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INTRODUCTION Imperial China Looking South

Wang Gungwu

Sixty years ago, a newly unified China was established, and its new leaders began to look southwards afresh. What they saw was a region that had been transformed by five centuries of a global maritime trade that eventually spawned several European empires. During that period, and especially in the nineteenth century, the earlier trading empires of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries evolved into national empires as nation-states developed out of feudal and absolute monarchies. Some, like those of Britain and France, were greatly enriched and strengthened by the scientific and industrial revolutions and their large capitalist enterprises spread across the globe. By the first half of the twentieth century, however, the rival empires in Europe had turned on themselves, and this led them to fight two world wars. In the Asia that they had dominated since the early nineteenth century, their destructive conflicts produced many revolutionary changes, for example, the rise of a modern Japanese empire, the destruction of imperial China, new divisions on the Indian subcontinent and, at the

end of the Second World War, the emergence of Southeast Asia as a self-conscious region with nationalist leaders who were dedicated to the task of building nation-states out of former colonial territories. The region's newfound self-awareness was enhanced by the common experience, for three and a half years during the Second World War, of having been under the dominance of a single, the Japanese, empire. This was the first time that the various kingdoms and ports and their peoples had ever come more or less under the control of one imperial power.

By the time China was reunified in 1949, some of the leaders of the countries to China's south were beginning to discover that they could together develop a distinctive identity for the region, and that it was in their interest to consider doing so as soon as they could. Spurred by anti-colonial movements that embarked on the task of nation building, inspired by modern concepts of sovereignty, freedom, equality, and economic development, their leaders and scholars found new perspectives from which to examine the history of China's relations with the region. For a while, the new countries were divided by the Cold War. This allowed the ideologies of the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, to determine the terms of division. It was a divide that was aggravated by a bitter hot war fought in the former French Indochina, one that inevitably affected all the states of Southeast Asia. Given the naval power of the United States, the anti-communist forces could, for most of the three decades between 1945 and 1975, control the coastal waters south from Taiwan to the Philippines, northern Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, and what had been French Indochina.

It was in this context that the history of trading relations between China and the kingdoms of the Nanhai (the Chinese equivalent to the South China Sea until modern times) attracted my attention in 1953. The subject was not new but had been studied largely in the context of using Chinese sources to throw light on the early history of Southeast Asia. The starting point was the exciting archaeological finds that proved that the region had a long and remarkable history. As more cultural artifacts were found, ranging from the monumental remains of Angkor Wat and Borobodur to beautiful examples of Dong-son drums and the discoveries at the ancient port of Oc-Eo, the realization that Chinese texts contained materials that could illuminate the findings and describe the rulers and peoples of the polities that

produced them aroused much excitement, especially among French and Dutch scholars. In particular, the fields of ethnology and historical geography were enriched. We began to see the outlines of earlier sets of interstate relations behind the extensive cultural interactions that were built on a regular maritime trade.

My attention was focused on the rise of imperial China along the northern coasts of the South China Sea. The arrival of northern armies under the Qin and Han dynasties at the turn of the third century BC to port cities like what is now Hanoi and Guangzhou changed the terms and nature of both political and economic relations. On the one hand, the hinterlands of the two cities came under imperial rule; on the other, relations beyond those ports across the Nanhai meant connecting the personalized ties between rulers that characterized the tributary trade that China encouraged. Following the imperial official recognition of each of these rulers, regular visits became normal, and brief notes on the trade began to appear in Chinese records and, eventually, in documents about exotic places and peoples. Combing through those notes and records led me to understand the pattern of each relationship and the major changes that occurred when there were power shifts in China as well as in the coastal kingdoms of the region. I was especially interested in the first phases of these relationships and, in my study, *The Nanhai Trade: Early Chinese Trade in the South China Sea*, wrote on the major features that determined how imperial China viewed the south.

