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AT LEAST FIVE FRONTIERS: AN INTERACTIVE CHINA IN EIGHTEENTH- CENTURY ASIA

ASIA

What is Asia, after all? For the Greeks it was the continental coast of modern Turkey, looming beyond the islands, much fought over; Troy was on the Asian side of the water. In the late 1500s Europeans were printing a growing number of maps that showed the general outline of the whole enormous continental mass; in the 1680s the erudite Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest made a very good world map, with labeling all in Chinese, for the Kangxi Emperor, perhaps the first time the great ruler learned that he was living in Asia¹.

Europeans often referred to “the Orient”, and as Asians figured out European language texts they translated this Dongfang, Tōhō, 東方 and so on, even though Asia wasn’t to the east of where they were. Recent critical thinkers have deplored Euro-American “Orientalism”, the exoticizing of Asian cultures rather than taking them seriously as sophisticated and serious versions of human experience. The International Congress of Orientalists, embarrassed, changed its name to the International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, which I can never remember. I am a very long-time member of a fine academic society centered in the U.S., the Association for Asian Studies. It originated in a Far Eastern Association publishing the *Far Eastern Quarterly*. The Ford Foundation offered that society a lot of money if they would take in scholars of South Asia, which used to be called the “Indian subcontinent”, but don’t call it that when you’re talking to a Pakistani, and Southeast Asia, which is all the lands and peoples between East Asia and South Asia, never mind if they worship different gods, pursue different ways of life, and rarely learn each other’s languages. So the Association for Asian Studies, publishing the *Journal of Asian Studies*, has little interest in Inner Asia, none in Russia or the world of Iranian and Arab Islam, sometimes

¹ The Getty Research Institute’s copy of this splendid map was on display in a “China on Paper” exhibit in 2007–2008. See Marcia REED, Paola DEMATTÈ (eds.), *China on Paper: European and Chinese Works from the Late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Los Angeles 2007) Catalog 190–195, and in the same volume, Gang SONG, Paola DEMATTÈ, “Mapping an Acentric World: Ferdinand Verbiest’s Kunyu quantu” 70–87.

Eurocentrically called the “Near East” or “Middle East”². Its interests stop right in the middle of the interactive expanses of Inner Asia, including the fabled “Silk Road”³, and cut off abruptly at the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan; of course a lot of strategists in world capitals would have slept better in 2012–2013 if that were a real, functioning border.

Our understanding of the changing shapes of relations within and beyond Asia must include quite a lot about relations between China and the peoples on its various borders. Very long time perspectives can be very useful. In this essay I go on an imaginary tour of a recent version of those borders. A Hong Kong travel agent might dream of an actual tour of these borders today, but then surely would think about the delays he/she would endure as tourism promoters, ethnic policy people, and military leaders yelled at each other in the meeting halls of the Zhongnanhai in Beijing. Let’s begin at a border marker I’ve actually seen and progress clockwise. In 2008 I participated in a conference in Nanning, Guangxi. After the conference we had a day of tourism, down to the coast. “Gold Sands” island 金沙島 is a center of Chinese domestic tourism; the local people are largely Jing 京, ethnic Vietnamese. We looked at Qing Dynasty Border Stele Number 1, in the middle of a thriving market town where people with the right papers were bargain-hunting back and forth across a bridge between China and Vietnam. We got a good introduction to a growing container port at Fangchengshi 方城市, where a plot of land was set aside for a new, state of the art low-pollution steel mill to be built by old Wuhan Steel; all the coal and iron ore would come from Australia, all the steel would go to new shipyards around the South China Sea. The local government people told us that during the American war in Vietnam this port had been “the north end of the Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail”; they would get ships out at night and they would be in Haiphong harbor before the American plans got out at dawn. Experts suspect that the Americans were monitoring everything but weren’t attacking Chinese-flag shipping.

For our purposes this little visit reminds us of the continued background of late Cold War conflict, the rise of production for global markets based on global supply chains, and very old ethnic mixings and border markings along a frequently conflict-ridden border. The energy and interactivity of the People’s Republic of China has intensified a wide range of “border issues”, most obviously the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. There will be something new in the news in the next few days. The range of geographies and issues is so great that we turn with gratitude to a set of short summaries by specialists with chapters on

² Charles O. HUCKER, *The Association for Asian Studies: An Interpretive History*, Association for Asian Studies Occasional Papers no. 1 (Seattle–London 1973).

³ In a vast and fascinating literature see recently Christopher I. BECKWITH, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton–Oxford 2009), and Johan ELVERSKOG, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia–Oxford 2010).

twenty different pieces of border⁴. In view of the news it is especially fascinating to find in this volume thirteen maps showing different and overlapping sets of maritime border claims. This essay began as a brief conference paper, and I have continued to find it useful to be brief, so that the reader can keep in mind some of the surprising comparisons among the various borders. The works cited, largely in English, give very good access to sources and scholarly literature in Chinese, Japanese, and many other languages. It will touch on several different kinds of constructed realities, especially borders but also ethnicities. Our Chinese colleagues are not as much at ease with ideas of “social construction” of political realities, wanting to insist that a border always has been a border of what always has been China. The range of geographic realities discussed in these pages should allow us to agree with them that borders are not constructed out of nothing⁵.

