colonist-settlers, both military (*juntun*) and civilian (*mintun*) colonies set up on conquered peripheries through the centuries to solidify the incorporation of the areas into the empire’s administration.

Such state-sponsored settlers also paved the way for voluntary Chinese migrants following in their footsteps in search of land to farm. Today, the nominally autonomous minorities have no mechanism for regulating the influx of Han Chinese, and just as in the past, such Chinese settlers are officially billed as helpful for modernization/civilization. Their nominal autonomy merely protects the existence in name of the minorities, not their self-determination into the future. It gives them no say over natural resources found on their former land. Today, as in the past, their land is often exploited by outside investors who send the profits elsewhere, and the indigenous people have no forum in which to argue that they, not the Han Chinese entrepreneurs from outside, should retain the profits. Moreover, the use of the Chinese language to name and delineate ownership obliterates the local terms of ownership, often age-old but in a non-Chinese local vernacular, now discarded. In this sense, we are witnessing a form of continuity with the earlier imperial-era Chinese ideology of colonialism, but now renamed economic development.<sup>10</sup>

In the past, the idea of virtuous civilization was also much at play in the longstanding practice of appointing indigenous people as local standard-bearers of the empire, investing them with a seal and some limited authority as a “native office.” These officeholders were native locals who pledged loyalty to the emperor and did the empire’s bidding in educating and civilizing their fellow natives. Some caretaker chiefs renounced their native origins and changed their names to Chinese names, claiming instead to be the descendants of conquering generals. In practice, this system of appointments also served as a mechanism of imperial expansion, especially in the south and southwest.

# The History Teacher

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The current Chinese system of nominal indigenous autonomy where governors of minority-dominated areas must be ethnic-origin locals, but still have no say over real power issues like settler immigration or resource exploitation in their areas, mirrors the “native office” system of the past. This is one way that imperial ways continue to influence modern China. The large influx of Chinese settlers in Tibet, Xinjiang, and inner Mongolia is not an issue that can be raised by citizens. For example, there is no space permitted for openly criticizing the way Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, has been transformed into a predominantly Chinese city.

In today’s China, with rising nationalism promoted by the government and because this new nationalism involves glorification rather than criticism of the imperial past, there is not much room for a sustained critique of China’s past empires. Accordingly, one won’t find these issues addressed in Confucius Institute educational materials or other state-sponsored depictions of China; they are likely to be set aside in favor of the image of an always-peaceful China. It is easier to avoid them than to confront the history of imperial wars of conquest and Chinese colonialism, or to consider what it might even mean to be “post-” this history in today’s world of looming confrontations.

There are writers on the homefront in China who have tried to point out that the empire’s past was not all about glory and high culture, but also injustice and cruelty toward the common people. For example, author Ling Cangzhou wrote books recounting the cruelties perpetrated by famous emperors. They were explicitly written as an antidote to the current trend of glorifying such tyrants and the “great” imperial dynasties of the past. But most writers shy away from, or are not allowed to write about, the issues of Chinese imperialism and colonialism in history, especially the issue of China making war on others to become the China that it is today through a history of imperialist expansion.<sup>11</sup>

The depth of the political sensitivity of this unresolved conundrum was highlighted during fall 2016, when Chinese historian Qin Hui’s new book on the difficult transition from the last empire to the early Republic of China (*Leaving Behind the Imperial System: From the Late Qing to the Early Republic*) was suddenly removed from all bookstores even though it had cleared the censorship hurdles and been duly put up for sale as an approved book. Most likely, someone higher up saw the book and began to worry that people might ponder the question of whether the nation really has been able to “leave behind” the empire and the imperial ways. So the command was issued to confiscate the book—a move itself very much reminiscent of the emperors of the past! ■

## FURTHER READINGS

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## NOTES

1. See Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On these issues, and for more on the first empires, see Magnus Fiskesjö, “Terra-cotta Conquest: The First Emperor’s Clay Army’s Blockbuster Tour of the World,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 1, no. 1 (2015): 162–183.
2. The pattern of “outsiders” usurping the empire is surprisingly old: even the famous ancient Chinese dynasty of the Zhou represents such an invasion by outsiders, “less civilized” people invading, usurping, adapting, and expanding existing state machinery—taking over its wealth accumulation. The Qin, who created the first empire, also represents such an invasion of a wealthy, more civilized center.
3. Even today, maps made in Taiwan for the Republic of China (which survives in name only, and only in Taiwan, though no longer ruled exclusively by the Kuomintang that fled there in 1949), continue to include Mongolia. In mainland China, too, there are sometimes ominous rumblings about taking Mongolia back. See Tatsuo Nakami, “A Protest against the Concept of the ‘Middle Kingdom’: The Mongols and the 1911 Revolution in China,” in *The 1911 Revolution in China: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Eto Shinkichi and Harold Z. Schiffrin (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), 129–149; Uradyn E. Bulag, *The Mongols at China’s Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
4. See Magnus Fiskesjö, “Rescuing the Empire: Chinese Nation-Building in the Twentieth Century,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 15–44.
5. The Qing Empire was led by ethnic Manchus, not Han Chinese. However, just as with the earlier Mongol world empire, which ruled China as the Yuan dynasty, they are claimed in official Chinese history education to be one and the same tradition. And this is not wrong, not just because both Mongols and Manchus (and other outsiders taking over the imperial machinery) assimilated to Chinese culture, which is the usual argument, but precisely because of the continuity of the conquest empire. Its ethnicity is less important than its structure and geography.
6. From author’s field notes from Southeastern Guizhou Province, China, May 2016.
7. Frank Ching, “Does Chinese Blood Really Lack the DNA for Aggression?” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/kzld2un>.
8. Kenneth Dean and Brian Massumi, *First and Last Emperors: The Absolute State and the Body of the Despot* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), <https://tinyurl.com/z2mx9za>.
9. See Magnus Fiskesjö, “Terra-cotta Conquest: The First Emperor’s Clay Army’s Blockbuster Tour of the World,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 1, no. 1 (2015): 162–183.
10. On the current situation of ethnic minorities in China, see Gray Tuttle, “China’s Race Problem,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 3 (2015): 39–47.
11. Democratic Taiwan is a different story. There, we find sophisticated discussion that does not shy away from any topic, not just the past Japanese Empire in Taiwan and across East Asia, but also China’s colonization of Taiwan, Han Chinese racism, and Taiwan’s own policies. See Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010).

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