

Introduction

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Editorial Preface

With the explosion of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc,¹ as well as the challenges from the Reform and Opening-up, the Party-State of the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) realized the necessity of a new comprehensive interpretative framework in which to redefine its relationship with the rest of the world and defend the national identity of socialist China in the midst of historical upheavals. Lessons from the old socialist states in the region inspired the PRC to broaden its vision to further the meaning of national identity not only as a mixture of premodern/tradition and modern elements, but also as a linkage of politics and culture. Along this line, vigorous attention has been paid to how to reinterpret the imperial legacies of premodern China in combination with traditional culturalism, inseparable from Sino-centrism, and modern nationalism, viz. a coexistence of the imperial characteristics of premodern times and the identity of modern nation-state. To be certain, the PRC does have its imperial legacies in terms of territorial continuity and ethno-cultural diversity from the premodern periods. By re-

¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Basil Blackwell, 1988).

connecting tradition and modernity to (re-)envision a new civilized empire, the PRC is now seeking a new national identity. It is at this moment that re-discovering historicity of inherent imperial features in premodern China and resetting the relationship between Chinese history and world history turn out to be integral to the reformulation of the national identity. To borrow from Ge Zhaoguang, “China does not proceed from empire to nation-state but holds the notion of a finite ‘state’ in the consciousness of an infinite ‘empire,’ and simultaneously preserves the imagination of an infinite ‘empire’ in the consciousness of a finite ‘state’.”² This use of historical embeddedness of empire is brought out as a core resource for the making of the new identity.

Three articles here treat the issues regarding the new national identity of the PRC in the Xi Jinping era by analyzing how imperial traditions, historical territory, and ideological engagement are maneuvered. In the first article, ‘China’s National Identity from Historical Perspectives: The Return of the Chinese Empire,’ Jeon In-gap relates the regeneration of the imperial tradition to the vital voices of the intellectual community talking about a new non-Western *weltanschauung*, derived from Chinese imperial tradition, for a new civilized empire. In particular, some Sino-centric universal values, according to Jeon, have become invaluable resources for the notion of non-western civilized empire. The long constitutional and institutional practice of the premodern Chinese states in pursuit of civilization and universality, the ongoing belief in the unity of All under Heaven or Grand Unification, and the imperial governance system open to centralization and decentralization alike are the points of emphasis both in the legitimization of a Chinese-style civilized empire, where various traditional and historical elements are absorbed together, and in the reconstruction of the new Chinese national identity.

Second, in ‘Historical Territory of China: Concern about Chinese Nationalism,’ Kim Seung-wook explores the new national identity by observ-

² 葛兆光, *Zhai zi zhongguo: Chongjian youguan “zhongguo” de lishi lunshu* 宅兹中国: 重建有关“中国”的历史论述 [Dwelling in the Middle of the Country: Reestablishing Histories of “China”] (Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2011).

ing the debate on historical territory. The PRC officially affirms its territory to be the territory of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), from the mid-18th century to 1840s in particular, when non-China—Inner Mongolia, Uighur, Tibet and other regions— were incorporated into the Qing and ‘China in history’ was completed. The scholarly focus on ‘China in history’ allows national integration under the PRC, whose territory and demographic diversity were inherited intact from the Qing, to be historically justified and the dichotomy of China and non-China, which involves the question of ethnic and cultural diversities, to be solved out. What is more, the article examines how ‘China in history’ can be exploited as a counternarrative able to demonstrate the workability of Chinese empires, historicize enriched non-Western experience of imperial China, and localize the Western theories on the formation of nation-states. In doing so, Kim contends, ‘China in history’ functions as a underlying frame of reference that fastens China as a region and China as a state together, fortifies the Sinocentric sovereignty, completely devoid of non-Chinese historical and cultural identities, and couches the ethno-cultural and historical borderlands of the PRC in its terms.

Last, in ‘The New National History of China and the Creation of National Identity under Xi Jinping,’ Oh Byungsoo analyzes the new state-authorized senior secondary (high school) history textbook, or *History: the Outline of Chinese and Foreign History* (歷史: 中外歷史綱要) published in 2019 and 2020. It is the ideological policy under Xi Jinping, Oh maintains, that stimulates how to reinterpret the relationship between the PRC and the world and reconstruct a new national identity in the midst of the Reform and Opening up era. The core message of the new textbook consists of two themes. The first is ‘China as an empire of civilization’ in premodern times which displaces a typical narrative of ethnic diversities and class conflict with a formative process of integration under universal laws and institutions of historical empires. The second is ‘China as a non-Western great power’ in modern times which not only struggles for the national independent development, but also stands for Third World during the Cold War. Through the two themes, the textbook bespeaks a new alternative history that China and the rest of the world should envisage in lieu of the estab-

lished Western-centered history and the US-led global capitalism, thereby shining a new identity of the PRC in the 21st century. The new identity enables the senior secondary students to learn a proactive role of the PRC as a non-Western great power in handling international matters and regional issues.

To sum up, the PRC is reconstructing its national identity in which to reinvest Chinese history for an empire of civilization in continental East Asia and beyond. With these in mind, the three articles in the Special Topic examine academic discourses on a new mode of civilization after the Western-centered modernity, a non-Western universalism for the future of the PRC, and profound historical experience of the PRC—China in history—in ethno-cultural and territorial spheres, different from Western standard, while scrutinizing their ideological implications of the recent revision of history textbook in the secondary school. Nevertheless, this representation of a new Chinese identity might aggravate concerns from neighboring states regarding any deprivation of their historical and cultural identity. Importantly, can the new Chinese standard of the PRC be fulfilled by other states or societies? Does the new identity and worldview of the PRC guarantee a vision for an inter-civilizational communication that acknowledges more similarities than disparities? It remains to be seen how the PRC makes effort to safeguard universal values and norms without the fervent desire for an empire of civilization infiltrated into a hegemonic voice for a Sinocentric world order.