FRONTIER 1. VIETNAM

There is a great deal of work still to be done in understanding this frontier. I have some beginnings published and in press, but I want someone else with a lot of time to spend to do a lot more⁶. That border stele will do as a starting place. From Song times on, central authorities in what today is China and in what today is Vietnam were very serious about knowing exactly where the border dividing their territories was. Historians of Southeast Asia and of its relations with China have noted that some Southeast Asian rulers seem to have been ready to see border principalities offering their fealty to superiors in two or more directions, not much interested in establishing a clear border, until they had to deal with European territorial powers in the nineteenth century⁷. There is much truth in this, but the Vietnam case makes it clear that when the rulers of China found a counterpart on the other side of the border that was as interested as they were in extending control all the way to the border they could get militant or even obsessive about the details.

In the Vietnam case the two sides were pushed into this focus by the emergence one after another of small powers based in mountain valleys in between that

⁴ Bruce A. ELLEMAN, Stephen KOTKIN, Clive SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia* (Armonk/NY–London 2013).

⁵ These remarks are somewhat supported by Ian HACKING, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge/MA–London 1999).

⁶ John E. WILLS, Jr., “Functional, Not Fossilized: Qing Tribute Relations with Annam (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand), 1700–1820”, *T'oung Pao* 98 (2012) 439–478; John E. WILLS, Jr., *Borders, Ethnicities, Brotherhoods, Provinces: Neglected Aspects of Qing Mining History*, in: Hans-Ulrich VOGEL, Ulrich THEOBALD (eds.), *Monies, Markets, and Finance in East Asia, 1600–1900*, vol. 2 (Leiden–Boston, in press).

⁷ Thongchai WINICHAKUL, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu 1994).

would support paddy rice cultivation and dense population and rebel. The first such challenge, that of Nùng Trí Cao 儂智高 in the 1040s and 1050s⁸, may be the best studied so far. In sorting out the political logic of a land of green mountains and paddy rice valleys we have a powerful new aid in James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, largely based in deep knowledge of Burma/Myanmar but well aware of studies of China's southern borders⁹. His big picture turns the view of the hill peoples as backward exactly upside-down. The hill peoples, Scott argues, are not exiles from the paddy fields, towns, and temple complexes or irrational resisters of that more civilized and comfortable world. They have made rational choices to flee the tax collectors and corvée recruiters of the valley states. Their swidden fields and patches of sweet potato and other dry crops do not produce as much food per area as paddy, but require much less intensive labor and provide varied food resources, much more likely to leave people with something to eat if one crop fails. Multiple and shifting ethnic self-identifications and the occasional emergence of a millennial prophet from the hills are important strategies of survival and state-avoidance. All earlier views, Marxist, colonial, and those of the elites of the Chinese and Southeast Asian lowland cores, have been in denial about the compulsion and exploitation in the valleys and always favor schemes that make it possible to keep track of people and to classify them in useful ways, in short, to "see like a state"¹⁰. This can be seen in Qing writing about the hill peoples, in the separate registries and jurisdictions for them, and in the efforts of the People's Republic policy-makers to shape a neat, manageable, visible set of recognized nationalities and versions of their languages.

Nùng Trí Cao, the Mac 莫 of the 1500s and 1600s¹¹, and many others were builders of small valley powers. Although details can be hard to sort out, their ethnic affinities are with the people today called Zhuang 壮¹². Lords of elite Zhuang clans, learning the skills of disciplining labor for their paddy fields among the mountains, quite often have been able to take Chinese surnames, send their

⁸ James ANDERSON, *The Rebel Den of Nùng Trí Cao: Loyalty and Identity Along the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier* (Seattle–Singapore 2007).

⁹ James C. SCOTT, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven–London 2009).

¹⁰ James C. SCOTT, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven–London 1998).

¹¹ John K. WHITMORE, Mac Dang-dung, in: L. Carrington GOODRICH, Chaoying FANG (ed.), *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York–London 1976) 1029–1035; Kathlene BALDANZA, *The Ambiguous Border: Early Modern Sino-Viet Relations* (Diss. University of Pennsylvania 2010).

