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Narrow Waters, Dangerous Currents

The Conflict in the Taiwan Strait

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Der Konflikt in der Taiwanstraße)

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Introduction (abridged) and excerpt from Chapter 4

Introduction (Abridged)

I decided to write this book in early 2022. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, my adopted home of Taiwan was suddenly making international headlines with a surprising frequency – mostly with respect to the issue of whether the country might be 'the next Ukraine', the next place to face an immanent attack from its bigger, hostile neighbour. Certainly, this comparison seemed apt given the apparent similarity of the situations: two democratic countries whose right to exist was not recognised by a neighbouring autocracy. That is, at least, how many commentators wanted to see things. After all, had not the two heads of state, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, just announced a major strategic partnership? The fact that the People's Republic doggedly refused to condemn Russia's invasion was interpreted as evidence of a secretly agreed quid pro quo: Beijing's support for the war in Ukraine in exchange for Moscow's eventual help with an invasion of the island of Taiwan. As is well known, the Chinese leadership has long dreamed of finally uniting the island with the motherland.

Six months later, it seemed that these predictions were coming to fruition. When the speaker of the US House of Representatives visited Taiwan in August of 2022, the People's Republic responded with the most expansive military manoeuvres the country had ever carried out in the Taiwan Strait. Large numbers of Chinese fighter jets and ships crossed what's known as the 'median line' – an unofficial border between the Chinese and the Taiwanese sides. Significant

numbers of foreign observers expressed fears that a war for control of Taiwan – possibly involving the participation of the USA – was edging closer, and that it might already be unavoidable. Though the manoeuvres were brought to an end after a week, China announced that it would be carrying out regular military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, explicitly stating that these would cross the median line. It was these events that sparked me to set to work on this essay.

Although the decisive impetus was provided by recent events, the complicated relationship between China and Taiwan is a topic that has preoccupied me for some time, ever since I first visited both countries nearly thirty years ago. In the summer of 1995, I arrived in Nanjing, then a city of around five million inhabitants on the southern course of the Yangtse River, as an exchange student. I neither spoke the language nor did I know a great deal about the culture of my host country. I wandered through the city in wide-eyed amazement. Construction work was taking place around the clock. Even at night, while I lay in bed, I could feel the incessant vibration of the ground beneath me. Ever since that time, China's economic ascent – an important catalyst for the recent tensions – has not been some abstract construct for me made up of growth rates and balance sheets, but something that I connect with memories that are etched into my consciousness. Memories of a country that was churning with change, a country so densely shrouded in smog and dust that I didn't even see the sun when it was shining.

In my first semester, I went to class every morning. In my second semester, I changed my plans and decided to do some travelling. The trains were slow – to get from Beijing to Shanghai, it took around five times longer than it does today – but they were reliable and took me to every corner of the country: to Yunnan, on the border with Myanmar; to Heilongjiang in the most remote reaches of the northeast; and in the spring of 1996, to the metropolis of Guangzhou right down in the south, where I only spent a few hours before the night ferry departed for Hong Kong. My actual destination on this leg of my travels was Taiwan. A friend from Berlin was studying there, but since there were no direct flights, I could only visit the island via a detour through the British Crown Colony.

If my knowledge about China was sketchy, my understanding of Taiwan was virtually non-existent. Officially, the country was called the Republic of China and was a fledgling democracy, with the first free presidential elections having taken place just two months earlier. I put the fact that the People's Republic had responded with military manoeuvres and firing missiles into waters off the coast of Taiwan down to the civil war that Mao's communists had fought against Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists half a century earlier. Never officially ended through a peace treaty or a ceasefire, the war had transitioned into a precarious, cold peace, because back then – as today –

Beijing viewed the island as a ‘renegade province’ that was by right subject to the sovereignty of the People’s Republic.

