

*The Sin Wai-Kin Distinguished Visiting Professorship in the Humanities Lecture delivered at The University of Hong Kong on 12 November 2018.*

### **China's South: Changing Perspective\***

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When I took my first course in Chinese history, I thought everybody knew where China was and saw the 5,000 years of history of China as straight forward. That was at the National Central University 中央大學 in Nanjing in 1947, where one of the compulsory subjects for first-year students was General History of China, *Zhongguo tongshi* 中國通史. The three volumes by Miao Fenglin 繆鳳林 covered some 5,000 years down to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also read another three volumes of the Cultural History of China, *Zhongguo wenhua shi* 中國文化史 by Liu Yizheng 柳詒徵. They were both leading historians of the time and I took for granted that reading these two books was more than enough.

It took me sometime to realize how wrong I was. Literature had been my first love and I did not expect to be a historian. After my first year, the civil war was going badly for the Kuomintang and the People's Liberation Army reached the north banks of the Yangzi. In November 1948, the university was disbanded and I went back to Malaya. A year later, I went to the new University of Malaya in Singapore. Its Arts Faculty was very small and only four subjects were available. For the three-year BA General degree, we did three subjects. I chose English literature and economics. For the third subject, I did not want to take geography and thought that history would be more interesting.

At the end of my third year, I decided on history for my Honours degree. The first three years was mainly modern history, mostly about Europe in Asia: the rise of Western empires with Asia peripheral to what the Europeans were doing. It was an absorbing story at a time when getting rid of the imperialists had become part of our daily conversations. I had never liked the British and Commonwealth history taught in school, but university history was different. I found to my surprise that Europe's role in the decline and fall of Asia was very interesting.

Our professor taught us to use primary sources in the archival collection at the Raffles Library. I looked for a topic that was linked to some aspect of modern Chinese history and saw that Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 and Kang Youwei 康有為 and their supporters had been active in Southeast Asia. Both had stayed briefly in Singapore and Penang before moving elsewhere. Their lives were remarkable and I took the opportunity to learn about the story of China's early efforts at modernization. My professor helped me to go to Hong Kong to search for more documents and interview early reformers and revolutionaries who were still alive. The work was exciting and I decided to go on studying history.

For my Master's degree by research, I was disappointed to find that I could not continue with modern Chinese history. Anything about modern China was suspect at a

time when British troops in Malaya were fighting a communist insurgency led by local Chinese. Books published on the Chinese mainland were restricted and there was no question of access to Chinese archives. If I wanted to do research on China, it would have to be another part of its history, something pre-modern. In the end, I chose to study the part of ancient China when its people traded in the Nanhai 南海, the South China Sea.

My earlier work on Sun Yat-sen and Kang You-wei had made me aware that there were several million Chinese living in Southeast Asia and that they came from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian with different backgrounds from my own. This was another part of China. My parents came from Jiangsu and my father's family had migrated south from Hebei during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was treated as sojourners from the north. Our family did not speak any southern dialect but one closer to modern *putonghua* 普通話. Growing up in Malaya, I did learn some of the dialects spoken, but was aware that South China was different from the China my parents told me about. The classical texts that my father taught me to read were focused on famous writers and poets from northern China and hardly ever mentioned the people of the south. Nevertheless, I had no doubt that we were Chinese who shared the same history.

When I went to London, I wanted to study early Ming relations with Southeast Asia but the professor I had hoped to study with was leaving. So I spent my first year looking for another subject. I had been curious about the numerous warlords *junfa* 軍閥 that carved up the Republic of China and why it was so difficult to reunify the country. But, with no access to Chinese archives, I could only study an earlier period of military fragmentation that would help me to understand. This led me to the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" *wudaishiguo* 五代十國 period that followed the fall of the Tang dynasty, one of the most divisive periods in Chinese history.

I began reading about the southern kingdoms: Southern Han 南漢 in Guangdong, Min 閩 in Fujian, Wu Yue 吳越 in Zhejiang and Nan Tang 南唐 in Jiangsu, and was intrigued by how hard they fought to survive and that, finally, it was the Song emperors in the north that united the country. This encouraged me to focus on the northern Five Dynasties to discover why this happened. After all, the classics of literature projected an image of China as the world of the Yellow River where core ideas and values had emerged from the intense interactions between the plains of Hebei, Henan and Shandong and the uplands of Shanxi and Shaanxi, the cradle zones of Chinese civilization. There was very little about the south.

### **From the north**

I began to see the way northerners perceived China's south and how people in the south related to the Chinese state. Where did the differences come from? Why does it matter? These were questions that surfaced while I was a graduate student. When I returned to Malaya in 1957, I taught Ming-Qing 明清 history from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the Opium War. The period was one when China was the dominant power in East and Southeast Asia but then rapidly declined. By teaching the course for ten years, I better

understood the trajectories of dynastic decline and fall and why that phenomenon dominated the narratives of north and south in different ways.