¹² Katherine Palmer KAUP, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder/CO–London 2000); Jeffrey BARLOW, *The Zhuang: A Longitudinal Study of their History and Culture* (2010) <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/resources/zhuang>; Zhang SHENGZHEN 张声震 (chief ed.), *Zhuangzu tongshi 壮族通历史*, 3 vols. (Beijing 1997).

sons to Chinese schools, and slide into full Han identity. In this they might be seen as the latest of millennia of southern rulers, back to Wu, Yue, and Chu before and after the Qin-Han transformation, who have been ready for co-optation by an imperial center and have found that center ready to co-opt them as ministers and to be firm but patient about their overcoming their cultural barbarisms. Some of the stories of the foundation of southern Chinese families by people fleeing invasions in the north clearly are legends devised in search of “non-barbarian” ancestry, but there is no reason to question the reality of migrations to the south and west over the centuries¹³. In Ming and Qing times, border peoples from southwest to northeast found demographic push and shove with Han settlers backed by the imperial state a losing proposition. Chinese statecraft at least from the Warring States on had a strong bias toward dense and mobilized populations¹⁴. The Dalai Lama has been quoted as saying that his deepest worry about Tibet is demography, that the Tibetans will be outnumbered by Han immigrants, as already has happened to a larger degree in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

FRONTIER 2: EASTERN TIBET

Once we follow the border of Yunnan north into the higher mountains things get very confusing. Several types of ethnic and cross-border interaction are intertwined. By about 1800 the mines of this area were attracting a lot of Muslim immigration from farther north. The Qing rulers always were wary of miners, unsettled, brawling, and of Muslims with their odd beliefs, foreign connections, and congregational solidarity and leadership. They overreacted to Muslim-anti Muslim brawls, and some see their repression putting Yunnan on a dire course toward the Muslim rebellions of the mid-1800s¹⁵. Tibet-related peoples already were part of the mix, and farther north in what is now western Sichuan the late 1700s saw a steady increase of Han settlement and a great deal of turmoil in the Tibetan (sometimes called Kham) communities, involving fights with Han settlers and among Tibetans whose allegiances were to Red Hat

¹³ The theme has been around in foreign writing on China for a long time; see Herold J. WIENS, *China's March Toward the Tropics: A Discussion of the Southward Penetration of China's Culture, Peoples, and Political Control in Relation to the Non-Han-Chinese Peoples of South China in the Perspective of Historical and Cultural Geography* (Hamden/CT 1954); Wolfram EBERHARD, *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden 1968).

¹⁴ See especially Mark ELVIN, *The Retreat of the Elephants: A Environmental History of China* (New Haven–London 2004), Ch. 5.

¹⁵ Jonathan N. LIPMAN, (2006). ‘A Fierce and Brutal People’: On Islam and Muslims in Qing Law, in: Pamela K. CROSSLEY, Helen F. SIU, Donald S. SUTTON (eds.), *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2006) 83–110.

monasteries, not the Yellow Hat ones dominant in central Tibet, or to the pre-Buddhist Bon religion. The Qianlong Emperor wanted to be called the Old Man of Ten Completions 十全老人 and ordered major compilations of documents on ten great military campaigns of his reign, of which the conquest of Xinjiang definitely was an impressive achievement but some others were expensive disasters, and none more so than the two Jinchuan 金川 wars, 1747–1749 and 1771–1776, in these mountains.¹⁶ The Qing would have had to deal with the fights between Tibetans and Han settlers at some level, but the scale of their commitment also was the result of their intent to stay in control of central Tibet, which had very little to do with the austere attractions of the high plateau and a great deal to do with the deep strategic and cultural connection of Tibetan Buddhism on the Mongols since the great Khubilai Khan, still in contention with his brothers, raised a young Tibetan as a completely bicultural Tibetan-Mongol and made him the great “National Teacher” 國師 Pakpa¹⁷, and much later a great lama was recognized by the Mongol Altan Khan as the first Dalai Lama in 1578 and the Dalai Lama recognized Altan as a reincarnation of Qubilai¹⁸. Since 1720 the Qing rulers had shown a strong and effective commitment to controlling Lhasa and keeping their Zunghar rivals from any influence or legitimation by the great lamas. At the end of the century they would be pulled into two expeditions into Nepal that were counted in Qianlong’s ten great completions. Down to 1949 the Tibetan people of what is now western Sichuan resisted Chinese encroachment and occasionally revolted against the Tibetan central regime in Lhasa¹⁹. And today the Chinese state seems able to keep a lid on in Lhasa as the Tibetans express their anger about, among other things, too many Chinese in town (demography again!), but the mountain monasteries of western Sichuan are giving the Chinese authorities a lot of trouble²⁰.

¹⁶ Joanna Waley-Cohen has been a leader in English-language studies of these wars; for a summary and citations of her other contributions see Joanna WALEY-COHEN, *The Culture of War in China: Empire and the Military under the Qing Dynasty* (London–New York 2006) 55–65.

¹⁷ Also written Phagspa and variations; I use Elverskog’s simplified spellings of Tibetan names, and in one case Naquin’s. Basic sources for the Pakpa episode are Morris ROSSABI, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1988) 40–42, 119, 143–146, 155–160; Herbert FRANKE, *Tibetans in Yuan China*, in: John D. LANGLOIS, Jr. (ed.), *China Under Mongol Rule* (Princeton 1981) 296–328, 305–311, and Luciano PETECH, *Tibetan Relations with Sung China and with the Mongols*, in: Morris ROSSABI (ed.), *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1983) 173–203, 181–188.