When I arrived in Taiwan, I found the island to be utterly different to all the other Chinese regions I had previously visited: visibly more affluent, palpably more free, and somehow more familiar. Instead of living in a residence for foreigners where Chinese classmates had to show their ID to enter the premises, my friend lived in a privately rented room. There were no propaganda slogans on the streets, the cinemas were showing Western films, there were English-language newspapers, and a nightlife that was scarcely different from that of a city back home in Germany. At the same time, though, Taiwan seemed much more Chinese than the People’s Republic: everywhere I looked, there were temples bursting with believers, there was an ancestral shrine on display in most businesses, and at the Palace Museum on the edge of Taipei, I was able to take in all the artworks that I had been hoping to see on my recent visit to Beijing’s Forbidden City. The image I had of China *before* my exchange year had much more in common with the island of Taiwan than with the rapidly transforming mainland.

Ever since that first visit, I have been trying to pinpoint what it is that connects and divides both sides of the Taiwan Strait. In the meantime, I have made Taipei my primary residence and I have travelled widely on the mainland, visiting just about every province, including the remote ones like Tibet and Xinjiang. Since my Taiwanese twang always gives me away, I have encountered countless reactions to the issue of ‘Taiwan’. Everything from bellicose taxi drivers who would like to see the island ‘liberated’ immediately through to contemplative intellectuals who see Taiwan’s democratic transition as a model for future developments in the People’s Republic. On the other side, I know people in Taipei who have diverse connections with China as well as people who would never set foot in their detested neighbouring country. What in Chinese is known as *liang an guanxi*, “the relation between the two shores” of the Taiwan Strait, has been an extremely complex affair for over seventy years now.

In recent times, however, these tensions have escalated palpably. The People’s Republic of China is growing ever stronger politically, economically, and militarily, and takes a particularly aggressive stance whenever its territorial claims are involved. Head of state Xi Jinping seems to be driven by a desire to go down in the history of the People’s Republic as the greatest statesman since Mao Zedong, which he can only achieve in one way: by subjecting Taiwan to the rule of the Communist Party. Now and then, in his speeches, he stresses that the solution of the Taiwan question cannot be passed endlessly from one generation to the next. And if Xi, who was born in 1953, is indeed seeking to bring about ‘reunification’, as it is known in the official parlance – something that seems doubtful but can by no means be ruled out – he has very little time at his disposal.

On top of this is the fact that not only are the hostilities between both sides of the Taiwan Strait growing, but also those between the major powers on either side of the Pacific. What we are dealing with here is a regional conflict that stands at the centre of a much larger, ultimately global tension that revolves around the question of who is going to be the hegemonic power in the Pacific in the twenty-first century. Since 1945, it has been the USA. Thanks to a dense network of allies, it still is, but Beijing does not want to let that stand for much longer. While it is difficult to assess the full scope of China's ambitions, what is clear is that it wants to be the one calling the shots in its own backyard. Removing the island of Taiwan from America's chain of allies and absorbing it into China's own domain would be *the* decisive step in bringing about a changing of the guard; a step that Beijing desperately wants to take, and which Washington wants to prevent at all costs. The fact that the usually so understated *Economist* declared Taiwan "the most dangerous place on Earth" even before the crisis of 2022 may well be the result of a passing bout of journalistic sensationalism, but one thing is certain: there is currently no place on Earth where a direct confrontation between the two superpowers is more likely.

The question on everybody's lips of *how* likely a war over Taiwan is will guide the ensuing discussion in a largely indirect fashion. Though I will reveal my own personal assessment in the final chapter, the true goal of this book is a different one: I want to help readers to *understand* the conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Estimating the potential for escalation is important, of course, but concentrating on this too intently leads almost inevitably to a focus on the worst-case scenario, drawing our attention away from the hidden roots of a conflict that is still yet to bear its bitter fruit – which represents a very limited form of understanding indeed. The current tensions are the result of historical developments, political interests, and national pathologies that are only partially familiar to readers in the West. The primary focus of my book is to lay bare these factors.

