

## Identity Politics With Chinese Characteristics

### How the CCP's Quest to Define "China" Shapes Beijing's Agenda

By Odd Arne Westad

What is China? The answer is less obvious than it seems. Is the vast territory primarily a country, a civilization, or a political construct? Is it an empire or a nation-state? Is it a region with different languages and cultures or a (mostly) homogeneous people in which the great majority are closely connected by common traditions and ancestors?

For most of the past two millennia, the area known today as China was the center of empires. Some of those empires were large, extending into Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, and the northern Pacific. Others were smaller, containing only parts of present-day China. At times, the area was made up of a number of small states competing for influence, in patterns not unlike what existed in Europe after the fall of Rome. But, in general, empire has been the rule rather than the exception.

That today's China descends from empires makes it harder to define what is "inside" and what is "outside" the country, as the Chinese like to put it. Much of the territory of today's People's Republic of China was acquired through conquest over a long period of time by one or another of these empires, from the Han dynasty's expansion into what is today southern China around 2,000 years ago to the Great Qing dynasty's conquest of Tibet and Xinjiang little more than 200 years ago. Just as in other states that persist over a long period of time, incorporation and integration lead to coherence and identification. Most people in the southern province of Guangdong now regard themselves as Chinese; those with roots in Tibet and Xinjiang are less likely to do so. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, defines them all as its citizens.

Things get even more complicated if one views China through a civilizational lens rather than an imperial or national one. Long before the first empire appeared in the region around the Yellow River, a culture based on a written language and a set of ideas emerged. Through the use of Chinese characters, these ideas about human relationships, society, and the ordering principles of the universe spread to surrounding areas, some of which are far outside China's current borders, including in present-day Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. By the eleventh century, this process had created a network of communities that shared and passed along technologies, religions, political ideas, literature, and art. Empires based in today's China were at the center of these communities, but other societies contributed significantly to them. The civilization that resulted from this process was not—and has never been—synonymous with just a single state or people.

This complexity has kept generations of historians and cultural anthropologists busy. For anyone attempting to rule China, however, questions about identity, territory, and culture are not merely academic abstractions. Indeed, as revealed by the journalist Bill Hayton's new book, *The Invention of China*, supplying answers to those questions is a crucial task of governing. This has been especially true since the collapse in 1911 of the Great Qing empire, on whose ruins the CCP eventually built the contemporary China state. For the party, defining what China is and who is

Chinese has arguably been as important as the development of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

In brisk and skillful prose, Hayton dissects eight “inventions” that he sees as central to that process, from the very concept of “China” to the maritime claims that the CCP uses to boldly insist that the country’s borders lie 1,100 miles from its southern coast. The book is certain to infuriate Chinese nationalists, who will see it as an attack on their concept of a Chinese nation. But it provides an excellent starting point for understanding how and why China’s search for identity has come to shape international affairs.

## **THE MIDDLE KINGDOM**

Hayton begins, quite rightly, with the concept of “China” itself. As he points out, the name of the country is a recent invention. Before 1911, there was no *Zhongguo*, as the country’s name is rendered today in Mandarin Chinese and which translates literally as “the Central Country.” There was only the empire of the Great Qing dynasty—and before that there was the empire of the Great Ming dynasty, and so on. Twentieth-century Chinese nationalists liked the term “*Zhongguo*” because it had sometimes been used by the empires to describe their central regions and because it signaled the global centrality of their nation-building project.

One has to be careful, though, with carrying the critique of invented terminologies too far. Although “China” may be a modern invention, the idea of a central Chinese culture represented by a relatively cohesive group of people is much older. It might not have been referred to as “China,” or given much of a name at all beyond “our culture,” “our (written) language,” or even “us.” This older identity was much less exclusive or specific than the ideals of modern nationalists. It was still very strongly held, however, and it mapped onto a specific civilization that it makes sense to call “Chinese.” Without this sense of cohesion, there would be little for China’s contemporary leaders to build on in their authoritarian quest for the further amalgamation and standardization of the state.

In a strange way, however, modern Chinese nationalists actively reject this older concept of Chinese-ness and seek to replace it with a newly defined category of “Chinese people,” which encompasses all those who live within the country’s borders. In this view, for example, people who are Manchu, Miao, or Tibetan are still Chinese. Furthermore, they have always been Chinese, even if they have not always known it. They are among the 56 “nationalities” that the CCP recognizes as forming the Chinese people. Ninety-two percent of that population, however, belong to just one “nationality”: the Han, as the CCP defines those who prior to 1949 would have been known simply as “Chinese.” Today, all top leaders of the party are Han, as they have been throughout the history of Chinese communism.

## **FROM EMPIRE TO NATION-STATE**

For Chinese nationalists, the problem of defining China’s territory has been even more difficult than the task of defining the Chinese people. The first few postimperial generations knew that the country was an empire merely acting as if it were a nation-state. The truth is that the map of today’s China looks remarkably like that of the Great Qing empire. This sits uneasily with the CCP’s contention that during the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, China underwent 100 years of “national humiliation” at the hands of foreign imperialists who stole Chinese land and slaughtered Chinese people. An old quip holds that spending 1,000 years in

perpetual decline worked out fairly well for the Byzantines. Likewise, in terms of territory at least, China came out of its alleged 100 years of humiliation in surprisingly good shape.