A great deal has happened in the world of scholarship since *The Nanhai Trade* was written in 1954. Obviously, the ancient Nanhai was nothing like what the South China Sea has become, and both China and the littoral states around that sea have changed a great deal during the past six decades. Historians have found more documents to examine, and other records have been further combed for additional snippets of information. Even more significant have been the archaeological finds on land and the cargoes that have survived in the wrecks discovered under the seas nearby. In addition, those artifacts have been thoroughly scrutinized with the latest technological devices. There has indeed been remarkable progress and we know a lot more than we ever did. But how much that has led to better understanding of imperial China's relations with the polities and peoples in the south remains an open question.

Consider the various paradigms that have been introduced to package all those centuries of development. For example, there are narratives of the wars between Vietnam and China and the regular turbulence on the borders separating Yunnan from Burma. At sea as well as overland, the connections were based largely on a growing multilateral trade, with sizeable human migrations southwards at different times. In modern times, much of the conversation, using the vocabulary of Western scholarship, has been about empires and colonies. Separately, for Chinese officials until the late nineteenth century, there were efforts to retain the tributary system under which diplomatic and trading relations were traditionally conducted. Each of these paradigms stimulated particular areas of scholarship. Recently, there has been much work done about the complex factors that entered into culture contacts, especially in mercantile plural societies. These are accompanied by a fresh interest in the integrative and assimilation processes that follow when generations of peoples are led to live close to one another. There are also new questions about foreign tutelage where political and economic changes have to be made. In addition, there are claims for local genius that transformed foreign ideas and institutions when they became localized. And, with new nations forming, there are, not least, sensitive questions of autonomy and independence related to the position of ethnic identities and the protection of their minorities' rights. For the leaders in China and the new nations of Southeast Asia, the affirmation of sovereignty has become central and, for some, this would include the issue of political participation and the development of distinctive democratic practices. Clearly, depending on which paradigm is chosen as the central focus, the story of imperial China and the south could be told very differently.

The conference title referring to imperial China highlights an important paradigm. It can be taken to refer to a political China that takes many shapes and forms. It brings to the fore the China after Qin Shihuang unified territories from the Great Wall to the coastal lands of the East and South China Seas. Also, during the two millennia since, there could have been several Chinas. Half the ruling houses of China were not originally people whom historians would call "Chinese". It is possible, albeit anachronistically, to describe some successful dynastic houses as, for example, Turko-Mongol, Tibetan or Jurchen-Manchu, speakers of non-

Sinitic languages like those from the Altaic or Tungusic linguistic families. At another level, one could point to different groups of believers operating at elite levels of Chinese society, Nestorian Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Manichaeans, among others. Yet others were Buddhist, Islamic, Lamaist, or shamanist, before they encountered the “Chinese” worlds of Taoist, Confucian, and the Sinicized Buddhist. And, looking southwards, northern Chinese migrants adapted to a range of local deities and practices that were eventually incorporated as new markers of Chineseness.

The Chinese official record had always asserted that the southern edges of the Qin-Han Empire reached the mountainous *southwest* consisting of peoples of distinct ethnic groups. To their east, in the lowlands, were various Yue or Viet peoples. Most of them, except for those in northern Vietnam who eventually became independent, were incorporated into the Chinese cultural family. Beyond that were maritime peoples who came to China to trade, and they could choose whether or not they wanted to be part of the enlarged Chinese community.

When I started in 1953, I had taken the conventional view that hundreds of tribes in the Yellow and Yangzi river valleys interacted for centuries, migrating, mixing, trading, and fighting, until they packaged a set of shared values that characterized a distinct *huaxia* culture. This is the culture we identify as “Chinese.” By the third century BC, this had blossomed into the “Hundred Schools” that reflected the brilliant discourses among the leading thinkers of the age. Among the best known among them were Confucius and his disciples, the activists led by Mozi, the followers of Laozi and Zhuangzi and, perhaps the most powerful in governance, the Legalists who drew their inspiration from Shang Yang and Han Fei.

After the Han rulers conquered the south, they imposed their increasingly Confucian culture on the people there. From the first century BC to the seventh century AD, the non-Han of the south were forced to absorb official political culture and ethical values together with the new ideas that came from India brought there by the Buddhists. Together with Taoist formulations that responded to the Buddhist challenge, the new body of ideas was able to encompass local belief-systems, rituals, and practices. After a few centuries, that combination had become strong enough to contribute richly to the formation of Han Chinese civilization. In other words, the belief-systems added new symbols and images to the

larger mix of what became identified as Chinese. What I did not know was how much the southern indigenes had given and what was accepted into the cultures that we call “Chinese”.