At its core, the conflict between China and Taiwan revolves around the question of whether the island of Taiwan belongs to the People's Republic of China or not. The regime in Beijing lays claim to a sovereignty that Taipei refuses to recognise; or, viewed from the other side, Taipei insists on its right to independence, a right that Beijing does not accept. One of the central dynamics of the conflict consists in the evolution of an explicitly Taiwanese identity, which began to emerge in the early twentieth century and which now, given the democratic nature of the country, is being more clearly articulated and strikes a chord with ever larger sectors of the population. There is no doubt that the emergence of this explicitly non-Chinese sense of national identity has significantly intensified the strength of the dangerous currents circulating in the Taiwan Strait. The other dynamic consists in China's growing military capabilities, which make a forceful takeover of the island gradually seem more tenable. The sabre-rattling of an underdeveloped country has given

way to the threat of war from a regime that has at its disposal an army which, though inexperienced in combat, is nonetheless highly modernised.

This shift has an unavoidable knock-on effect when it comes to the conflict between China and America. The USA was remarkably late in recognising the main challenger to its position of global supremacy, and ever since it realised its mistake, it has sought to assert its dominance with increasing vigour. After contributing to the maintenance of peace in the Taiwan Strait for decades by preventing the one side from engaging in military brinkmanship and the other side from making a formal declaration of independence, in recent times, the USA has been indulging in an increasingly radical, at times almost Manichean rhetoric. The former US diplomat Susan Shirk has described the dynamic astutely as an interplay of ‘overreach and overreaction’: Beijing overreaches in terms of its totalitarian ambitions, and Washington overreacts by viewing every Chinese foray as part of an epoch-defining struggle between democracy and dictatorship. The result is a dramatic deterioration of bilateral relations that further increases the risk of a military confrontation.

In *this* conflict, which some are already describing as a new Cold War, Taiwan is the apple of discord between the fronts. Without the island, Xi Jinping’s dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will remain unfulfilled; and without its Taiwanese allies, Washington’s position in the Indian Pacific would be much weaker than it is today.

The fact that Taiwan is the world’s largest producer of semiconductor chips, making companies in China and the US alike – and right across the world – dependent on the island, raises the stakes even further, and makes it impossible to disentangle the two conflicts. For this reason, although in the subtitle of this book I refer to “conflict” in the singular, throughout, I try to keep an eye on the (sometimes) different dynamics that are at play here. As much as Taiwan is dependent upon American support, sectors of the Taiwanese population fear that China’s rivalry with the USA could heighten Beijing’s resolve to assert its claims to the island. Some even accuse Washington of wilfully stoking the flames of the present tensions to the detriment of Taiwan. Since the crisis in 2022, these voices have grown noticeably louder.

So how does one approach a field of conflict with this level of complexity? I’ll give a somewhat truncated run-down of the structure of the book.¹ The first chapter begins by sketching out the geographic facts. In the second section, I attempt to outline, by way of three historical sketches, the events in the twentieth century that led to today’s situation. The first of these sketches covers the period from the end of the Pacific War in 1945 through to the outbreak of the Korean War. The second sketch begins in 1972 with Richard Nixon’s historic visit to China and ends with the consequences of this visit, which did not emerge until seven years later: namely the resumption

¹ Translator’s note: This section has been significantly shortened for this translation sample.