The struggles that modern China has had with defining its borders is probably the main reason the CCP has so fully embraced the Western concept of state sovereignty. Prior to the period of Western global domination, Asian states often had overlapping forms and claims of sovereignty; a region could owe different kinds of allegiance to two different countries or reserve authority in one area while ceding rights in another to a nearby empire. Sovereignty was divisible and relative and sometimes negotiated in each generation as regions rose up or fell behind.

In contrast, the CCP is obsessed with state territorial sovereignty to a higher degree than almost any other regime in the world. This may be rooted partly in the fact that Westerners and Japanese bossed China around when it had a weak central government in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; they may not have split the country up, but they certainly lorded it over the Chinese. A more convincing explanation, however, is that the CCP is so insistent on China's sovereignty because it fears that its rule could be challenged in some of the territories the party took over from the Great Qing empire. Today's China is perfectly capable of adhering to international treaties or reaching border settlements with its neighbors. But the kind of international pluralism or democracy its government talks about is valid only for states. And inside its own borders, every state does what it wants—as China now does in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, places where the CCP has dramatically reduced autonomy and suppressed local identities. According to Hayton, Chinese President Xi Jinping has made it clear that he will “pay more attention to integration and less to institutionalizing diversity.”

China's insistence on the most extreme form of sovereignty is a variation rather than a violation of international norms as they have developed since the late nineteenth century. China's territorial expansion, on the other hand, is more clearly an act of a defiance. This is especially true in the southern parts of the South China Sea, which Vietnam calls the East Sea and the Philippines refer to as the West Philippine Sea. Over the past two decades, China has pushed hard to extend its territorial sovereignty to these waters, irrespective of overlapping claims by nearby states. By reclaiming land and setting up naval stations and missile sites, China has militarized the dispute and locked itself into a set of conflicts with its Southeast Asian neighbors. For Beijing, it seems, sovereignty is not only absolute but also hierarchical: China's sovereignty is, well, more sovereign than anyone else's. It sets a troubling pattern for Chinese behavior as the country's power increases.

Nowhere is this more alarming than in Taiwan. The CCP claims full sovereignty over the island, by which the party means that it believes it has the right to take over Taiwan by force whenever it wants to, regardless of the wishes of the island's people. This type of claim is of course not unique to China; think, for instance, of Spain's claims to Gibraltar. The difference is that there are now increasingly vociferous groups, close to power in Beijing, that want the CCP to exercise its alleged right to claim Taiwan. Of course, wanting to do something and actually doing it are two different things. For China to seize Taiwan by force would be a bit like wanting to fly and jumping off a cliff to prove that it is possible: the war that would follow would be cataclysmic for China and the world.

## **RIGGED AGAINST CHINA?**

Hayton's book is not good only on what China is; it is also a useful primer on what Beijing wants. Here, Hayton offers two takeaways, one slightly comforting and one somewhat alarming.

Although the CCP is becoming increasingly authoritarian at home and more aggressive abroad, there is little evidence that the regime is out to destroy the international system designed by and still dominated by Western power. Rather, it seems intent on getting more out of that system. Of course, the difference between those two goals depends on which methods Beijing adopts and how Western powers respond. But, at least for now, there remains a chance that China can be induced to take a more cooperative stance toward other countries, at least over time.

At the same time, however, most Chinese today believe that the international order is rigged against China. For more than 500 years, this thinking goes, Europeans have taken possession of the world. They have wiped out native peoples and enslaved others, colonized vast swaths of the globe, and taken control of natural resources. The so-called liberal order that these Europeans and their descendants have constructed is thus blatantly unfair—not just because it was built on wealth and power gained through genocide, colonialism, and slavery but also because by the time China became a global power, the institutions and norms of the Western-dominated order were already firmly in place. China and the Chinese, in this view, will always be second-rate in such a world.

It is difficult for foreigners to disabuse Chinese of this notion. Many Chinese find it laughable when Westerners concede that their societies were deeply illiberal for centuries but then insist that they are wholly different today. Meanwhile, Western governments feed the darker undercurrents of Chinese nationalism by frequently disregarding the very norms, values, and institutions they claim to defend.

It is hard, however, to see where such a dim view of the status quo will take China, except toward a form of international nihilism. The CCP seems to understand this as well, as the party struggles to suppress unlicensed ultranationalist groups within China. After all, extreme, chauvinistic nationalism could be easily turned against the party and its rule, as happened when Russia abolished the Soviet Union. For that reason, despite Hayton's bleak account of the origins of the CCP's identity politics, there is some reason to hope that pure self-preservation may eventually lead the party toward a less strident form of nationalism. No one, however, should expect that to happen anytime soon.

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