ON THE MULTINATIONALITY OF THE QING EMPIRE

1. China, a multinational country

The People’s Republic of China (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo 中华人民共和国) is defined, since its foundation in 1949, as a multinational state (tongyi de duo minzu de guojia 統一的多民族的國家). More than 50 ethnic groups are living in its territory. The Han nationality is the most numerous and constitutes more than 90% of the population. The others constitute around 7% of the population, but they hold more than 60% of its territory⁠¹.

The purpose of the present essay is to retrace this multinational nature of the Chinese state during the past epochs, focusing specially to the period of the last imperial dynasty.

During the Qing dynasty one of the many populations that today are included in the People’s Republic of China subdued the whole country and established its domination over China. They were the Manchus (Manzu ren 滿族人 or Manzhou 滿洲), that ruled the country from 1644 to 1911. They well understood being a minority. They could not rule China by themselves alone. For this reason they looked for the help of the Han and established a multinational system of power.

2. The ancient “Chinese World Order”

Since antiquity the intercourse between China (Zhongguo 中國 = “Central Country”) and other countries has been envisioned in a way that is different from the international relations as they have been conceived in the West. The “Chinese World Order”, as Fairbank has named it², developed

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¹ For a rather complete survey of the national minorities of China, see Ma Yin, China’s Minority Nationalities, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1989.
up upon lines that have nothing in common with the international law that up

to our epoch has managed the international relations in the West. Today the

ternational community relies on a basis of equality, that is typical of to
day’s world and with which, at the end, even the Chinese have complied.

The idea of a national state has always been unknown to the Chinese

tradition. For it, on the contrary, there has always been a distinction between
civilized and uncivilized peoples. The Chinese acknowledged as civilized
those peoples that accepted Chinese culture, which was considered by them

as unique in the world. In this way, whoever accepted Chinese culture and
practiced Confucian ethics was a “Chinese”, putting aside his language and
his origins. Naturally, given the ideographic nature of the Chinese writing,

Chinese characters were the only means of expression in writing, apart from
pronouncing the ideograms differently, as it happened to the Koreans, the

Vietnamese and the Japanese.

The delegations of the foreign countries coming to China were always
considered subordinate, and an intercourse with the empire ruled by the

“Son of the Heaven” (Tianzi 天子) was never conceived on a basis of equal

ty. It was said that they were coming to the civilization (lai hua 来化), an

expression that may also mean that “they were coming to be transformed”.
Thus China assimilated all the populations with which she came in contact,
special for what pertained to the ruling classes. The national minorities of
today, called in China “populations of small number” (shaoshu minzu 少數民族)
are nothing else than the remnants of the non-Han people that occupied the
hinterland and the South of China in the VI-V centuries B.C. Gradually,
they were pushed to the more trackless regions by the moving forward of the
agricultural civilization of the Han people. Those of them who accepted the
Chinese culture were considered Chinese; the others continued to be consid

3. The management of non-Han peoples in ancient China

The Chinese institutions were not considered proper to rule the non-Han
peoples. The native institutions were kept in existence for them, under the
control of the imperial authority that intervened only whenever it perceived
that its interests were put in jeopardy.

Since Han times (206 B.C-220 A.D.), the territories of the empire inhabi
ted by the Barbarians were called “governorships and prefectures held with
the reins” (Jimi fu zhou 賑縻府州). Such administrative units were self-