of diplomatic relations between the USA and the People's Republic and the ceasing of diplomatic relations between Washington and Taipei in 1979. The third sketch looks at the Taiwan Strait after the end of the Cold War. After these sketches, I turn my focus to the question of whether it is only a matter of time before Taiwan falls to the mainland. This is followed by a section titled *Two Long-Held Dreams*, which attempts to get to the roots of the China–Taiwan conflict and seeks to demonstrate that both countries currently stand at a point in their history where it is only the resistance of the other side that can prevent them from realising their long-held dreams. In the People's Republic, Xi Jinping's much-heralded 'China Dream' aims at the full restoration of its territorial integrity. While in Taiwan, it is the dream of political autonomy without the threat of external influence that moves the populace. This is followed by the section *A Battle on Many Fronts*, which seeks to show, by way of three contemporary examples, that the conflict in the Taiwan Strait cannot be understood if we view it exclusively as the threat of a future war. The first example is China's use of disinformation to sow doubt among the Taiwanese populace and force its own narrative onto the rest of the world; the second is its use of diplomacy to isolate the island and to force the rest of the world to adhere to the One China principle; and the third looks at the tussle for Taiwan's semiconductors, where it is the USA that is trying to prevent China from gaining access to the latest technology (which often comes from Taiwan), something the People's Republic resists with the full might of its economic power. And this trade war is increasingly having an effect on the interests of companies from beyond the two main belligerents as well. In the concluding chapter, I demonstrate that the complex, sometimes contradictory developments that my book traces out ultimately lead to one crucial realisation: that the biggest risk of a military escalation will come in the second half of the current decade. And the only way that this clash can be averted is if all parties demonstrate a significant measure of geopolitical finesse – and the time for this is now. That which the US General Douglas MacArthur once called “the vital moment” that can be the difference between war and peace arrived in the Taiwan Strait a long time ago. If those responsible let this moment slip by, they will write another chapter in the tragic history of failure that can be summed up, after MacArthur, in two words: *too late*. Ultimately, this book does not offer advice, and it is also not a clarion call. There would be better formats for that. Rather, it seeks to arm readers against seductive simplifications. Because while the intellectual challenge issuing from China may sometimes seem overwhelming, this only makes facing up to it all the more urgent.

The Dream of a United Greater China

Throughout China's 5,000-year history, national reunification and opposition to division have remained a common ideal and a shared tradition of the whole nation.

Chinese Government *White Paper* on Taiwan (2022)²

March 2014: During his eleven-day tour of Europe, China's head of state Xi Jinping makes a stop in Berlin. Just a few weeks have passed since Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the situation threatens to overshadow the visit, which Xi had been hoping to use to expand economic and trade relations. In a speech at the Collège d'Europe in Brussels, he once again lectured his audience about China being the oldest civilisation on earth with a 5,000-year history – a somewhat arbitrary piece of verbiage, since not so long ago it had been 3,000 years, even in official statements. Even before the visit to Berlin, though, there had been a minor note of discord: the Chinese side wanted to send a delegation to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and to the Neue Wache, but Chancellor Merkel ruled it out. She feared that such a visit could be manipulated in the Chinese media to stir up resentments toward Japan by drawing parallels to their arch-enemy's actions during the 1937–45 war, in particular to the Nanjing Massacre. The massacre is known as *datusha* in Chinese, the same word used for the extermination of European Jews in the Holocaust.

In the chancellery, Merkel receives her guest with a gift: a map of China made in Germany in 1750, a reprint of a French original published in Paris in 1735 by the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville. French Jesuits were the most sought-after cartographers in the world at that time, and even the Chinese Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) employed a number of these skilled mapmakers at his court to produce an atlas containing maps of his domain, a territory whose extent and geographical makeup was largely unknown to him at the time. Three editions of the famous 'Atlas for a Complete View of the Imperial Territory' were published between 1717 and 1721. Research in Chinese studies typically refers to this nowadays as the Kangxi Atlas, though Monsieur Bourguignon d'Anville was not involved in the production of this collection. He produced his map in Paris using sketches and preliminary work carried out in the Far East – without the slightest clue that some 300 years later, it would be a cause of diplomatic friction between Beijing and Berlin.³

² "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era", https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white-paper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html, no page numbers.

³ Marijn Nieuwenhuis, "Merkel's Geography – Maps and Territory in China", <https://antipodeonline.org/2014/06/11/maps-and-territory-in-china>, accessed 6 May 2022.