Between the Qin-Han and the Manchu Qing dynasties, three major streams of thought shaped China’s master narrative that coloured all ideas of what was or was not *huaxia* culture. The Taoists preferred to leave the origins of this culture open, while the Confucians stuck to the texts anointed by Confucius and used them to determine what qualified people to become Chinese. In contrast, the Chinese who turned to Buddhism were prepared to look beyond borders. As Buddhists, they had no difficulty relating themselves to the “Western Heaven” (西天) that connected them to India and Central Asia. The fact of such different viewpoints shows that there have always been many ways of approaching that Chinese narrative. The chapters in this volume testify to the wide range of viewpoints about what happened over the centuries. The richness of current scholarship that focuses on what lies beneath the idea of Imperial China is most encouraging. What more lies below what we know today? What are the perspectives that have guided the progress since I began sixty years ago?

I shall offer a brief survey of four perspectives that influence the study of the relations between China and its southern neighbours. The first is the Sinocentric Chinese perspective. The second comes from the opposite direction, looking north, from both the maritime south and the overland southwest. The third comes from the distant West but represents modern national efforts to envisage universal history. With the fourth, I shall look to a broader perspective that contains a bundle of social science initiatives. They all have one thing in common: they confirm the attraction of history, and are linked to people who make history, who write and study it, who decide how history may be used, and who try to determine what the dominant historical narrative should be.

The Sinocentric Perspective

I was born and brought up in Southeast Asia but taught at home to see Chinese history and culture from within, what I later learnt was a Sinocentric view. The Chinese historical record was my starting point with

which to understand how the Chinese saw their neighbours and what they knew about the world. At the colonial English school where I received my formal education, I was taught the history of Britain and its Empire. This confirmed for me that starting from inside and looking out, whether from within China or Britain, was the norm. The story began with Britons, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans, and went on to how the United Kingdom expanded to dominate Asia during the past two hundred years. Thanks to that national-imperial perspective, I learnt about the larger world that was once the global British Empire. We were especially drawn to all the places marked red on the map.

In other words, I thought my homegrown Sinocentric approach was normal, quite comparable to the Anglocentric view. At the National Central University in Nanjing where I was enrolled for more than a year in 1947–48, both the traditionalist and the nationalist versions of Sinocentric history were put before me. It showed that one centric vision can evolve into another, and people can have parallel perspectives if they want. It also endorsed what I took to be the norm — the Chinese, like the British, can claim that their respective perspective on history is legitimate.

Over the decades, this Sinocentric narrative has moved away from that in the official histories compiled by Confucian literati. Historians within and outside China have used existing sources to rewrite history in new ways. Some have been influenced by European methodology; others have been specifically drawn to Marxist analyses. But they remain close to Chinese sources that are seen as Sinocentric. The modified narrative still says that the Qin-Han conquests marked a systematic beginning through deep cultural penetration by Chinese from the north. The majority Yue south of the Yangzi did retain much of their culture for a while. But, when Turco-Mongol and Tibetan forces invaded northern China and large numbers of families migrated south with their armed retainers, fundamental changes began to take place. After several centuries, the descendants of northern families with their Han culture had created what they as settled southerners saw as a distinctive Tang culture (that of the Tangren or Tang people).

After the fall of the Tang, the kingdoms in the south received more immigrants, and the southern elites affirmed their position as Chinese. Their culture became, in their eyes, increasingly more authentic than that

in the north. They thought the peoples and cultures from the steppes had diluted what was Chinese. The country now needed the southerners to maintain a balanced Chinese vision.