¹⁸ Johan ELVERSKOG (ed.), *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra: Altan Khan and the Mongols in the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden–Boston 2003) 139–167; Henry SERRUYS, *Altan-qayan*, in: GOODRICH, FANG (ed.), *Dictionary of Ming Biography* 6–9.

¹⁹ Melvyn C. GOLDSTEIN, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1989) 46, 83–84, 179–180.

²⁰ For excellent detail see *Economist* (London), 12–18 November 2011, 47–48.

FRONTIER 3: THE SILK ROAD OASES

China today has borders with four “-stans”: Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizistan, Kazakhstan. Connections across Asia by way of the Silk Road (a metaphor for many roads) continue to fascinate. Some Uighurs, Kazakhs, and others agitate for greater autonomy or independence, others find the continued incorporation of Xinjiang in the Chinese state preferable, connections and currents in the world of Islam are an important part of the combustible mix, and the Han settlers just keep coming²¹. Xinjiang definitely was within the boundaries of the Qing Empire as it was incorporated in the Westphalian multi-state system in the 1800s. It was a military colony where quite a few dissidents and dismissed officials spent long years in a sort of Qing Siberia and where great efforts had been made to promote oasis agriculture and to attract Han settlers, largely from impoverished Gansu and not needing much attracting. The Silk Road connections and rich oases of this region had attracted the attentions of strong Chinese regimes since Han times, but after 1500, as intercontinental maritime trade expanded, the Inner Asian Silk Route was less attractive. The Qing effort to take and hold on to this vast area in the 1700s did not have much to do with its intrinsic attractions, and almost everything to do with the ongoing and finally successful effort to crush the Zung-hars. In sharp contrast to their deep engagement with Tibetan Buddhism, the Qing elite had little understanding of Islam and, as noted, feared its congregations and its foreign connections. The resulting upheavals in this area and in Gansu in the 1800s involved Chinese Muslims, Uighurs, and others²².

FRONTIER 4: THE STEPPE

There is no denying the central importance of the northern frontier in the history of imperial China. We are now well beyond an Orientalizing image, used by Chinese anti-traditionalists like Lu Xun as well as by foreigners, of a millennial Great Wall²³. The Qin-Han confrontation with the Xiongnu and others is seen as a precipitation in two directions of a warring, herding northern culture²⁴. Major scholars emphasize the roles of bicultural northern elites in the re-unification of

²¹ On new settlements of dominantly Han population see *Economist*, 25–31 May 2013, 45–46.

²² Jonathan N. LIPMAN, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle–London 1997); James A. MILLWARD, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford 1998); James A. MILLWARD, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York–London 2007).

²³ Arthur WALDRON, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge/MA–New York 1990).

²⁴ Nicola Di COSMO, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge/MA–New York 2002).

the empire under the Sui and Tang²⁵. Ming obstruction of possibly viable accommodation with Mongol leaders and reliance on the enormous effort and expense of the Great Wall complex is seen as less typical of a long tradition and more the result of the glamorization of hyper-Confucian opposition to any form of “opportunism” and the very real menace of some Mongol leader making use of the mystique of the great days of Chinggis and Qubilai.

For the Qing there was no escaping the primacy of connections and conflicts with the Mongol peoples²⁶. The Manchus were thoroughly engaged with Mongol politics and Tibetan Buddhism before they took Beijing in 1644. In the 1680s and 1690s they had a big scare when Galdan, Khan of the Zunghars, revolted against their hegemony; the Kangxi Emperor led an expedition north with effective ferocity, and Galdan was killed and the Zunghars scattered, many of them farther west into modern Xinjiang. There the Qing pursued them in a series of very large and determined invasions in the 1750s, ending the threat of any Zunghar revival and beginning their long struggle to hold and finance Xinjiang and manage its Muslim peoples. Very patiently over many decades the Qing rulers imposed new “banner” divisions on the Mongols and made them effectively “Mongols of the Qing”²⁷. Qing patronage and control of Tibetan Buddhism also were important factors in the decline of the Mongol threat to China in the 1700s; large numbers of Mongol males were lamas living in monasteries. This was the end of the millennial threat of the mounted archers to north China. It would have been much less conclusive if the people of the steppe had not also been encircled from the north by the rapid Russian expansion across Siberia.

FRONTIER 5: THE NORTHEAST AND KOREA

From the Sui to the Ming founding, the zone reaching from near modern Beijing to the Korean peninsula and even to Japan was the scene of immense conflicts and contradictions and a great deal of state-building. One of the most important states was Goguryo高句麗, very important in Korean history but with its capital on what is now Chinese territory, so that there continue to be vehement arguments as to who should be protecting what heritage. The Jurchen people built their own

²⁵ See for example Victor MAIR, *The North(west)ern Peoples and the Recurrent Origins of the ‘Chinese’ State*, in: Joshua A. FOGEL (ed.), *The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State: Japan and China* (Philadelphia 2005) 46–84.