Turning to how the north perceived China's south from early times, I sum it up as follows. There were at least three *souths* -- the southeast; the southwest; and a further south that both were linked to. Most of the south were peopled by what northerners called the "Hundred Yue", *Baiyue* 百越 or "Southern Man" *Nan Man* 南蠻. Those of the southwest were distinguished as "Southwest Man" *Xinan Man* 西南蠻. There was no single name for peoples further south but they included more distant people who came to trade at the riverine ports of the Yue as well as the upland towns of the Southwest.

When the Qin and Han rulers consolidated their control over the southern lands they conquered, the lands of the *Baiyue* became part of the Chinese empire. Over the next millennium, these lands attracted large numbers of settlers from the north. In the southwest, some settlers did move to the uplands, but the imperial authority decided to leave most of the *Xinan Man* alone. The most important changes came about during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This was when the "five Hu (tribes) overwhelmed the (Chinese) Hua" *Wuhu luanhua* 五胡亂華. The invaders were the ancestors of peoples later known as Turks, Tibetans and Mongols; they established their sixteen kingdoms and brought Han China to an end.

These invasions led to a series of northern dynasties being established through collaborations between the Hu and Han peoples. Those Han Chinese who refused to collaborate moved south, to south of the Yangzi, to Zhejiang and Fujian, the southern valleys of Jiangxi and Hunan, and across the mountains to the *Lingnan* 嶺南 areas. These migrations, comparable to refugees, consisted largely of families with retinues of servants and retainers and were well armed to defend themselves in the southern wilds.

Thus a new and smaller "China" was established under a succession of four Southern Kingdoms *Nanchao* 南朝, the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen dynasties 宋齊梁陳. In the north, however, the Tuoba Turks 拓跋 who founded the northern Wei 魏 dynasty took control and it was their descendants of the Sui and Tang dynasties that brought "south China" back into the fold. By that time, the economy of the Yangzi delta region was highly developed and the empire's growth centres shifted southwards from the plains of the Yellow River. With growing wealth and cultural confidence, the Tang people *Tangren* 唐人 in the south could boast that they were more authentically Chinese than the northerners.

It is still sometimes a conversation piece whether the less than Chinese northerners are more Chinese than the southerners who were not fully Chinese. What happened was that they had become Chinese at different times and in different ways. When I studied the Five Dynasties period, I was surprised to learn how much the northern *five* dynasties were unlike those kingdoms that were established in the south.

The other question that interested me was how such a divided China could become one again. The Song 宋 dynasty achieved that as the *sixth* northern dynasty and was also one that had a mixture of Chinese and Tuoba military leaders, and its emperors were only

partly successful. They failed to retake the sixteen prefectures that had become part of the Khitan Liao 契丹遼 empire, including the areas around modern Beijing. As a result, the Song was largely on the defensive for the next two and a half centuries, continually under pressure by non-Han forces like the Khitan Liao, the Jurchen Jin 女真金 and the Tangut Western Xia 黨項西夏.

The Southern Song was forced to move its capital to Hangzhou, and its rulers were in effect southerners who had to concentrate on building a secure and independent Song Kingdom *Song Guo* 宋國. This was a remarkable story of building a kingdom under the cover of an ideal All under Heaven *tianxia* 天下 that its best scholars had to redefine. They did so by reinterpreting the Confucian Classics, drawing on the wisdom of Buddhist and Daoist thinkers and practitioners while doing so. They also used the experiences of generations of Confucian officials who had served both northern and southern dynasties since the fall of the Han. Thus a revitalized body of Confucian thought was gathered together to become the new orthodoxy, *Lixue* 理學 Neo-Confucianism. In this way, China's south could claim to be the China that saved the core values of civilization.

This success story was based on the talents of enterprising southerners who developed the economic potential of coastal resources combined with those of northern elites who had brought their cultural authority with them when the Song was forced southwards. The Neo-Confucian canon that emerged was the product of two centuries of revisions and renewals during times of desperate defense. In the end, it became the gift from the south to the China that was finally reunified under Mongol Yuan, Ming and Qing rulers. The paradox here comes from the fact that the separation from the north had enabled the south to gain its own authoritative voice; this gave the southern literati the right to shape the future China when given the opportunity to do so after the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Integrating the south**

This brings me to the next big political change in Chinese history. It came from outside China because the Song Chinese had failed to put a broken China back together again. When the Western Xia and the Jin armies were defeated by the Mongols, it opened the door for Kublai Khan to conquer the Song kingdom. The whole of China was once again unified, something that no ruler had been able to do since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. For China's south, this was a transformative moment. For the first time in history, all of China was ruled not by northern Chinese but by northern *non-Chinese*.

These Mongols were brutal and destructive conquerors. They devastated most of the lands they conquered for a period of seventy years before defeating the Song. Their ambition to rule the world did not stop at the land edges; from the China coasts, they even set out to conquer countries across the seas. However, Kublai Khan did adopt Chinese ideas of legitimacy by seeing the Yuan dynasty as the successor of the Liao and Jin dynasties as well as the Song. He not only kept all of China together but also, 92 years later, his successors left a united China for Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, a leader from the south, to inherit and rebuild as a "Han-Chinese" Ming dynasty.