This perspective can be compared with the Vietnamese view that saw their culture as more authentic than the northern Chinese, especially after the Mongol conquest and also when the Manchu Qing dynasty ruled China. Comparing “Tangren” and Vietnamese portrayals can tease out some of the subtleties in the Sinocentric perspective. What is fascinating is that the Sinocentric model could describe when and how Mongol and Manchu intrusions were domesticated and their dynasties accommodated in the Chinese narrative. That inclusive process has been used to suggest how the current narrative established in Asia after a century of Western dominance may delineate how future global history is written. For the histories of southern China and Vietnam, however, the key difference rests on the fact that the Tangren provinces of China accepted the northern perspective while the Vietnamese were free to cultivate their own.

It is now acknowledged that, after the Ming, there were exceptional moments when southern Chinese experienced remarkable changes, whether on land or at sea. The Ming consolidated control over Yunnan, the former lands of the Dali state that Mongol Yuan had destroyed and, about the same time, attempted to intervene in Vietnam’s internal affairs. Later, coastal Chinese like Zheng Chenggong brought Taiwan into the fold. The vitality of southern Chinese was severely tested when the Manchu and their allies conquered all of China. The record shows that those in the south resisted the invaders much more strongly than in the north. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, it was the southerners who began to shape a new national consciousness. The sense of Chinese oneness, bolstered by modern ideas of the sovereign nation-state, was also strongly supported by merchants, workers, and other sojourners in Southeast Asia. Thus, step by step, China’s relations with its southern neighbours acquired new dimensions.

The Sinicization perspective reminds us how long the process of becoming Chinese took. Until now, large numbers of peoples in China’s southwest remain wedded to their own ways. But, with more direct interventions today from a powerful central government, that process has been speeded up and resisting it is likely to become more difficult. How will this affect the Sinocentric story? As Chinese historians confront

other historical perspectives, will it be told differently? Let me turn to the perspective of China's southern neighbours. I shall call it the northward perspective.

The Northward Perspective

The key point here is that this perspective was based on a weak sense of recorded history. China's southern neighbours countered the Chinese historical narrative largely with silence. When I was young, such a northward perspective was never recognized. At university, I learnt that there were very few records extant that could tell us what its southern neighbours thought of China. Most of the time, we depend on what Chinese officials had compiled about what southern peoples experienced of China's wealth and power. These materials touched on wars and commerce, changing tributary conditions, and culture-contacts that included the peoples in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and the northern regions of Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar and some of the littoral kingdoms of the South China Sea. The first full account was the *Man Shu* of Fan Zhuo, concerning the state of Nan Zhao in Yunnan in the ninth century. Another very full one was that of Zhou Dagan, the *Zhenla fengtuji* written four centuries later. All others were brief summaries or fragments of lost works. In any case, they do not represent southern perspectives, merely what the Chinese officials thought were worth noting.

The earliest northward perspective came from Vietnam, and that was deeply influenced by Sinocentric records. Vietnamese historians retrospectively interpreted early Chinese official accounts to recapture their ancient past. They also used that framework to account for the hierarchical relations with China and provided the Vietnamese with a proto-nationalist perspective. Later, with new narratives introduced by Christian missionaries and French colonial historians, that Vietnamese version of Sinocentrism has been discarded and replaced by modern nationalist historiography. There is little evidence of an indigenous historical perspective.

There are Thai and Burmese perspectives in their respective chronicles, but references to China were largely limited to the few official contacts they had, especially when they touched on possible Chinese help to sort out local wars and political matters like the occasional succession problem.

In the Malayo-Javanese world, it is remarkable how little has so far been found in their records about relations with China, whether diplomatic or commercial, before the twentieth century. In retrospect, it is possible to speculate what the rulers and officials of these kingdoms might have thought of China. For example, reading Chinese histories “against the grain”, as recent Southeast Asian historians have done with colonial records, is one way to point to what northward perspectives might have been like.

After the sixteenth century, European historical jottings can be used to help us portray some Southeast Asian experiences of dealing with Chinese merchants. But, except for the peoples in China’s southwest, notably those along the borders of Myanmar and Laos, and with China’s exceptional relationship with Vietnam, imperial China was hardly present in the region down to the twentieth century. It was only after the coming of European empires that Southeast Asians sought to build a coherent northward perspective for themselves. This is still work in progress.

The Universal History Perspective

The third perspective refers to the modern national narrative that was extended to cover the history of the world.

