ENCOUNTERS WITH ASIA
Victor H. Mair, Series Editor
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The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State
Japan and China

EDITED BY JOSHUA A. FOGEL
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they could recognize each other's governments as legitimate actors. The adoption of Buddhism marked all three countries as civilized. Japan and Tibet could send scholars and emissaries to China, and China could send a princess to Tibet: Srong-btsan-sgam-po was not Chinese, but he was cultured. As members of a common international society Japan, China, and Tibet could trade, ally, start wars, and end wars.

Conclusion

Returning to the framing question of this volume, Japan became “Japan” through interaction with its neighbors. In the seventh and eighth centuries, when Tang concepts of state formed a shared international culture, Japan reconfigured its institutions and political ideology in that context. In a world of states legitimized by Buddhism and Confucianism, Japan became a state legitimized by Buddhism and Confucianism. A parallel process occurred in the nineteenth century, but the dominant international norm was then the singular sovereignty of the nation-state. I do not here wish to argue that world culture can, in isolation, explain the remarkable transformation of the Japanese state and society in the late 1800s. The force of world culture co-existed with the logic of capitalist development and modernity. Historians should not consider world culture theory as an exclusive concept. World culture theory, however, highlights the ways in which Japan’s adoption of “Western” models was rooted not in efficiency, rationality, or efficacy, but in the quieter forces of conformity and social reproduction.

Chapter 4

When Did China Become China?

Thoughts on the Twentieth Century

WILLIAM C. KIRBY

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Earth’s human communities were to a considerable degree organized as empires. These were collections of diverse peoples, governed by small bureaucracies that ruled through divine legitimacy or the mandate of tradition. These multinational, multicultural spatial regimes included the Ottoman, Romanov, and Habsburg empires, which had their roots in medieval and early modern times; they included the “new” Imperia of the British and the French, who together governed most of Africa, all the Indian subcontinent, and much of Indo-China; and they included the Da Qingguo, the Great Qing Empire of the Manchus. In the first half of the twentieth century, they would be joined by more cohesive states, such as Germany and Japan, that sought to be, and claimed the title of, empires.

One hundred years later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, all but one of these empires have disappeared. The Ottomans have given way to a small and secular Turkish national state and a series of ethnic and religious states and proto-states in contemporary North Africa and the Middle East. The Romanov and later Soviet empires have broken up into a multitude of national or ethnic regimes. Austria and Hungary have long gone their separate ways, while the Habsburg lands in the Balkans can look back on nearly a century of murderous nationalisms. The British have lost their entire empire, which is feebly remembered in the form of the “Commonwealth,” and even the future of the United Kingdom as a unified state is open to question. And la France d’outré-mer no longer crosses even the Mediterranean.

Of all the world’s empires a century ago, only that of the Qing remains as a bordered political community, albeit without the Manchus. Although an empire that ruled from the Chinese lands of the Ming, the Qing had comprised much more: the Manchurian homeland, Mongolia,
Xinjiang, and Tibet, among its far-flung parts. In the twentieth century, the empire became the basis of the Chinese national state. Yet just what “China” has meant, as a state, has been more readily recognized, and less contested, abroad than at home.

If we define “China” for the purpose of this discussion as the contemporary Chinese nation-state, then in political if not geographical terms it is reasonable to date “China” from the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. To be sure, if we look at certain distinguishing attributes of nineteenth-century European nation-states, such as professional standing armies, investment in economic development, and the articulation of “national” goals promoted from generation to generation, then we can surely argue that in its final half-century, and particularly in its final decade, the Qing was becoming such a state. But, of course, it was not simply a Chinese state. Historically, the Qing state had borrowed freely from Inner Asian, Manchu, and Chinese political traditions. In the nineteenth century it was in the process of reinventing itself again with the appropriation of European institutions and officials (John King Fairbank’s “dyarchy”). In its final years in the early twentieth century, modern “state-building” under the xinhai reforms was accompanied, at least to some degree, by an effort to reassert the Manchu-ness of Qing leadership.