I call this a transformation because the reintegration of China's south was a total success. Another 300 years later, the Manchu Qing from outside the Great Wall also conquered all of China. As descendants of the Jurchen Jin, they claimed to know how China should be governed. But, unlike the Mongols, they were a smaller tribal confederation from the forests of Manchuria and were helped by having the Mongols as partners when they marched into China. Later, the Qing pushed further north and west and, like the Mongol Yuan, created a larger "China" that looked beyond traditional borders across to the Eurasian landmass. They conquered Xinjiang-Turkestan, dominated the Tibetans, and redrew the map of what came to be recognized as the historic China.

The Qing imperial map reminds us that China has never been a country, kingdom or empire of fixed and unchanging borders. For example, if the Qin and Han, the Sui and Tang, the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing can all be called Chinese dynasties, every one of them had a different set of borders. Not being a Han-Chinese dynasty, the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing were not inhibited by Chinese traditions of what *tianxia* referred to. They used the economic resources of China to support their expansions and administered Han-Chinese territories the way they thought appropriate. As for the lands that had never been part of China, they drew up new boundaries and managed them quite separately. In that way, the Mongol conquest made questions of what was north and what was south within a unified China increasingly complex and subtle. What endured was the reintegration of north and south China and the recognition that the south had laid the foundations of a new imperial orthodoxy.

There was another change to the map of China, this time in the south, that turned out to be equally enduring. The Mongols had marched south from Gansu and western Sichuan and into Yunnan and incorporated into their empire most of the lands of the southwest *Xinan Man*, that is, southern Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and western parts of Guangxi. For centuries, those areas had their own independent states, notably the Nanzhao 南詔 and Dali 大理 kingdoms. But the Mongols did something that no other conqueror of China had ever tried. They invaded China not only frontally across the Yellow and Yangzi rivers but also from the southwest and, in a two-pronged attack, destroyed the Southern Song. There followed a long process of territorial integration under the Ming, and the system of *tusi* 土司 administration by local chieftains was systematically dismantled during the Qing dynasty. What remains in the southwest today are the autonomous towns and prefectures reserved for various minority peoples or "nationalities" that are controlled by central officials appointed to provincial governments.

The process of reintegration by the Mongols from their capital in Beijing had been tentative; the Ming emperors completed the task after they drove the Mongols out. The founder first moved the capital south to Nanjing to affirm the new orientation but Zhu Di 朱棣, Emperor Yongle 永樂, usurped the throne after his father's death and moved the capital back to Beijing. He was the first Han Chinese emperor to rule China from that city and, from that time on, the centre of political power has mainly remained in the north. Beijing today is largely the city that Yongle had mapped and built.

The significance of this move was profound. It originated from the time when Zhu Di was enfeoffed as Prince of Yan 燕王 and made leader of the forces in Beijing to defend key parts of the northern frontier. For at least 30 years, he faced endless Mongol attacks

and was widely respected as a dynamic military leader. From the old Yuan palaces in Beijing, he was alert to the ambitions of Timur as the Mongol armies sought to regain their dominance in Central Asia. And, while his father had revived traditional Chinese ideas of *tianxia* and called for the restoration of Han and Tang glory, he saw in addition a more extended and inclusive worldview. When he became emperor and decided to return the capital to Beijing, he saw that this would allow him to reclaim what might be called a Mongol equivalent of *tianxia*, a worldview that emanated from Beijing. And one of his reactions against Timurid expansions in Eurasia, by sending Zheng He's naval expeditions to the Indian Ocean, point to that larger perspective.

The Chinese of the conquered Song were designated the "southern people" *Nanren* 南人, the fourth tier of the Mongol Yuan population. With an all-powerful centre lodged in the north, the *Nanren* literati had to review their position as a forsaken elite group. As they pondered their future, they continued to see themselves as bearers of the Confucian wisdom that flowered during the Song. They carefully conserved that image while successive Mongol rulers turned to Daoists and Buddhists for spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, their reorientation under rulers who were by and large indifferent to their skills enabled them to keep their self-respect and eventually won them the right to restore parts of the Song examination system during the later period of the Yuan.

Their perseverance was rewarded when the Ming emperors set out to restore Chinese moral and political values. As torchbearers of the Neo-Confucian heritage, the southern literati were brought back to the central offices. This included being entrusted to tutor the imperial household and conduct all the examinations for public office. Southern examination graduates held high offices and could stand up to former northern Han Chinese elites. The heritage sites might be located in the north but, to these literati, it was their southern minds that climbed the steep slopes of timeless wisdom. That made them proud to say that China's south was the true home of an impeccable Neo-Confucian civilization.

## **From the South**

There are no records of what the southern Yue people thought of "the Chinese" before they came south to settle. The little we know about their early contacts came from the impressions left by northerners who served as officials or were sent south as exiles. Some wrote poems and essays about people who were not at all like themselves. Over the centuries, the various peoples lived together and those who identified as *Tangren* developed local customs and lifestyles. Only the educated elites still conformed as much as they could to the northern cultural traits their ancestors had brought with them, notably those transmitted through literary works, Confucian classics and Buddhist and Daoist texts.