Lacking strong history-writing traditions, China’s southern neighbours are open to new approaches to history. When the Europeans arrived, new commercial needs shaped a perspective that was connected to an emerging worldview. This Europe-based knowledge system produced a dominant narrative that gradually replaced what there was of local but poorly articulated perspectives. By the nineteenth century, the nation-state empires of Western Europe had been strengthened by a global capitalist economy. This led to the quest for a paradigm of universal history. However, as I discovered when I was introduced to the history of the British Empire, the idea of that universal history itself has behind it strong national narratives. When looked at closely, the idea may be suffused with a specifically French, German, or Anglo-American imperial imagination.

For the nation-building states of Southeast Asia, this universal history founded on the national histories of major European powers is attractive. It has a distinguished pedigree and may be traced back to the histories

of Herodotus and Thucydides and the trajectories of Greek and Roman empires. Also, the salvation faiths that shaped the outlooks of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims gave it a linear and progressive timeline that provided post-Renaissance Europe with a master narrative. That was later revised to suit the secular nation-state approach in history writing. The global impact of the European states added to its appeal, as can be seen in the speed at which various Asian leaders chose to use it to reframe their own histories. The Japanese took the lead in the late nineteenth century and inspired the Chinese, Koreans, and others, now very much including the new generation of nationalist leaders among China's southern neighbours.

Thus, when former colonies became new nations after the Second World War and sought to emulate the states of the West, it is easy to understand why they adopted this master narrative. Two main strategies are being used, the first turning the colonial records against the imperialists by reading them "against the grain"; the second, digging deep into each country's past for authentic features to define the nation. In so doing, they can reinterpret their historical relations with China, both when China was strong and when China was weak. This includes a perspective on China siding with communist powers during the Cold War and China as a successful model of state capitalism. Although that was after the end of imperial China, the narrative can be read back into China's imperial past.

The new master narrative was based on the sovereignty and legitimacy of nation-states. The origins of each state were traced back to the remote past, claiming that it was destined to become what it is today. The approach has political and emotional appeal, but it draws on subjective judgements of what parts of the past are necessary to support what constitutes the national ideal today. It can be argued that this serves one of the basic needs of human society. Most people want a sense of belonging, to be comfortable and secure in a collective identity. It is therefore natural to seek a global order in which all nations can be assured of peace and prosperity as the end of history. Once this is accepted as the universal answer to world order, national histories should conform to this master narrative. To accept the rules governing such an international order then becomes the test of a country's good will and sincerity. Any power that

does not pass the test could be declared an outcast that should be contained if not punished. In short, the dominant master narrative holds the moral high ground.

For the neighbours south of China, such an approach could be used to read back into the past. It did not matter if their local traditions were Hindu-Buddhist, Muslim, Confucian, or Christian. As long as they are embedded in the country's nationalist aspirations, they can help revive the past. The Sinocentric notes found in Chinese records can now be modified or discarded. The universal history narrative can counter any viewpoint that does not support the interests of the nation-state. Where China is concerned, its southern neighbours can employ this paradigm to rewrite their histories altogether.

Ironically, this same perspective has also been used to support a narrow Sinocentric perspective, one that uses the Sinicization process to promote the modern Chinese nation-state. I first saw this emerging in the 1930s, when the nationalist narrative that had been aroused by anti-imperialist sentiments was greatly aggravated by the Japanese invasion of China. It was for a while opposed by internationalism, also taken from Europe though seen by some as something of a Western heresy. The form of that internationalism was represented by the communist ideal. But the latter vision failed, in part because the nationalist narrative superimposed on the Sinocentric perspective was too powerful. The post-Maoist adjustment to the modern universal narrative has returned to its nationalist base in the hope of redesigning a new kind of multinational state.

Now that the dominant narrative can challenge the Sinocentric and bolster a new northward perspective, it is likely to produce historical interpretations that can aggravate national sentiment for the foreseeable future. Such a development could result in more misunderstanding and strife that will do little to enhance historical scholarship. Can this be avoided? As long as the sovereign nation is the primary loyalty, it probably cannot. In that case, can we build a platform that frees the historians of both China and its neighbours from increasing suspicion, fear, and anger?