A photo released by the chancellery shows Angela Merkel curiously bending over the framed map as if looking for a place she can identify. Head of state Xi Jinping is standing slightly off to the side, also eyeing the gift, but betraying no inclination to take a closer look. Of course, he immediately noticed that the Chinese territory depicted on the map is much smaller than the one he governs. The main areas missing are the ones in the west, which were only gradually incorporated into the empire over the course of the eighteenth century, during the heyday of the Qing Dynasty: namely Tibet, Xinjiang, and parts of Mongolia. Well, they are not so much missing as they are set in a different colour to distinguish them from the actual Chinese territory. The same applies to the island of Taiwan, which the Qing had conquered in 1683, but had since led a largely unnoticed, marginal existence. As mentioned earlier, Kangxi himself had once described it as a “lump of dirt” and considered leaving it to its own devices once he had repatriated all the immigrants from the mainland.

China without Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan? Just what is the chancellor trying to tell me, the visitor from Beijing may have asked himself. Heated debate broke out online in China, creating a lot of work for the censors and forcing the German government spokesperson to clarify the situation a few days later: The map had been a gift of friendship and had been understood as such by both sides.⁴ The first statement may well be true, but I have my doubts about the second one. We shall return to this episode later.

The emergence of a ‘Chinese’ colonial empire

The traditional term for the Chinese heartland shown on Merkel’s gift (excluding the later conquests) is *nei di*, or “the interior territories”. For the most part, they were delineated by natural boundaries such as the ocean, the Himalayas, and the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts. It’s worth noting briefly that, apart from the coast, these are somewhat vague boundaries. Where exactly do the Himalayas begin? What about the Gobi Desert? In the northeast, on the border with Manchuria, where there was a complete lack of natural markers, the famous Great Wall was built during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

The interior territories comprised a region inhabited by different peoples who spoke a variety of languages, dressed differently, and had different culinary preferences. The people were not citizens of a united nation, for there was no Chinese nation at this time; rather, they were subjects of the ruling dynasty. When the Portuguese soldier of fortune Galeote Pereira found himself in a prison in the coastal city of Fuzhou in the mid-sixteenth century, he surprised his fellow prisoners

⁴ Johnny Erling, “Merkel’s gift to Xi enrages China’s bloggers”, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/arti3-cle126604689/Merkels-gift-for-Xi-enrages-China’s-bloggers.html>, accessed 6 May 2022.

by telling them they were ‘Chinese’. They had never heard of this designation. They referred to themselves as *da ming ren*: subjects of the Great Ming.⁵

However, the fact that the interior territories exhibited considerable geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences does not mean that there was no sense of belonging and historical continuity. There certainly was among the literate elite, and this sense was based on their appreciation of canonical texts, which in turn served as the basis for institutions such as the civil service examinations, which created a sense of shared tradition. Because internal cohesion needs to be set against an ‘outside’, the interior territories were juxtaposed with expressions such as *guanwai* (beyond the pass/border) or *haiwai* (behind the sea), which were associated with notions of alterity, savagery, and cultural inferiority.⁶ That was where the “barbarians” lived; an ambiguous term that translates various words in Chinese with widely varying degrees of accuracy, because depending on the region, the people on the other side of the border were given different designations. The one common belief about all these peoples, however, was that they did not share in the blessings of Confucian culture, meaning they occupied a lower rung of civilisational advancement than the inhabitants of the interior regions.

This conceptual world, which had been preserved for centuries, was shaken up when the people of the Great Steppe, the Manchus, scaled the Great Wall, conquered the capital of Beijing, and overthrew the Ming Dynasty. In a park north of the Forbidden City, you can still visit the spot where the last Ming emperor hanged himself in 1644. From that moment up until the early twentieth century, Beijing was ruled by the Manchurian Qing Dynasty, which had very different ideas about the relationship between inside and outside, civilisation and barbarism. Which is hardly surprising, given that according to traditional ideas, the Manchus were viewed as barbarians themselves. It was for this reason that Ming loyalists like Koxinga fought against them bitterly for decades – in vain.