It was significant that the southerners adapted to living in terrains quite different from those in the north. Most of them settled the valleys of smaller rivers that flowed into the East China and South China Seas and were separated by hill ranges. As riverine peoples living in these valleys, they evolved different kinds of agrarian communities. Those closer to the river mouths developed trading centres, some of which were large enough for them to establish local kingdoms with distinctive cultures. The best example

south of the Yangzi delta was the much smaller river Qiantangjiang 錢塘江 in the ancient kingdom of Yue 越國, later the basis of Wu Yue kingdom in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and provided the capital of the Southern Song. Further south were others that played similar roles: the Minjiang 閩江 that was home to the ancient Min Yue 閩越 and later, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom of Min. And then small rivers like the Jiulongjiang 九龍江 of Zhangzhou 漳州 and in the Hanjiang 韓江 of Chaozhou 潮州, whose Min-dialect speakers established their own ports and shipping centres that produced some of the most adventurous traders of the East and South China Seas.

To their west, the rivers have a different orientation and became the centres of a larger political unit that was no less riverine. That was the famous kingdom of Nan Yue 南越 that had its capital in what is modern Guangzhou. The powerful kingdom was developed bestride the valleys of the West River Xijiang 西江 and East River Dongjiang 東江 where the two rivers met at the delta now known as the Pearl River Zhujiang 珠江. Here was rich agricultural land comparable in some ways to those of the Yangzi delta, but the two rivers are not as spectacular. The Nan Yue kingdom did produce a rich culture of its own but it was not strong enough to withstand the onslaughts by the forces of the Qin-Han empires. In the end, in contrast to the northern conditions that determined the shape of imperial China, the Nan Yue was more like a riverine state.

Further west was another riverine state contemporary with the Nan Yue. This was the Lo Yue 駱越 kingdom that developed its distinctive cultural centre along the Red River Honghe 紅河 in northern Vietnam. That kingdom was equally dominated by the Qin-Han empires and also subject to northern Chinese influences over several centuries. But fewer Chinese migrated that far south and, after the Tang dynasty, the chiefs of the Vietnamese peoples were able to make use of some powerful Chinese institutions to set up their own independent kingdom.

These ancient southern kingdoms became sites for sizable riverine states but they could not muster any combined power to challenge forces sent from the north and never had the capacity to take over the whole of China. The military superiority of the north was derived from the need to share resources on a very large scale to deal with problems associated with great rivers liable to flood and open plains difficult to defend. Northerners had to learn how to handle the distribution of power in those areas that they managed to hold and control. It required these Chinese to fight endlessly in large numbers, and that helped them to be militarily well organized and powerful.

In the southern riverine systems, most communities were content to be separate and distinct. In many ways, large parts of southern China have similar riverine conditions as the mainland parts of Southeast Asia. There, too, port cities close to the mouths of rivers tended to be developed as polities that became the capitals of kingdoms and even compact little empires. The best examples close to China's frontiers were the small port towns along the coast of what today is central Vietnam where small rivers flowed into the South China Sea. These trading centres cooperated and functioned as a distinct polity known to the Chinese first as Linyi 林邑 and later identified as Champa or Zhancheng 占城 but they could not establish an enduring and powerful kingdom. Similarly, the maritime trading

polity to their west known as Funan 扶南. This gave way to the Zhenla/Gaomian 真臘-高棉 state built around valley system of the Mekong; this was a more successful kingdom that reached its apogee with the large Khmer Empire centred around Angkor. But even this could not dominate across river systems for long and ended up overrun by tropical jungles.

Further to the west, the Menam river (Chao Phraya) eventually became the heart of dynastic states that the Chinese called *Xianluo* 暹羅 (Siam), whose rulers were related to some of the Southwest Man peoples neighbouring Yuan and Ming China. Siam grew to become a strong kingdom but was never secure against enemies from their west. There the delta areas of the Salween and the Irrawaddy rivers provided river passages into the interior of modern Burma where other upland peoples came to establish Theravada Buddhist states. But, like all the others, none were strong for long enough to establish lasting empires.

Thus, at different times, the southern coasts from the Qiantang river to the Pearl River in China to mainland Southeast Asian polities all the way to today's Myanmar, there had been at least two sets of riverine states. They were separated because the Qin-Han and Tang empires stopped at China's southern coasts. After reaching the sea, the emperors chose to establish their garrisons on land and sea to defend the coastal borders. They seemed to have been content with that once they were clear that there were no threats from maritime enemies. Even the coastal Yue peoples of the south who later became *Tangren* or Tang Chinese did not seek to expand Chinese power. They were content to be skilled maritime folk who could be counted on to venture across the China Seas as imperial sailors when necessary or as merchants whenever they had opportunities to do so.

From ancient times, foreign traders coming to China were always welcome but it was a long while before Chinese merchants went forth in their own ships to trade south of the coastal areas. It was not until the tenth century that there is evidence of the Chinese venturing beyond the Nanhai to obtain local products and reach out to Southeast Asian markets. Again it was the Mongol invasion that unleashed China's outreach to its south. Although primarily a continental power, the Mongol Yuan made good use of the navy that the Southern Song had built originally to fight the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin forces. Kublai Khan noted that southern Chinese were great sailors and ship-builders and harnessed their navy to further his imperial adventures.