Linguistically, we know that China was “China” abroad earlier than at home. Whereas the Western powers would refer to the Qing as “China” or, in H. B. Morse’s language, in his magisterial study of foreign relations, as “The Chinese Empire” (a term that would be appropriated only later), and briefly, by Yuan Shikai’s would-be Zhonghua Pengzu, “China” was not the term of currency domestically or more broadly in East Asia. Chinese ministers served the guocho (dynasty) and bowed to the Du Qing. Vietnamese, Koreans, and Tibetans had different ideas and terms for the area we know today as China, but they too dealt with the Qing, not with “China.” Vietnamese rulers of the Nguyễn dynasty in the nineteenth century would appropriate Chinese political terms to call themselves “sons of heaven” (thiền tài [tianzi in Chinese], also hoàng đế [huangdi in Chinese]). But these same sons of heaven could and did pay fealty to the big son of heaven in the “northern court,” and did so through the Qing Board of Rites.

In the emerging system of international relations governed by treaties, foreign powers signed treaties with “Chinese” authorities of various sorts. The Treaty of Nanjing was signed by an imperial commissioner, yet it was the Shanghai daoai (court intendant) who signed the lease that would lead to the International Settlement. Foreign powers dealt selectively with various authorities in different parts of the realm (Lamas in Tibet, chieftains in Xinjiang), in fact often undermining the court in Beijing while proclaiming support for the principle of “Chinese territorial integrity.” As successful as the Qing was in appropriating international law to defend its sovereignty, the concept of “Chinese territorial integrity” was introduced as a governing concept by foreign powers less as an effort to define (let alone defend) the Qing than to govern their own, mutually overlapping, appetites in East Asia. (To this, of course, there could be exquisite modifications, such as the British recognition of Qing, and then the Republic’s, “suzerainty,” or paramountcy, but not exclusive sovereignty, over Tibet.) The broad point here is that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was seldom a clear-cut, mutual (Manchu, Chinese, and non-Chinese) recognition of “China” despite all the international dealings that had taken place across what Westerners called “Chinese” borders.

In domestic political terms in particular, there was no “China” in a formal sense under dynastic rule. Nor, despite historically Chinese collective identities, did there exist concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” before the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, it is not surprising to read Liang Qichao’s lament of 1900, in his essay on “China’s Weakness,” that the Chinese people by and large had no idea of what “country” they were living in. They referred to it by chaozai, by the name of the ruling dynasty. “China” (Zhongguo), Liang wrote unhappily but accurately, “is what people of other races call us. It is not a name the people of this country have selected for themselves.” John Fitzgerald takes Liang’s point farther:

Before the modern period, the term zhongguo designated neither the nation nor the territorial state but the place of the emperor at the center of the world. Its first appearance in the formal designation of state was in the attenuated form of Zhonghua mingzu (Republic of China) in 1912, although it was frequently used to refer to both the state and to the nation in the Republic. Even then, however, the usage was not universal. Not far from the capital, in the 1900’s locals still referred to their country as the Great State (Déguo).

China, then, may have had an ancient civilization, but with the advent of the Republic, it was in fact a new country. This was a fact recognized by good Chinese republicans and by the Republic’s first president, Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), not to mention by the teams of international advisors that sought to influence what was widely seen as a great political experiment: the birth of Asia’s first republic and the transition from dynastic to national state. But the Empire gave way not to one but to several Chinas, to at least four alternative conceptions of a republic, and to decades of contestation, still ongoing, as to what “China” should or would be.

Here we might reflect on several questions that were unanswered.
when the empire fell in 1911. Who would comprise the “Chinese” people of the new Chinese nation-state? How large would “China” be? What would distinguish the Chinese republic in forms of governance?

Who Is Chinese?