This leads me to my fourth perspective, one that, for want of a more accurate label, I shall call the New History perspective, which is a little like saying, Let a hundred flowers bloom!

The New History Perspective

In the 1950s, I thought the British version of universal history was comparable, if not parallel, to the Sinocentric claim to project a universalist *Tianxia*, or All under Heaven. However, two other perspectives caught my attention. One included for me “New History” and social history, equally innovative and impressive. James Harvey Robinson had stressed intellectual and cultural progress that called for the application of multidisciplinary research, and G.M. Trevelyan talked of “history with the politics left out”. The second was economic history with a political agenda. This began with Karl Marx in Western Europe and was associated with violent action. When I was in Nanjing, I observed how the idea of class revolution became the driving force that overturned the Chinese world. After 1949, PRC historians were exhorted to follow this agenda and some effort was made to try to rid China of its Sinocentric perspective.

I was reminded of this fourth perspective when Ho Ping-ti, the distinguished historian, died in 2012. When he was young, his ambition had been to master the social sciences he learnt from the West and rewrite all of Chinese history with a new set of instruments. If he had been interested in China’s southern neighbours, that meant he would have moved away from the Sinocentric view. But that ambition also suggested that he would reject the universal narrative of the nationalist historians. He was familiar with the work of Max Weber and other contemporaries who brought social science dimensions to enrich the way to look at history.

The debates that Weber and others like him initiated took New History far beyond what Robinson had envisaged but nevertheless produced many blossoms. The vision of what the social scientific approach could do for history has been inspirational. Although historians have found it difficult to shake off the dominant narrative centred on the nation-state, the increasingly varied efforts of generations of New History advocates have increased the breadth and depth of historical explanation. No longer would narratives hinge so much on what men did for nation-states; no longer would international relations be only about peace and war. The gates are open for the study of other actors: workers and subalterns, women, human security, the environment, including everything that did not depend on the alluring discourse of power and wealth.

Where China and its southern neighbours are concerned, the past half-century has seen some social science flowers blooming among younger historians trained in the West. In China and Southeast Asia, there is still unease if not resistance, in part because of traditional disciplinary divides, but in part also because the emphasis on theoretical and quantitative skills does not attract historians. Of course, opening wide to New History extends the number of approaches to successful history writing. But the criteria for excellence are also demanding in new ways. For historians to learn enough so that they can distinguish the fruitful from the facile may not be easy. To master appropriate methodologies and apply them to localized historical data requires highly critical skills. And, to adapt theories drawn from other societies and use unfamiliar paradigms for local phenomena is risky and can be controversial. It is obvious that there is no shortage of reasons why many historians still hesitate to employ this perspective.

Furthermore, for China and its southern neighbours, there is no meeting of minds. On the one hand, Chinese historians have only recently moved away from Marxist certainties. Now they face a medley of methods and theories derived from Western experiences that few as yet know how to employ. This has meant that even the best scholars on China's relations with its southern neighbours tend to stay within the Sinocentric tradition. On the other hand, historians of the neighbouring states are still encouraged to work with their nationalist paradigm. As a result, the social sciences have added little to what the historians of China and its neighbours can share.

The new history perspective has so far not been attractive in the region. In China, the Sinocentric perspective remains strong. In the south, the local historians either neglect historical research because they do not think it important or prefer the nationalist response against imperial history and are content to claim that response as universal. These perspectives will continue to predominate as long as the interests of nation-states remain primary.

In that context, you can see why the papers collected in this volume are so appealing. Most of the topics examined here reach out in new directions. And a multiplicity of perspectives is explored by using a wide range of local and transnational data without being tied down to political or cultural

borders. There are some subjects here that someone half a century ago might have thought of studying, but the approaches and methodologies used and the theoretical insights that are being tested today would not have been possible at that time. As I look back at the immense amount of work that has been done during the past decades, I feel there has been an awakening followed by shouts of self-discovery. I sense a borderless spirit at work in the papers offered in this volume. Perhaps the multifaceted perspectives of New History have inspired some of the many-splendoured blossoms gathered here.