²⁶ The best recent entry points into a rich Western-language literature are Peter C. PERDUE, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia* (Cambridge/MA–London 2005) and Evelyn S. RAWSKI, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1998).

²⁷ Johan ELVERSKOG, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu 2006).

bilingual and bicultural power structure, ruled north China for over a century, and were the ancestors of the Manchu Qing rulers. The fall of the Yuan was a moment of epochal opportunity, seized by Yi Songgye 李成桂 to found a new dynasty that would pursue a long transformation in political culture, reducing the roles of Buddhism and warfare and pursuing Confucian ideals²⁸. Ming troops and even some Jurchen aided the magnificent Korean defense against the Hideyoshi invasion of 1592²⁹; the rising Manchus forced a much-resented submission on Korea in 1637; but the embassies continued to appear in Beijing regularly, their ambassadors exchanging poems in Chinese and Confucian tracts with their hosts, and going book-shopping in the Liulichang.

It would take a long and round-about exposition to argue that these dramas have anything to do with the astonishing situation on the Korean Peninsula today, where the Republic of Korea, one of the last century's greatest economic and political success stories, with an impressively low Gini coefficient (a measure of economic inequality) and (along with Hong Kong and Finland) one of the world's best school systems³⁰, confronts a northern neighbor with a vast army, chronic hunger, and almost no lights on at night. In Pyongyang I'm sure you still will find photos of Kim Il-sung standing on the sacred mountain Paektusan, which is right on the Chinese border and also was the Changbaishan 長白山 sacred mountain of the Manchu people.

FRONTIER 6: MARITIME CHINA

Starting where the China-Vietnam border reaches the Gulf of Tongking we have come a very long way around and back to salt water. I have been interested in maritime China since I followed some old Dutch records to these waters about fifty years ago³¹. One of the oldest Orientalist clichés about China is that it was

²⁸ Martina DEUHLER, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge/MA–London 1992).

²⁹ Kenneth M. SWOPE, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592–1598* (Norman 2009).

³⁰ *Economist* (London), 12–18 November 2011, 79–81.

³¹ Major efforts, with many leads to topics that still need work, include John E. WILLS, Jr., *Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang: Themes in Peripheral History*, in: Jonathan D. SPENCE, John E. WILLS, Jr. (eds.) *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China* (New Haven [1979]; 1981) 204–238; John E. WILLS, Jr., *Contingent Connections: Fujian, the Empire, and the Early Modern World*, in: Lynn A. STRUVE (ed.), *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time* (Cambridge/MA–London 2004) 167–203. Also in Chinese translation of volume, *Shijie shijian yu Dongya shijian zhong de Ming Qing bianqian*, 2 vols. (Beijing 2009); John E. WILLS, Jr. (ed.), *Eclipsed Entrepots of the Western Pacific: Taiwan and Central Vietnam, 1500–1800* (Aldershot–Burlington/VT 2002); John E. WILLS, Jr. (ed.), *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions* (Cambridge/MA–New York 2011).

“continental”, hiding behind a Great Wall, not adventuring and arguing around an interactive Mediterranean. This is not entirely misleading – we have seen the unshakeable primacy of Inner Asian issues in the foreign relations of High Qing – but it needs a lot of deflating. From Northern Song times, Chinese ships and settlers were major forces all the way from Guangdong to India. The ruins of a Chinese-style pagoda were sketched by the German-Dutch artist Georg Brandes in the 1790s and survived until the 1850s, at Nagapattinam on the coast of what is now the Indian state of Tamil Nadu; a Chinese inscription for this structure dated 1268 is recorded in the famous *Daoyi zhilue* by Wang Daoyuan³². But in Hong Kong and elsewhere around the South China Sea people know all too well some differences from the Mediterranean, which is a narrow sea with many local wind patterns, so that you can get from point to point in any direction through a sailing season of about nine months; here you are stuck with the *iron logic of the monsoons*, the shifts from the chilly continental air and north winds in the winter to the damp heat and typhoon alerts of the summer. In the age of sail, ships leaving Guangzhou southbound in the north monsoon couldn’t count on getting back until the next summer, at least until some pioneering voyages around the Philippines after 1750³³. The distances to destination ports were longer than those in the Mediterranean, and between modern Vietnam and the Philippines shoals made the middle of the seas very dangerous. There may be deep cultural reasons why the Chinese were less interested in planting centers of the own culture and way of life in Java than the Greeks were in planting colonies in Sicily, but the most basic reason is that the winds and the distances put Chinese settlers in Sumatra or Java much more on their own³⁴.