The post-imperial era may be defined in part as the quest to build a modern nation-state, in particular by extending the boundaries of the Chinese nation (in the sense of minor or ethnic nationality) to be coterminous with the reach of the sovereign power of the state. The first Republic, of 1912, took a liberal and inclusive approach, emphasizing in its five-bar national flag that the Republic of China consisted of Han, Manchus, Mongols, and Tibetans—such generosity perhaps befitting a China-based government whose real political reach into non-Chinese areas of the old Qing was limited. At the same time, even a weak republic had ambitions for cultural and, especially, linguistic unity: the principle of “one state, one people, one language.” The reach of the later Nationalist (Guomindang) state was limited, too, yet it pursued a more strongly racial nationalism, symbolized by Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) one-sun flag and his belief that, just as the Chinese “race” had defeated the alien Manchus, “the authority to rule China was placed back in the hands of the Han people and China’s territories were all bestowed on the Han race.” Even though the People’s Republic of China would promise to restore “autonomy” to selected “national minorities,” and would in its own flag attempt to symbolize the country’s diversity, its rule, too, would be marked by the overwhelming political dominance of the Han in the governance of the former Qing realm. (So much so that in recent years the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Qing emperors Kangxi and Qianlong would be posthumously elevated in film and textbook to the status of Chinese patriots.) In the People’s Republic, after all, one could be Tibetan, Uighur, or Mongolian, and still be a “Zhongguoren,” a “Chinese,” and citizen of the People’s Republic of China. The presumption of Han dominance would extend even to overseas “Chinese” until the 1960s. Whereas Huaqiao (“overseas Chinese”) might well include non-Han emigrants, they were nonetheless all citizens of “China”—should they wish to claim that right of return and that passport.

Yet that assertion of extended sovereignty over “Chinese” the world over has been withdrawn in recent decades, and the question of “who is a Chinese?” has been re-opened by cultural and political debates across the Taiwan Strait in the 1990’s. Lee Teng-hui’s (b. 1923) bangguo lun (thesis on two Chinas) might be translated by the People’s Republic as a theory of two “states,” but it could be equally well understood (and was more likely intended) as a theory of the coexistence of two “nations” on either side of the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan’s linguistic distancing from “China” is clear to anyone who follows official rhetoric on that island. As late as the 1980s the People’s Republic would be referred to as Zhonggong (the Chinese Communists) or daliu (the mainland). Now—and for all political parties—it is simply Zhongguo (China), as distinct from Taiwan. We are all Huaren, says Taiwan’s President Chen Shui-bian (b. 1951), coining a fuzzy term for anyone descended of the Chinese cultural realm, but we are not all Zhongguoren. So the covers of passports of the Republic of China will now tell the world, in English, that they are “Issued in Taiwan.”

China’s Borders

The question of who is “Chinese” is directly related to the capacity of the Chinese state to demarcate and defend borders. No Chinese empire had ever been so big for so long as the Qing realm of the Manchus. The first decade of the twentieth century was full of portends of its dissolution. But the striking fact of the twentieth century was that this space was not only redefined, as “Chinese” and as the sacred soil of “China,” but also defended diplomatically and militarily to such a degree that the borders of the People’s Republic of China today are essentially those of the Qing, minus only Outer Mongolia. In this sense, the Qing fell but its empire remained.

The legitimacy of this national project was recognized by the world at large in bilateral agreements and in multilateral organizations (such as the League of Nations). These borders have enjoyed international diplomatic recognition since 1912, because the great powers of the day continued to believe—rightly—that a divided China would be a source of international instability. But it was the job of Chinese governments, not foreigners, to defend these borders. They did so with impressive success.

Chiang Kai-shek’s (1887–1975) Nationalist government held on to at least nominal title to areas that the Manchus had governed but where the Chinese Republic had little power: in Tibet, for example, where the Nationalists, like the Communists after them, would undermine a stubbornly autonomous Dalai Lama by playing up the authority of a (China-friendly) Panchen Lama; or in the Muslim region of Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) in the far northwest, where Chinese rule was reasserted in the mid-1940s, after a period of Soviet occupation. In each instance China used forms of what we would call the non-recognition doctrine; refusing to recognize anyone else’s sovereignty until matters could be settled in China’s favor.

The nonrecognition of unpleasant realities was carried to an art form
China's Political Form

But what kind of "China" would dominate the old Qing lands? Indeed what would be "Chinese" about the principles and practice of successive Chinese republics?

The large majority, even of highly educated Chinese, did not have a particularly nuanced conception of what a Republic would be, once the Qing was overthrown. It is telling that in his forty-five days as provisional president of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen was much more concerned about what the Republic would do rather than what the Republic would be. He issued executive orders on footbinding and opium smoking; he ordered provincial governors to provide charitable relief; and he called for the introduction of entirely new designs of clothing that were "good for health, easy to move in, economic, elegant looking," and indeed Republican. To the degree he defined the Republic at all, it was as a "socialist republic" committed to the reforms of Henry George. A decade later, he would set forth the three principles—of nationalism, socialism, and democracy—that he deemed most appropriate for the development of China.