As soon as they had brought the interior territories to heel, the Qing set off on large-scale campaigns to extend their domain through new conquests in the west, eventually more than doubling their territory.⁷ These forays incorporated Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia into the empire, along with the island of Taiwan, the only territory “behind the sea” in the east. These conquests not only lent a new legitimacy to the foreign Manchurian rulers – anybody who could achieve such

⁵ Bill Hayton, *The Invention of China*, 10ff. On the origins of the term ‘China’, see Geoff Wade, “The Polity of Yelang (夜郎) and the Origins of the Name ‘China’”, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 188, May 2009, http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp188_yelang_china.pdf. The Chinese word *zhongguo* (China), from which the name ‘Middle Kingdom’ derives, was originally plural and referred to “the middle states” of the North China Plain. Kai Vogelsang, *Geschichte Chinas*, Stuttgart 2012, 14.

⁶ James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864*, Stanford 1998, 2ff; as well as the previously cited study by Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*, 34–59.

⁷ See Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge/MA 2005.

feats must have possessed the “mandate of heaven” (*tian ming*) –, they also once again increased the cultural diversity of the empire, making it necessary to conceptually redefine the entire empire. To this end, Kangxi’s successor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) curated an image of himself as the ruler of a large union of five peoples and their respective languages and scripts: the Manchus and Manchurian, the Han and Chinese, the Mongols and Mongolian, the Tibetans and their Tibetan language, and the Uighur-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang. The idea was not that the different groups merged in the ‘melting pot’ of the Chinese nation (this idea emerged later), rather they were supposed to preserve their respective characteristics and thus contribute to the unique composition of the empire. At the centre of the empire was the Manchurian imperial house as embodied in the emperor, who was not only viewed as the Confucian son of heaven, but also the khan of the Mongols, the lhama of the Tibetans, and the leader of all other peoples. In paintings made at the time, Qianlong had himself portrayed as the founder of the great unity, a ruler adept in communicating with all cultures.

In light of this, it is not immediately clear to what extent the Qing should be described as a *Chinese* dynasty. James Millward notes that neither the Han Chinese as a group nor Chinese culture held a privileged position within this vision. Pamela Kyle Crossly adds that “China” (*zhongguo*) was viewed by the Qing rulers as one of several provinces within their empire.⁸ The long-held notion of the ‘Sinicisation’ of the foreign rulers, who were enlightened by the radiance of Chinese civilisation and, as it were, became converts to Chinese culture, has long since been exposed by the relevant research as overly simplistic, even if it still lives on in the People’s Republic today. Just how concerned the Manchus were with preserving their distinct identity is evinced, for example, by the fact that the ban on Manchurians marrying Han Chinese people was not lifted until 1902, when the dynasty was in its death throes and the Manchus were facing racist abuse from Chinese nationalists.⁹

It is true, however, that the ruling ideology of the Qing rested on a Confucian foundation stretching back millennia. According to these beliefs, the empire had no fixed borders, not only because mountains and deserts are formations without clear outlines, but also because, according to these traditional ideas, it was not one country among others, but *tian xia*, “everything under heaven”. In the sinocentric world of the pre-modern era, there was neither another civilisation of equal standing nor another ruler on par with the ‘son of heaven’. As such, the borders of the Qing

⁸ Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, 199; Pamela Kyle Crossly, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology*, Berkeley/CA 1999, 341.

⁹ Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China*, Seattle/WA 2000.