The southern provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong were where the best ships were built. Their peoples ventured forth to the open seas to fish and trade and, after many centuries, had become fearless sailors who knew how to handle rough seas and typhoons. The Southern Song economy became increasingly dependent on the trade they brought to China's shores. However, when Kublai Khan took over, he went further. He saw the Song navy as an instrument of power projection and used these Chinese sailors to help him look for other places to conquer. He sent the navy east to attack Japan and south against Vietnam and Champa and even went as far south as Java.

In short, 120 years before Zheng He, Kublai Khan had opened China to the south in an aggressive way. As it turned out, his own forays did not lead to very much; he seemed not really to have known what he was doing. On land, however, the Mongols did better when they marched deep southwest into Yunnan and Guizhou, but when they tried to



conquer Vietnam, Champa and Myanmar, there again they crossed a bridge too far. As people from the open steppes, they simply could not cope with the jungles of Southeast Asia. But the changes they made did endure. In a matter of decades, the Mongol Yuan had brought the Southwest into China's south and outlined the future borders between China and Southeast Asia. These borders have remained more or less the same down to the present.

As for the water's edge where imperial rule had stopped, China was open to maritime trade coming from the ports and kingdoms beyond the South China Sea. By the time of Zheng He's 鄭和 naval expeditions, the Chinese had become one of the largest groups trading between China and the Indian Ocean and that display of naval power did impact on the trading patterns of the region after the 15<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Zheng He concluded that there were no serious enemies that Ming China needed to fear, so the successors of the Yongle emperor stopped the expeditions and left maritime trade mainly to foreign merchants. As we know, officials in Beijing virtually forgot about that navy for the next four hundred years and the successor Manchu Qing dynasty was never interested to expand their economic interests overseas.

It is well known how the Ming dynasty integrated all foreign trade into an elaborate tributary system. They had become conscious that they faced existential threats from the north and formalized a system that enabled their officials to assert direct control of all foreign trade. Thus the *haijin* 海禁 policy to stop Chinese from going overseas to trade with the foreigners while allowing foreigners to come under tributary conditions. The system was tightly regulated and that kept the trade limited. However, the enterprising people of Guangdong and Fujian never allowed these rules to get too much in the way. They continued with their private trading and much of that was decried as "piracy," or as "illegal". Those who were caught trading without permission were heavily punished.

Ironically, this was also the time when differences in outlook surfaced between the southern literati *shidaifu* 士大夫 and the merchant and artisan *shang* 商 and *gong* 工 classes. The literati who had been denied direct access to the northern sites of wisdom for centuries headed north in larger numbers to the power centre in Beijing to perform their imperial service. Their roles in the court and control of the examinations gave them influence and prestige in the north that they had never previously enjoyed. As a result, they hardly noticed how their compatriots in the south, the trading classes, and even peasants and fishermen, were less impressed. The latter looked further south and saw their wellbeing linked to knowing the South China Sea and the neighbouring ports. They greatly valued the freedom to trade abroad and having the chance to welcome more foreign merchants to the country.

This dichotomy in outlook differentiated the upper classes that valued the sources of authenticity and political power in the north from the non-literati who were more attracted to wealth-making developments both within and outside the empire. During the course of the Ming, these differences became subtler as further changes began to appear. While the Chinese people as a whole were being steadily integrated in a unified *tianxia*, there remained social and cultural gaps in the south between the literati who depended on servicing northern imperial interests and the venturesome merchants and artisans who continued to be endlessly enterprising. In particular, the latter groups had become great

risk-takers who continually sought opportunities to do what they believed were in their interest and what they thought they could do best. There was a changing perspective in the south among people who saw their future in developing more fruitful relationships with agencies across the seas. However, those reoriented to northern interests did not fully appreciate their potential for economic development and national consciousness.

### **Challenges from further south**

The relative indifference of the Ming and Qing empires to enemies from the south did not become obvious until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even after the defeats of the two Opium wars, the literati supporting the Manchu emperors were confident that the southern borders were manageable. The polities beyond the South China Sea might have changed hands and stopped sending tribute while armed European ships came in their stead. These Western trading forces were not an existential threat and could be satisfied by allowing southerners to work with them. Administrators appointed from the north backed by garrison troops could protect the southern shores.

When the Qing fell, the integrated literati civilization was destroyed. Bitter lessons were learnt, great mistakes continued to be made for several decades, and China was almost dismembered. New leaders arose to reconfigure how China was to be reintegrated but much of their experiments with liberal capitalism and totalitarian communism failed, in part because foreign interests continued to determine what the Chinese contenders for power should do.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese republic has modeled itself on the West in significant ways. At the same time, generations of leaders also wished to retain as much as possible of the best of Chinese culture. As a result, a host of tensions and contradictions have troubled the Chinese people for the past hundred and twenty years. The people have also undergone civil wars pitching the south against the north and suffered invasion by the Japanese who moved southwards from their bases in Korea and Manchukuo. Throughout that time, most Chinese faced great uncertainties concerning their identity as Chinese.

