Asianism, Nationalism and Culturalism in Early Twentieth Century China

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In the first half of the twentieth century in China, various apparently contradictory trends began to manifest themselves that profoundly affected how the Chinese viewed Asia, as well as themselves in relation to Asia. It was around the same time that the Chinese began to develop an acute sense of nationhood that they also began to develop a sense of Asianness (or ‘Asianism’ as it is usually called), that is, a sense of belonging to a region wider than the nation-state. It was also during this period in which a clear differentiation was being made between the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization, with loyalty to the nation coming to the fore, that numerous Chinese intellectuals conducted a spirited defence of Chinese/Eastern civilization vis-à-vis Western civilization. Even unquestionably modern-minded nationalists like SunYat-sen dipped repeatedly into the treasure house of Chinese/Eastern civilization to reinforce pride in being Chinese as well as in being Asian. Furthermore, consciousness of being the inheritors of a unique civilization that had historically held sway over a number of foreign peoples, was coupled with a pained sense of being just one among a community of weak nations preyed upon by Western imperialism and Japan. Thus, notions of being a distinct nation historically inhabiting a definite territory, of being the centre of a great civilization, and of anti-imperialism, all combined to produce a complex construction of Asia in China during this period.

The events of the last two decades of the nineteenth century had made many Chinese begin to become acutely conscious of the question of the boundaries and the border regions of China. It can be argued that, historically, the Chinese empire had never been particularly preoccupied with the exact demarcation of its territorial limits. This is not to
say that it had been indifferent to threats emanating from its periphery, or had had no expansionist inclinations in the past. However, the question of boundary lines and the precise extent of control exercised by the centre over outlying regions did not have quite the same significance that this was to acquire later. This is reflected, for instance, in the relative lack of importance, with some exceptions, traditionally attached to maps and map-making in the compilation of geographies of regions within and outside the Chinese empire.

From the 1870s and 1880s, various Western powers and Japan began to steadily encroach on territories deemed by the Chinese to be very much within their sphere of influence. The Russians preyed on the far Western regions. The British competed with them in the region of southern Turkestan, and also made advances into the Himalayan states, Tibet and Burma. The French moved steadily into Tonkin bordering the Chinese south and southwest, while the Japanese repeatedly challenged Chinese supremacy in the Liu Qiu (Ryukyu) islands, Taiwan and Korea. For many Chinese, resisting these threatening developments on the periphery became a question of paramount importance to the very survival of China. They responded not just by using military means, but by making systematic efforts to arrive at a precise geographical construction of China with the aid of European-style maps. At the same time, importance was attached to detailing the history of relations between China and other Asian countries with a view to emphasizing Chinese historical claims to supremacy over, or at least special interest in, those areas. Among those who made efforts in this direction was the scholar and diplomat Xue Fucheng in the 1890s. Later on, the work of Dai Jitao, the author of Ribenlun (Treatise on Japan), also showed the same understanding ‘that geographical boundaries define a national people’.2

Initially, the forceful assertion of China’s territorial claims over a substantial part of eastern and central Asia in the early twentieth century was to a great extent only hypothetical. A China in the throes of dynastic decline, revolution and civil war was most of the time not in a position to back up these claims with adequate military force. It was also not directed, intentionally at least, against other Asian peoples (except obviously against expansionist Japan), because its target was clearly the Western powers and their aggressive moves. Nevertheless this development was not without significance for China’s later relations with other Asian countries, particularly those that shared a boundary with China or that the Chinese claimed had lain within their sphere of influence in the past. Chinese, even with widely divergent ideological views or on opposite sides of the political spectrum within China, by and large came to share a similar picture of what they considered to be the territorial extent of the Chinese state. A potentially divisive element, carrying within it the seeds of suspicion and confrontation, crept into the relationship of China with other parts of Asia, the full implications of which were only to be seen later, in the post-colonial world of independent nation-states in Asia.