Empire were to be thought of as transitional zones rather than fixed lines, and claims to rule over different regions had to be constantly renegotiated or settled by force.¹⁰

The Tsardom of Russia was the only neighbour with whom the Qing signed a treaty in 1689 to more or less clearly establish their shared border, which was largely determined by the course of different rivers. It was no coincidence that these borders divided the empire from a cultural sphere where, in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, an entirely different understanding of statehood and state power had begun to take shape. An understanding guided by the notion of sovereign nations existing within fixed borders, whose sovereignty was grounded in the fact that they possessed undisputed power within those borders, and that their foreign relations were based on recognition by other nation-states, which were likewise sovereign and thus equal. The history of China's modernisation is largely a result of its entry into the Westphalian system. This process – initially unwanted by China and forced by the West – brought with it an entirely new answer to the question of what 'China' actually is.

In other words, in order to find its place within the *inter-national* order of modernity into which the country had been hurled, it had to reinvent itself as something it had never been throughout the course of its long history: a Chinese nation.¹¹ The only way to achieve this was with recourse to the typically modern, highly dangerous ideology of nationalism, which remains as powerful today as it was back then. As was the case elsewhere, the ideology of nationalism functioned as the vehicle of nation-building, and since that process is still ongoing in China, nationalism is still needed, and this is truer under Xi Jinping than ever before. When the current leader invokes the 'China Dream' and describes it as the 'glorious resurrection of the Chinese nation', what he means is that with this, the catastrophic fault lines that emerged along China's path to modernity will have been erased; the dialectical course of history and the Communist Party's unwavering struggle will have brought the country to a point where it is once again able to assume its place in the world. United, secure, and strong, from this day forth, it will be able to actively shape the world rather than merely occupying the space that is assigned to it. In a sense, this represents a return – though under a different banner – to the greatness that the empire has not enjoyed since the reign of the Qianlong Emperor.

Reshuffling the cards

This narrative may have some merit in the early twenty-first century (the supposedly 'Chinese' century), but whether these fault lines have truly been erased is open to debate. Certainly, as was

¹⁰ Liu, *Frontier Passages: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism*, Stanford/CA 2003, 177 (fn. 53).

¹¹ Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924*, Stanford 2012; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, Stanford 2004.

the case in early 2014, cracks have regularly appeared in the self-image of the People's Republic, which otherwise seems to be carved in stone. We cannot know what Xi Jinping thought when he received Angela Merkel's controversial gift, but the reaction of state media in China was prompt and can only have been triggered by a specific directive from the Party. There was extensive media coverage of Xi's Berlin visit, including mention of the gift, but the reports showed a *different* map as the supposed gift the head of state had received from the chancellor. Produced in 1844, it was roughly a hundred years younger than the one by Bourguignon d'Anville and was made by the British cartographer John N. Dower. Reflective of the time of its creation, it showed a Chinese territory that was not only significantly larger than that depicted in the map Xi Jinping had actually received, but that was also larger than the People's Republic of today. It included all of Mongolia as well as an area of about 1.5 million square kilometres in Manchuria that the Qing Empire lost to Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. Only during the era of Mongol rule under Genghis Khan was the territory we now call China even larger than what was displayed on the map that Chinese state media presented to their audience as a gift from the German chancellor. What on earth could be the motivation behind this sleight of hand?

In his book *The Invention of China*, Bill Hayton asserts that: "the People's Republic's sense of self (...) is far too fragile to admit that the shape of the country may have been different 300 years ago."¹² There is probably some truth to this. Territorial issues form not only one of the most sensitive topics in China's foreign relations, they are also an issue in its domestic discourse, or rather in the lack of a genuine discourse that addresses these issues, with the void being filled by dogmatic party lines maintaining that China has always been China and its territory has always been defined by its present borders. There can be no discussion of which territories were added when, because that would lead to the difficult terrain of historical contingencies and relativise the unconditionality of the territorial claims that China's government makes today. According to the logic of the nation state, territorial integrity cannot be separated from political sovereignty, and on this point, there can be no compromises.