The identity issue began when the republican state moved away from the idea of China as the centre of *tianxia* that was territorially manifested in Qin-Han imperial power to that of the home of the Chinese *nation* *Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族. That was inevitable when the 500-year old examination system based largely on the Confucian classics as interpreted by Zhu Xi was finally abandoned. Following that, the decline and fall of the traditional literati was rapid. New generations of students attended modern schools and were liberated to look elsewhere for enlightenment and preferment, notably in the sciences, in commerce and in industrial enterprises.

This made the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some of the most intellectually alive years in Chinese history. The period could be compared to the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring States centuries of “Hundred Flowers blooming and Hundred School competing, the *baijia qifang*, *baijia zhengming*, 百花齊放, 百家爭鳴”. The Chinese seeking modernization adopted new ideas from the West that would enable them to make China

progressive and ultimately as good as, if not better than, the imperialist powers. That became part of a new national consciousness that also sought to revive a sense of pride in Chinese past achievements. This swelled to become something like the “China dream” that Chinese leaders from Sun Yat-sen down to Xi Jinping were to share, a dream to become as modern as possible without losing the values that made them Chinese. That has become a search for the right balance between heritage and progress that has engaged some of the best minds in the country for the past century.

At its core was the integration of the new Chinese nation as *Zhonghua minzu*, an ongoing process the progress of which is still debated among the leaders. However, one new trend was especially prominent. This saw the rise of enterprising southerners in coastal cities who were quick to master the new business and industrial methods. These were people who had different attitudes towards economic opportunities, not least overseas. Most of them had long been in communication with adventurous foreigners and were keenly aware of what China’s modern development would require. With the literati out of power, they could push for new ways to help the country’s rejuvenation. The integration ideal allowed them to rise to national prominence and gave them the chance to lead the country’s economic development.

The challenges were great in the midst of civil wars followed by the Japanese invasion. These economic leaders were handicapped by being closely associated with capitalist enterprises. Young idealists objected to those foreign connections, supported those who were anti-imperialist, and welcomed the Chinese Communist Party’s victory in 1949. Among the new political elites that established the People’s Republic, the struggle to redefine the new China led leaders like Mao Zedong to adopt extreme revolutionary goals that included discarding the past and starting afresh to attain a socialist *tianxia*. This “cultural revolution” reversed much of the earlier modernization efforts and the economy stagnated. The regime returned to the traditional position of northern political and military elites dictating the fate of Chinese lives and forcing the enterprising southerners to their customary peripheral role.

In retrospect, when the People’s Republic faced the high tensions of the Cold War, China’s eastern and southern coasts had become the country’s frontline of defense against international enemies. The contest between militant communism and a post-imperial capitalism had triggered hot wars in Korea and Vietnam along China’s borders. The challenges of decolonization in the south were particularly volatile and China’s south once again came into focus. The Vietnam War highlighted how painful this period of nation building was for all the countries in Southeast Asia.

China turned away from the coasts in the face of the American naval power supporting the Nationalists who had retreated to the island of Taiwan. As a result, Mao Zedong looked to overland help from the Soviet Union and went so far as to move China’s major industrial capacities from the coastal cities into the interior. While this reduced China’s vulnerability, it did little to avoid the tensions between the Chinese and their Soviet comrades. Thus, for three decades, national development was determined by continental and security demands and economic growth was severely constrained. Only the exceptional policy towards the British colony of Hong Kong could provide China with access to the global economy.

Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 decision to open up the economy, *gaige kaifang* 改革開放, to the outside world was ultimately based on the idea that the modern market economy was primarily maritime. Ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, developments under capitalism were most successful when it utilized the open seas, especially after the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans were inter-connected. This gave the countries of the North Atlantic great advantages, and most of their economic growth came from the industrial and technological inventions that took advantage of the seas to reach out in every direction.

This was the maritime *global*, a much more enduring system than the earlier continental *global* that the Mongols had tried to establish. I do not know whether Deng Xiaoping arrived at his reform policies by reflecting on historical change, or whether he was simply rejecting the disastrous ambitions of Mao Zedong. Whatever the reasons, Deng Xiaoping's decision was game-changing. By recognizing how much the market economy depended on an open maritime outlook, he enabled China to develop at an astonishing speed in the last forty years. There is no question that his *gaige kaifang* policy was truly a great leap forward and China's southerners played a vital role in that transformation.

This is something that the people in China's south had long understood but never had the power to act upon. Nor had there been the kind of leadership that could inspire a totally new orientation towards the outside world. Hundreds of years earlier, Song rulers had supported a maritime opening, but only in a defensive way. They opened up the economy mainly for the revenues that the trade generated to fill the imperial coffers. The Mongols opened the ports further but were committed to their continental agenda. As for the Ming and Qing rulers, political power had moved decisively northwards and neither empire took any initiatives to encourage the entrepreneurial southerners.