The famous voyages of Zheng He 鄭和 arose from a conjunction of several centuries of experience in seafaring and settlement in Southeast Asia with the new restrictions on maritime trade in the early Ming; they were a short-term full employment act for seafarers and an attempt to push as much of the trade as possible into the still-legal tribute embassy channel. Siam, Melaka, and Ryukyu were among the tributaries who kept some trade going thereafter³⁵. The maritime

³² Tansen SEN, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu 2003) 231; Debala MITRA, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta 1971) 194–197 and photograph 121; Max de BRUIJN, Remco RABEN (eds.), *The World of Jan Brandes, 1743–1850: Drawings by a Dutch Traveler in Batavia, Ceylon, and Southern Africa* (Amsterdam 2004) 353–354.

³³ Paul A. VAN DYKE, personal communication.

³⁴ Despite my protests in John E. WILLS, Jr., “The South China Sea Is Not A Mediterranean: Implications for the History of Chinese Foreign Relations”, *Zhongguo haiyang fazhanshi lunwenji*, vol. 10 (2008) 1–24, my French and German friends continue to write about various Southeast Asian “Mediterraneans”, but the concept does not seem to carry much weight.

³⁵ Louise LEVATHES, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleets of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (New York–London 1994), and Edward L. DREYER, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in*

Chinese had to do some dodging of the officials to participate in the global expansion of maritime trade after 1500. After 1700, Chinese traders from Guangzhou and Xiamen went to Southeast Asia in large numbers, and foreign merchants came to Guangzhou to buy tea. But all this happened in a *widening stateless space*, in which a few possibilities of autonomous maritime power proved extremely fragile³⁶, Taiwan was an anomalous Qing frontier with few connections other than those with Fujian, there was no Japanese maritime presence, and then into that stateless space came the Europeans with their liberal activist states, their Bengal bully boys, and their opium.

FINALLY: WHY IS CHINA SO BIG?

Our tour of the frontiers of China has passed through some very different places at very great distances from one another. That enormous space in the middle offers vital clues to the nature of the frontiers and of China's foreign relations past and present. We need to ask a question that seems silly, and the answer obvious to modern Chinese nationalists and many others, but that needs to be problematized and made explicit; "Why is China so big?" Many historians and social scientists have noticed the persistent bias of China toward political unity, and a surprising degree of commonality in elite and even popular culture, over a very wide area. My modest addition to this discussion rises out of the teaching and thinking that led to my *Mountain of Fame*³⁷.

Continental strategic and ecological factors – the need for unity against the threat of the northern nomads and for coordinated efforts to keep the Yellow River in check – go only part way even toward explaining the persistent unity of north China, and do nothing at all to explain the long and successful incorporation of the center, south, and eventually southwest, where water control problems

the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433 (New York–Boston–San Francisco 2006) are reliable summaries. Still important are the pages on this theme in one of the great intellectual monuments of the twentieth century, Joseph NEEDHAM, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, *Physics and Physical Technology*, Part III: *Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge 1971) 379–699. One of the most useful of the more specialized studies is Ma HUAN, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores'* (London 1970, Bangkok 1997).

³⁶ John E. WILLS, Jr., *Hansan Island and Bay (1592), Penghu (1683), Ha Tien (1771); Distant Battles and the Transformation of Maritime East Asia*, in: Evert GROENENDIJK, Cynthia VIALLE, Leonard BLUSSÉ (eds.), *Canton and Nagasaki Compared, 1730–1820: Dutch, Chinese, Japanese Relations*, *Intercontinenta* 26 (Leiden 2009) 255–260.

³⁷ John E. WILLS, Jr., *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton 1994). I have tried to develop some of these ideas in lectures at Mesa State College, Colorado, in 2005, at a Mellon Dissertation Seminar at the University of Minnesota, at the University of British Columbia, and at a Research Agenda Symposium, "Research in World History: Connections and Globalizations" sponsored by World History Association, Boston, all in 2006.

usually could be worked out at local levels, and where local cultures were quite different from those of north China. Here we have to look at some peculiarities of north Chinese culture that opened the way toward incorporation of southern elites and peoples. In many parts of the world, there is a strong tendency to divide people into “us” and “them”. When you meet one of them you are always on your guard, or perhaps you just shoot first. Serbs and Croats are a good example. You would never want your daughter to marry one of *them*; in fact, in such a “tribal” system, cross-cousin marriage often is a preferred option. One strand of European political culture, building on “us versus them” attitudes to create more elaborate forms of competitive corporate solidarity, runs from the competing city states of ancient Greece through those of Renaissance Italy to the fully developed Westphalian multi-state order. By contrast, as far back as we can trace Chinese constructions of kinship, they have been exogamous and patrilineal. People in the same patriline, later those bearing the same surname even if no genetic relation was clear, did not marry. Thus every marriage involved making a connection with someone “outside”, not predetermined by blood. In many parts of the world today, and throughout the world until about 1850, it has been understood that a marriage is an alliance between two families, to be based on more reliable criteria than raging young hormones. A potential son-in-law might have to prove himself, or continue to show his qualities even after the wedding.