In this sense, borders must be immutable – well, almost. Because apparently – and this is something that Hayton overlooked – there is nothing wrong with noticing a shift in borders if that shift is to China's *disadvantage* and presents the country as a victim of imperialist aggression. The outrage that Merkel's gift triggered among some online commentators in China was not directed at the German chancellor but at Russia, and in the most vituperative of tones. Some bloggers speculated that Merkel's map was intended as a reminder of the great theft carried out by Tsarist Russia, in an effort to prevent China from siding with Putin on the issue of Crimea. Some even went so far

¹² Hayton, *The Invention of China*, 241.

as to suggest that the chancellor wanted to encourage China to demand the return of these stolen territories from Russia. It's no wonder the Chinese censors sprang into action. But if the anti-Russian outrage was inconvenient for the Party, why did it provoke it in the first place by presenting a different map?

It would seem that the Communist Party has a deeply fraught relationship with its own history, especially with the Qing Dynasty. After all, did not 1735 – the year in which Monsieur Bourguignon d'Anville produced his map and the Qianlong Emperor took the throne – mark the beginning of the great conquests that led to a massive expansion of the empire and a new golden age? The 1840s, on the other hand, when John Dower made his map, ushered in the so-called “hundred years of national humiliation”, in which a weakened China became the plaything of imperialist powers. Today, the country would like to put the disgrace of that time behind it once and for all and return to the greatness it reached after 1735, but as the game with the switched-out maps shows, the People's Republic remains strangely entangled in its history of earlier humiliations and defeats.

Behind all of this is a simple truth that is highly inconvenient for the Communist Party: the territorial gains of the Qing Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were made through campaigns of imperialist expansion and colonisation. Although research in the field carried out in the West has long hesitated to apply such terms when the perpetrators are non-Western, there is now growing agreement that these designations are appropriate.¹³ “The Chinese Qing Empire was a colonial empire that ruled over a diverse collection of peoples with separate identities and deserves comparison with other empires,” noted Peter Perdue back in 1998.¹⁴ The Qing conquered and occupied vast territories, subjugated the local populations, and, in the case of the Dzungars, even exterminated them in order to populate their lands with inhabitants of the interior territories.¹⁵ What was this if not imperialist expansion followed by a settler colonialism similar to that practised by European powers right around the world?

For Beijing, this view is uncomfortable and even dangerous, because it exposes the People's Republic as the heir to a colonial empire that has never been decolonised. According to the logic of the nation state, people who advocate the independence of Taiwan or the secession of Tibet and Xinjiang are separatists who violate China's territorial integrity and violate its national sover-

¹³ The obvious exception is the Japanese Empire between the late nineteenth century and 1945. For a discussion of Qing imperialism, in addition to the books by Teng, Millward and Perdue, see the account by Paine in *Imperial Rivals*.

¹⁴ Perdue, “Comparing Empires: Manchu Colonialism”, in: *International History Review* 20, no. 2, 255–262.

¹⁵ Regarding the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate under Qianlong in the mid-eighteenth century, some scholars speak of a genocide. See Perdue, *China Marches West*, 283ff.

eignty. According to another, let's call it postcolonial, logic, we might just as well speak of a historically delayed emancipation struggle on the part of oppressed peoples. But this does not only contradict the self-image of the People's Republic, which of course grew out of the struggle *against* imperialist Japan and subsequently dedicated itself to liberating other countries from the yoke of Western imperialism;¹⁶ it also (and this is even more important) cuts against China's national interest in controlling these economically and strategically important territories. Therefore, according to the only permissible reading in China today, the Qing Dynasty was not at all concerned with imperialist expansion but with the establishment of national unity. That the subjugated populations were *actually* Chinese is seen as self-evident. As we will see in a moment, this viewpoint is not the product of communist ideology, but is actually borrowed from the conceptual closet of the Greater Chinese nationalism that the Republic of China – which now exists in Taiwan – had already advanced prior to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

¹⁶ See Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, London 2019.

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