Deng Xiaoping's southern tour *Nanxun* 南巡 in 1992 was a dramatic climax to his reform programme. It certainly gave a great boost to entrepreneurs everywhere. It became another historical turning point when the idea of national integration meant that northern Chinese joined those in the south with equal enthusiasm to open the economy further. Some may now argue that Deng Xiaoping also opened up the country to problems he did not foresee, for example, the corruption of the Communist Party's senior cadres and the lack of moral compass found among so many Chinese people today. Both examples might have been the consequences of opening up quickly at a time when the whole country was in a state of confusion after decades of tight closure. That was unfortunate and probably unavoidable under those circumstances. I certainly does not negate the fact that the transformative changes he inspired have brought great benefits to most of the people of China.

This leads me to mention one other consequence that deeply affects China's south. For the first time in history, the Chinese openly proclaim that they need naval power to protect their widespread economic interests. It is not surprising that China's maritime outreach has become central to its future development. Although political power remains centralized in Beijing, the dynamism of the country's entrepreneurs comes mainly from the kind of openness that southerners have practiced for centuries. They are the ones who have long known how to maximize benefits from their outgoing endeavours, including a fine understanding of the need to defend China's maritime interests. It is no wonder that they support the political leadership in the north that appreciates their contributions.

## **Region Beyond**

The challenges ahead are much more challenging. The country's economy remains on track although many experts see the need for urgent readjustments after growing so fast for forty years. Others want more political reforms to give people room to participate in public affairs and the freedom to experiment and innovate. Yet others stress the fact that the majority of people live in the interior far from the coastal regions and have not gained as much from the rapid developments of the past decades. They are keenly conscious that the country's borders extended by the Manchus deep into Central Asia now means that more than two-thirds of its borders are continental. However successful the opening to the sea has enabled China's economy to develop, the people must not forget that their enemies had traditionally come overland.

Throughout their history, the Chinese have found their land borders difficult to defend and never found a reliable solution to the problem. Their efforts to defend the borders along the Great Wall were eventually futile. Today, these borders are longer; some of the fourteen countries China shares them with are not particularly friendly. At the same time, the Chinese are well aware that the naval powers of the world are allied to watch China's every move at sea. Most Chinese remember the way China was forced open by foreign navies. The lessons from history still resonate with their leaders, especially those dedicated to the country's defenses.

China's south is now more open than ever, and yet the tradition of wanting it controlled to some extent remains strong, certainly among those with political power in Beijing who are sensitive to any threat to their right to rule. I stress this here because it helps to explain what is the biggest and most visionary idea that has come out of China in the past few years. That is the "One Belt One Road" idea or Belt Road Initiative (BRI) that seems to offer many opportunities for future economic growth. However, the key feature of the Initiative is that it is both overland and maritime across what had for millennia been the Old World. It is a juxtaposition of land and sea strategies by China's leaders and marks their understanding that a balanced approach is essential to advance their long-term interests.

The ancient overland "silk road" and the access to the ports along the ocean highways are the two sides of the vision that demands that China remains in control when dealing with both directions at the same time. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between the overland belt to the west and north and the maritime road that is east and south. The Chinese know their history well, so they expect that the challenges that face each half would be qualitatively different. Here I shall concentrate on China's south and simply describe the overland Silk Road across Central Asia as having been financially unprofitable ever since the end of the Mongol empire; it is unlikely that Chinese leaders expect this half to pay for itself. China understands the costs and risks of investing in the Eurasian landmass. For example, it was remarkable how quickly, at the end of the Cold War, China moved to initiate the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and offer cooperation and assistance to several Central Asian countries. It was obvious that geopolitical advantage and not profits attracted the region's neighbours to ask to join the organization.

Here I shall focus on China's south and the role it is expected to play. Recent events have made clear that the major powers now see Southeast Asia as potentially the centre of the Indo-Pacific strategic zone. The region has had an extraordinary history. From a series of independent trading kingdoms and autonomous port-cities, they became territories dominated by the West. Nevertheless, they kept their pride in their community interests and managed to draw lessons from the periods of subordination. Today, they are engaged in building nation-states with distinct identities, with leaders committed to protect each country's sovereignty. Although the course of nation building has exposed a variety of tensions within and without, the leaders have come together as members of a regional association to safeguard their interests against big power rivalries involving those like the United States, China, India, and Japan.

The region has a complex history of being highly diverse and regularly fragmented into small polities. For them to come together was not normal. It began during the Vietnam War when Southeast Asia was sharply divided into two main parts. The countries fearful of the domino effect by which a communist victory in Vietnam would lead the others to fall under communist control pushed Thailand and four maritime states into a regional Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. After the war ended and Vietnam was reunited, ASEAN learnt afresh how to be neutral between the superpowers and play a useful role for the region.

During the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia, both China and ASEAN intervened on the side of Cambodia. This led China to reassess its policies towards the association and see how it could keep its members friendly. By the time the Cold War ended in the 1990s, the conditions were so changed that it became possible for all ten states to set aside their differences. In 1999, to the satisfaction of the interested big powers, all four anti-capitalist states on the mainland had agreed to join the six anti-communist others to make ASEAN a fully representative regional organization.