This family and kinship background can be seen nourishing a political culture in the very important legends of three sage emperors, Yao, Shun, and Yu, traditionally a bit before 2000 BCE. Each succeeded the one before not by heredity but after proving himself the best man for the position³⁸. Shun passed the ultimate test when Yao gave him his two daughters in marriage, and Shun kept harmony in the household. We have here in kinship, I think, an important root of a political culture that produced not competitive corporate solidarities like the Greek city states but open-ended *networks* of one-to-one human connections, many of them hierarchical. Such connections are important in all societies and all complex organizations, but the Chinese have been unusually adept at them and self-conscious about them. None of us can function or talk about functioning in a Chinese society without thinking a lot about *guanxi*.

A particular form of *guanxi* that was of special importance in traditional Chinese political culture was “the Way of the Ruler and the Minister”, *jun chen zhi dao* 君臣之道. A great many of the most heroic figures in the very rich Chinese stories of their own past are not rulers but selfless ministers, defending the realm against invaders, protesting against corruption and abuse of the common people, risking their own lives to give unwanted advice to unworthy rulers. Confucius himself was a would-be minister and teacher of other would-be ministers. Not

³⁸ WILLS, Mountain of Fame, Ch. 1.

even Confucius had a very strong sense of commitment to his home state in a multi-state world; when politics went sour there, he and his disciples moved around, looking for a ruler who would listen to the Master's Way³⁹.

The importance of this theme in political culture for the enduring Chinese tendency to unity of a very large continental area is immense. A powerful ruler could count on having a large number of able men from a very wide area present themselves as candidates for ministerial positions, and could appoint them to govern local areas. Members of local elites, even hereditary rulers on the fringes of the Chinese realm, might be attracted by the moral glamour and material rewards of ministerial status. In Warring States, Qin, and early Han times, c. 400–100 BCE, we can see a long arc of transformation, culminating in the dramatic new measures of bureaucratic recruitment at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Wu in 141 BCE, as grandees of a northern culture zone with much herding, and the elite of the Yangzi valley state of Chu, with a distinctive shamanic culture, were drawn into the central political order. (This looks obvious to me now, and I used to show this arc to my freshmen every time I taught the survey, but it's not clear in Chapters 3 and 4 of *Mountain of Fame*, nor in Mark Edward Lewis' excellent new survey⁴⁰; the tyranny of the Great Change in 221 BCE is with us yet.) As noted above, there was a mutually reinforcing loop of bureaucratic centralization and script standardization.

The Way of the Ruler and the Minister was protean in the changing circumstances to which it adjusted, as protean as the idioms of citizenship and solidarity in the European tradition⁴¹. A crucial reshaping of this tradition now is much more accessible to us, through the riches the Five Dynasties–Song volume of the *Cambridge History of China*⁴². Later, quite different inter-dynastic re-shapings can be followed in the rich volume edited by Smith and Von Glahn and in the abundant literature on the Ming–Qing transition⁴³. (One could get the impression from Smith and Von Glahn and their collaborators of disappointment at the failure of early Ming projects of systematic transformation; I, on the other hand, think mid-Ming mess and muddle worked pretty well to keep the peace in such

³⁹ WILLS, *Mountain of Fame*, Ch. 2.

⁴⁰ Mark Edward LEWIS, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge/MA–London 2007).

⁴¹ WILLS, *Mountain of Fame*, esp. Ch. 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15.

⁴² Denis TWITCHETT, Paul Jakov SMITH (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China: vol. 5, Part One: The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907–1279* (Cambridge/MA–New York 2009).

⁴³ SPENCE, WILLS, *From Ming to Ch'ing*; Frederic WAKEMAN, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, 2 vol. (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1985); Lynn A. STRUVE, *The Southern Ming, 1644–1662* (New Haven–London 1984); Lynn A. STRUVE (ed.) *Voices from the Ming–Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws* (New Haven–London 1993); STRUVE (ed.), *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*; Lynn A. STRUVE (ed.), *Time, Temporality, and Imperial Transition: East Asia from Ming to Qing* (Honolulu 2005).

a vast and varied area, as it does in the PRC today⁴⁴.) Around 1800 China showed signs of the kinds of centrifugal growth that afflicted the Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal empires⁴⁵, but avoided dismemberment to join the “family of nations” as a single state.