But in politics as in economics, Sun's was a vision of an International Development of China, to cite the title of one of his most famous works. Apart from his insistence that the Control and Examination branches of government join the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (taken from the French and American experience) of his ideal government, there is almost nothing of historically Chinese statecraft in his thought. If the Manchus had been political or cultural borrowers and synthesizers on a big scale, their Chinese successors in the twentieth century would not do them in their appropriation of alternative international models of political organization. Chinese political leaders of the twentieth century, like the cultural critics of the May Fourth Movement, were cultural borrowers par excellence. Therefore, the twentieth century was a century of continual experimentation with political forms, not one of which was indigenous in origin: the parliamentary republic of 1912–18; the military dictatorship of 1913–16; the attempt at constitutional monarchy in 1916; the "Confucian fascism" of Chiang Kai-shek, and the several forms of communism under Mao Zedong (1898–1976) and his successors.

Of all China's republics, the People's Republic was perhaps the greatest plagiarizer of international forms. In its first years, Mao Zedong and his colleagues followed Stalin's suggestions that the PRC needed a "coalition government" as an initial façade for party dictatorship; it needed elections—sham elections to be sure—to the Political Consultative Conference; and ultimately it had to have (and would have, in 1954)
a constitution modeled largely on the USSR’s “Stalin Constitution” of 1936. As Stalin put it in 1952, “If you do not have a constitution and if the Political Consultative Conference is not elected, enemies can charge that you have seized power by force.”

It is particularly ironic, but an extension of this pattern of borrowing (and of limited domestic political resources), that Chinese leaders seeking to define and protect a new nation-state would so willingly and consistently invite foreign intervention, but this, too, has been a defining characteristic of Chinese republics. Thus, Sun Yat-sen did not think himself a traitor to “China” when he sought to negotiate a European military invasion in the context of Chinese civil wars in the 1910s. Later Sun, and thereafter the Chinese Communist Party, would welcome massive foreign involvement in Chinese domestic politics in the form of Soviet political and military assistance; and Chiang Kai-shek would count American intervention in the civil war of the 1940s and 1950s.

It must be a sign of the limited universe of shared political values in post-imperial states, that each of China’s twentieth-century republics has treated its predecessor as fundamentally illegitimate, and so to resist it was not traitorous. Although today the Republic of China on Taiwan likes to date its birth from 1912, it forgets that it is the descendant of that second republic which overthrew the first by military force. When the People’s Republic was established in 1949, by means of a military conquest that began when the country was under foreign occupation, it not only called an end to the “reign era” of the Republic of China, it declared a fundamental distinction between its “new China” and the “old China” of everything before it.

There are, to be sure, continuities across several republics, particularly those of the Nationalist and Communist Party-States. The Chinese Party-States have had several consistent roles in nation-building. They existed not only to lead the government, but also to forge a citizenry for the new nation-state: for example, Chiang Kai-shek’s New Life Movement of the mid-1930s, aiming to discipline an undisciplined populace; or Mao Zedong’s famous effort to revolutionize culture. At the same time the Party-States were military states, as both the Nationalists and the Communists fought their way to power by means of party-armies in the first half of the twentieth century. (One difference: whereas the Nationalist military took oaths to defend the nation, the People’s Liberation Army swore—and still swears—to uphold the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.) The Party-States were also developmental states, aiming to mobilize and industrialize China on the basis of Party-approved plans, from the top down. And the Party-States were Leadership States, each with one paramount Leader leading the small group of men who, through the Party (Nationalist or Communist) would govern China.

But, the question may be posed: what was distinctively “Chinese” about the several Party-States of China’s twentieth century, and what has been their effect on the development of a “China” that can be distinguished from the Guomindang or Communist Party? Much more work needs to be done, by historians and political scientists in particular, on the relationship of the Party-State to the development (or nondevelopment) of truly national institutions in China’s several republics. But on the basis of current evidence it would seem reasonable to conclude that the lengthy dominance of single-party systems, has come at the cost of national institutions of civilian government that represented more the national interests of “China” than those of a political party. Certainly the influence and rituals of Party-State political culture die hard. When Chen Shui-bian was inaugurated as president of the Republic of China on Taiwan on April 20, 2000, ending the Guomindang Party-State’s monopoly on power, he bowed formally three times to Sun Yat-sen’s portrait after having joined in the singing of the Guomindang hymn that had become the “national” anthem.