By that time, China that was engaged globally with the maritime market economy that effectively connected it with Western Europe and the United States. To everyone's surprise, it moved quickly to propose an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and also supported other initiatives to bring ASEAN commercial interests closer to China's own. I mentioned earlier the growing importance of the South China Sea. Where the Road initiative is concerned, that Sea and Southeast Asian are inseparable. China and five ASEAN members have announced their rival claims over the reefs and islands. That soon attracted the attention of international lawyers and oil companies. But soon after 2010 when China was seen the world's second largest economy and showed surprising determination to control all their claims, its island-building activities drew the United States to insist on the freedom of navigation for all shipping. In addition to ideological differences, China's claims in that zone came to be seen as potential threats to the security and sovereign rights of several of the new nations.

### **New perspectives**

China's south thus led to a web of multiple interests that had begun as separate disputes between China and some ASEAN neighbours and then involved legal expertise,

and finally included powerful global powers like the United States and its allies. For China, this is a long way from its traditional positions in the south. It had shared the Nanhai or South China Sea with numerous maritime interests for millennia. The sea had been no more than common fishing grounds and also throughways for merchants to and from China and no polity had made claims on any of its features. It was only in 1947 that the Nationalist government produced a boundary map affirming China's claims, a map that the PRC inherited and reproduced in their maps thereafter.

This south is now central to future economic development and keeping the waters secure for China's maritime linkages today has never been as important. For the first time in history, the south is an existential problem for its national interests. There are at least three dimensions in which all this is new.

Firstly, China understands that the dynamism in economic globalization depends a great deal on entrepreneurs and financiers as well as the inventive industrialists who were always better appreciated in China's south. Today Chinese leaders would strongly support them to manoeuvre the BRI in this south to ensure that the economy is ticking away. Secondly, the region that is wrapped much of the way around the South China Sea had never been united before. This is not to suggest that ASEAN is now united on all matters of common interest. Its members are still struggling to find their way to become more united on several key issues. But the fact that the association has come this far without any serious breakdown in relations is remarkable. It is clear that they fully understand how important it is for them to succeed in doing more together.

Thirdly, the South China Sea has become a source of tension between the United States and China. Thus the subject involves countries outside the region, including US allies Japan and Australia and some countries of the European Union. The Sea is entangled in the US reaction to China's rise as a global economic power. This rivalry could lead to the countries in the region having to choose sides at some point in the future. It is in China's interest to keep the region united and not break up into partisan actors in the rivalry that seem unavoidable. When the Americans redefined their strategic concerns by moving the goalpost from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, it made Southeast Asia even more central to the competing powers involved. As a result, what the Chinese do at sea has become more than ever the subject of alarmist speculation, again something that China has never experienced in the south before.

All these are new problems in China's south and southern Chinese could be expected to have bigger roles to play in the future as China's leaders navigate through the challenges ahead. The region of Southeast Asia itself also faces changes to its strategic role because of its inter-ocean location. ASEAN would have to learn to respond quickly to the intensified activity to come. When key leaders of the world met in Singapore last November at the ASEAN conference, they dealt with a wider range of issues than ever before. No one knows how the region can help to resolve some of the threats to peace and prosperity that more countries now face. Regular meetings among them may not be enough if either China or the US insists that a neutral ASEAN would be unhelpful.

Clearly, China's south has become more complicated than ever. Its peoples who have long understood the demands of coastal and maritime development are now also immersed in the overland economies of ASEAN's border zones. In addition, millions of

southern Chinese have settled in Southeast Asia during the past two centuries. How they have become integral parts of the region's populace could add further dimensions to how China understands and deals with the region's local national leaders.

The final point to make is that ASEAN is now being re-envisaged as a strategic zone for all the powers. This is because the global economic dynamism that had been centered in the North Atlantic for the past two centuries is moving to this part of the world. That shift had begun by spreading westwards into the Pacific Ocean after the end of the Second World War. Since then, even more significant shifts have been eastwards from Europe to the Indian Ocean. China's Belt and Road Initiative looks like ensuring that that economic dynamism could make our region the zone where future decisive actions are going to take place.

This is reflected in the US decision to redefine their key strategic interests as located in the Indo-Pacific. The two oceans have always been where the Asians were trading for millennia, where the exchange of ideas, cultures and goods has been conducted under conditions of relative peace. Those trading relationships show how the region was enriched. A better understanding of that history might help its peoples restore some of the conditions that made that possible. Of course, the American strategic decision to name the Indo-Pacific as the strategic zone of their ultimate interests places the region in a different framework. Taken together with the economic shift from the North Atlantic, Southeast Asia as the only region that faces both oceans would become strategically more significant than ever. And this region, although not part of China, is certainly part of China's south.

\* This is a revised version of the transcript of my Sin Wai-Kin Distinguished Visiting Professorship in the Humanities Lecture delivered at The University of Hong Kong on 12 November 2018. A shorter version forms chapter 6 in my volume, *China Reconnects: Joining a deep-rooted past to a new world order*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishers, 2019.