Today, the great area and population of China are important shapers of global interaction. Among the benefits to China’s people of the tendency to form a single very large polity at many periods, not matched in polycentric Europe and for much shorter periods in the Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal empires of many cultures, languages, and religions, were long periods without full-scale war over this large area, the relative rarity of massacre and planned, systematic devastation, the nearly complete absence of ethnic cleansings and bonfires of heretics, and the economic stimulus of a huge internal market. To take the case I know best, the Ming-Qing transition, the brutalities of Zhang Xianzhong and the ten days at Yangzhou were brief and self-limiting; only the clearing of the south coast in the 1650s and 1660s bears even faint comparison with the long ravaging of the German lands during the Thirty Years War. The Chinese people today have good reason, it seems to me, to cherish their rather fragile unity and internal peace.

The consequences of China’s bigness for its foreign relations were manifold. Unlike the elites of polycentric Europe, Chinese rulers, would-be rulers, and officials rarely had much direct experience of dealing with foreigners and almost never defined their political positions in terms of affinity for one foreign power or another. The Chinese state could draw on great wealth and a dense population in mobilizing military power against a challenging neighbor, but was wary of the ways in which military strength assembled to dominate a neighbor might destabilize politics within the empire⁴⁶. The rewards of foreign aggression could not compare with the abundance of trade and of tax revenues within the huge empire. The marvelous silks and other consumer goods produced for the vast domestic market were attractive to foreigners as well, and foreigners could obtain them either through trade or through gifts from the imperial court.

But big was fragile. In the Ottoman and Mughal empires, groups who viewed their neighbors as deeply different or inferior by reason of birth or religion might work out arrangements not to kill each other and to interact in practical matters, though very rarely to eat together or marry across group lines; a new foreign group, like the western Europeans in the Ottoman realm or the Portuguese in the

⁴⁴ Paul JAKOV SMITH, Richard von GLAHN (eds.), *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Cambridge/MA 2003). See my review of this book in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48 (2005) 1, 134–136.

⁴⁵ C. A. BAYLY, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London–New York 1989) Ch. 1, 2.

⁴⁶ Timothy BROOK, *What Happens When Wang Yangming Crosses the Border?*, in: Diana LARY (ed.), *The Chinese State at the Borders* (Vancouver 2007) 74–90.

Mughal, might be neatly fitted into such a system, encapsulated and rendered harmless for the time being. The Chinese tradition had fewer such options. Class differences were deep but hereditary status was declining in Ming-Qing times, with the important exception of the Manchu-Han divide. *Guanxi* were constructed and achieved, not given by birth. The Chinese itch for *guanxi* easily reached across the boundaries of imperial rule. In Chinese thinking and writing the figure of the “Chinese traitor” *Hanjian* 漢奸 is omnipresent. Foreigners wandering around China and building *guanxi* with Chinese might open the way to subversion and invasion. Chinese sources from Han times on are full of stories of Chinese traitors advising foreign rulers on strategies of invasion. Qing documents on disorders in the mountains of northern Annam/Vietnam sometimes seem to assume that the foreigners couldn’t produce their own scams and thieveries without the instigation of *Hanjian*⁴⁷. If big was fragile and *Hanjian* were everywhere, *defensive* limitation of foreign contacts made sense; trade was confined to a border point or two or to strictly controlled trade in the capital or another major city. Defense is the category under which foreign relations are discussed in the Qing statecraft collections⁴⁸. It is far more useful as a master concept for our historical long perspectives than the tribute system. Unilateral and bureaucratic management of foreign relations were indeed persistent aspects of China’s defensive foreign policies, but only from about 1425 to 1550 did the tribute system provide the matrix within which all of the empire’s legal foreign relations were managed⁴⁹.

CONCLUSIONS?

So have I done anything of use here for our discussions of Asia in recent times? Perhaps, if we think of a map of Asia with big splashes of a single color – Russia, China, India – and the patchwork of their many smaller neighbors. We tend to view the rise of the BRICs globally, but we ought not to forget their near neighbors, those shoppers walking across the bridge at Qing Border Marker Number One, and the listener to a paper of mine in Hanoi who responded, “Well, why

⁴⁷ See the section on Vietnam above.

⁴⁸ Changling HE 賀長鈴 (ed.), *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編, 3 vols. (Taipei reprint, [1826] 1963), *juan* 80–88, entitled *saifang* 塞防, *shanfang* 山防, *haifang* 海防, *manfang* 蠻防, *miaofang* 苗防.

⁴⁹ John E. WILLS, Jr., Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas about Mid-Ch’ing Foreign Relations, in: *Annals of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies* 8 (1986) 84–90; reprinted in: *American Neptune* 48 (Fall 1988) 4, 225–229; John E. WILLS, Jr., Did China Have A Tribute System?, in: *Asian Studies Newsletter* 44 (Spring 1999) 2, 12–13. For a sketch of the history of the tribute system see John E. WILLS, Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K’ang-hsi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge/MA 1984) 14–23.

should we trust documents written by Chinese, kept in an archive managed by Chinese?" Others will think of the complexities of border relations with Myanmar/Burma, the convoluted arguments about how one determines a maritime frontier, the big surges in mining in Mongolia, and desperate people in the darkness of North Korea looking across the border to the lights of China.