As I have argued elsewhere, the history of the Chinese Party-State has been marked by its inability to work together with civilian elites to erect an enduring, self-replicating system of government. Civilians could serve the Party-State, but could not govern separately from it. The Nationalists on Taiwan eventually learned to cohabit with the soberminded, authoritarian technocrats who guided Taiwan’s economic miracle, and this may be happening on the Chinese mainland today. But these elites have never exercised political power independent of the Party-State, and they have never fundamentally challenged it.

Pressures for Taiwan’s eventual democratization—and fulfillment of the original promise of the first Chinese republic—would come from other quarters, above all from the Taiwanese majority who had long chafed under Nationalist Chinese rule. Is this a portent for other regions? Will ethnic challenges lead the process of political change in the People’s Republic as well? It seems too early to say, but the evolution of a democratic, autonomous Taiwan in the past decade allows us to recast the question of the unity of “China.” From the perspective of history, we may ask not how soon will Taiwan become enfolded in the arms of the motherland, but how long can the Chinese nation-state hold on to historically non-Chinese areas that were inherited from the Qing, such as Tibet or Xinjiang?

Ultimately, the key to the future of a state called “China” lies in the great unresolved question of the twentieth century: what kind of political system will, in the long run, take the place of the old empire? Chinese governments have been much more successful in defending territory and sovereignty—for which international recognition would be
forthcoming—than they have been in erecting stable political systems
that enjoy domestic political legitimacy. Save for the 1990s, every decade
in the twentieth century witnessed a major political upheaval. If twenti-
eth-century history is any guide, when political change comes in China,
it will be closely related not to historically Chinese political traditions
but to contemporary international political and intellectual currents.

"China," then, appears to have succeeded more as a geographic than
as an enduring political project. In China as elsewhere in the twentieth
century, an empire was replaced by the more dynamic state form of the
twentieth century, the nation-state (which in China took the form of sev-
eral republics and two Party-States). This became a viable, perhaps es-
ential, regime in a world of competition thanks to the possibilities of
military and communications technology: the military united and de-
fended it; railroad, airplane, and telephone allowed it coherence; and its
ideologies of ethnic and civic cohesion gave it a semblance of political
unity. In purely geographic terms, the Chinese nation-state was more
successful than any other post-imperial structure in the twentieth cen-
tury. As an effort to define a state and a culture, however, "China" has
been a work in progress, a process of becoming more than of being.15

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it may be that the
new but poorly institutionalized Chinese state, like other nation-states, is
losing its capacity to mobilize and monopolize economic and ideologi-
cal resources, as the web of economic relations and the diffusion of cul-
tural or religious values makes all frontiers more permeable and
vulnerable than they ever were under the Qing. If that is the case, the
history of "China" may prove to be a very short one indeed.
11. Ibid., 6–7.
12. Ibid., 7–11.
13. Ibid., 10–11.
15. Ibid., 79.
18. Ibid., 15.
20. Ibid.
23. Wakabayashi argues that the more substantive meaning of “harmony” (jirau) is “popular unity and integration.” See Wakabayashi, “Katō Hironobu and Confucian Natural Rights, 1861–1870,” 471–72.
29. See Mark Ravina, Land and Lordship in Early Modern Japan (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

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47. Ibid., 366fn.
49. See Frank Dikötter, The Discourse of Race in Modern China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).
51. For the People's Republic, the distinction between Chinese gongmin and jingmin was drawn decisively during the ethnic riots in Indonesia in the 1960s, when Beijing insisted that Indonesian Chinese were all first and foremost, Indonesian citizens. Meanwhile, Taiwan and Hong Kong mobilized (semi-officially) to aid Indonesians of Chinese descent.
53. See Shi Zhe, Zai lishi juren shenxian (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian shuju, 1991), 408.
54. William C. Kirby, “The Nationalist Regime and the Chinese Party-State,
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5. Ibid., 23–29.


8. Ibid., 83–89.


