



A Dialogue on "What Is China: Problems in Modernity, State, Culture"

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A Dialogue on “What Is China: Problems in Modernity, State, Culture”*

GE Zhaoguang

Talks with Authors Series, *Rethinking China: Its Territory, People, Culture, and History*¹ by Ge Zhaoguang, Director of the National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai
Japan National Press Club, November 10, 2014

On November 10, 2014, Ge Zhaoguang, Director of the National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai and winner of the twenty-sixth Asia-Pacific Award アジア・太平洋賞, held a press conference at the Japan National Press Club. As part of the series “Talks with Authors,” Prof. Ge discussed “What Is China?” using such key concepts as worldviews, national borders, history, and periphery to present the contents of his award-winning book *Rethinking China: Its Territory, People, Culture, and History*. Coincidentally, this press conference was held on the very day that Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and Chairman Xi Jinping met in Beijing, the first Japan-China heads-of-state meeting in two years. Prof. Ge advocates that China rid itself of the notion that it is the Celestial Empire 天朝, and encourages China and neighboring countries to adopt a sensible attitude in dealing with friction over territorial disputes. Here we present the text of his talk and the main questions and answers following.

Moderator: Bandō Kenji, member of the Planning Committee, Japan National Press Club (and expert member of the Editorial Board of the *Mainichi Shinbun*)

Interpreter: Ōmori Kikue, Simul International

YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdzvWhaZTtM>

* This press conference first appeared in Japanese in *Ajia jihō*, December 2014, and is translated here with permission of the Asian Affairs Research Council. © 2015 Japan National Press Club

1 Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *He wei Zhongguo: Jiangyu, minzu, wenhua yu lishi* 何為中國：疆域、民族、文化與歷史 (*Rethinking China: Its Territory, People, Culture, and History*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2014). Translated into Japanese as *Chūgoku saikō: Sono ryōiki, minzoku, bunka* 中国再考：その領域、民族、文化 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2014).

Moderator For our series “Talks with Authors,” we are pleased to have with us today Prof. Ge Zhaoguang of Fudan University in Shanghai. Prof. Ge’s book *Rethinking China* was published by Iwanami Shoten in its “Contemporary Library” series and will receive the Asia-Pacific Award. Prof. Ge is in Japan to receive this award tomorrow at the award ceremony. Taking advantage of this opportunity, we asked him to give a talk to us. Today, after a lapse of two and a half years, the Japanese and Chinese heads of state are meeting, so the talk couldn’t be more timely. China is expanding, and in his book, Prof. Ge takes a historical perspective and talks about how China is expanding, both as a country and in its relations with other countries. Prof. Ge’s talk will, I am sure, have many suggestions for how to think about Sino-Japanese relations. First we will hear Prof. Ge’s talk, and then Prof. Ge will take questions. Let us hear, then, what Prof. Ge has to say about his book.

The Ten Problem Areas Facing China

Prof. Ge Good afternoon! Here I would like to concisely present my reasons for writing *Rethinking China*, what the book says, and what I think. At present China is growing its economy and increasing in strength, yet within China, we are discussing the difficulties that China faces. I call these difficulties “the ten problem areas.” What are they? The first is the Korean problem, that is, issues related to North and South Korea. The second is the problem of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands in the East China Sea. The third is the problem with Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea. The fourth is the problem of Inner and Outer Mongolia. The fifth is the Xinjiang problem, which is connected with Islam. The sixth is the Tibetan problem, which is related to Tibetan Buddhism. The seventh is the Taiwan problem, which involves the countries’ two different systems. The eighth is the Sino-Indian problem, which concerns the two countries’ borders. The ninth involves China’s many ethnic minorities. Issues have arisen between the Han majority and minorities and also within various ethnic minorities. The tenth is the Hong Kong problem, which is presently attracting much attention. These problems concern China’s neighbors, China’s international relations, and Chinese domestic problems.

In Chinese historical circles, five key concepts are occupying much discussion at present. These five key concepts are territory, ethnic minorities, China’s periphery, the state, and identity. In writing this book, I discussed five areas: the traditional or historical worldview, international relations, national borders, history, and China’s periphery. With this book, I hope to achieve a reconception of China along four dimensions.

Rethinking China in Terms of Four Features

Prof. Ge In considering the first feature, I argued that over the course of China’s long history, various ethnic groups have blended together, that China’s territory was constantly changing, and that China’s culture is pluralistic.

I also argued, the second feature, that the theme of the modern history of China is different from those of Europe and Japan. For example, the theme of European history is a transition from empires to nation-states. But modern Chinese history has two themes: the transition from being the entire world 天下 to being one in a community of nations, and the incorporation of the four peripheral peoples 四裔 into the central empire. These two themes shaped China into a rather unique nation.

A third feature of China presented in my book is that China vastly differs from its neighboring countries not just in politics but also in culture, with the result that these countries diverged considerably. So in this book I devoted a chapter to describe how the cultures and identities of the countries of East Asia increasingly diverged from the sixteenth century.

The fourth feature of China is that contemporary China faces a very difficult political and cultural situation. So I would like to ask my readers in Japan and elsewhere in the world (since this book is being translated into English) to show understanding of China. Below I would like to cover these four features in more detail.

China’s Peculiar History and Its Ethnic Problem

Prof. Ge Why did I write about the blending of different ethnic groups, the changes in China’s territory, and the pluralism of Chinese culture in Chinese history? For one, I want to change traditional Chinese thinking, and for another, I also sought to anticipate objections. What is the traditional Chinese way of thinking? It is the outlook that China comprises the entire world 天下. It includes the system of tributary states 朝貢國 and the system of enfeoffment 冊封. It is the notion that China is the source of East Asian culture and the center of East Asia. It is the view that the East Asian cultural sphere developed in countries that used Chinese characters 漢字文化圈. I sought to question this traditional Chinese way of thinking.

In this small book of mine, I devoted the first chapter to consideration of how China’s territory and culture changed over the course of history. In ethnic relations, we can’t rely just on unreflective Han ethnic perceptions. In considering territory, we can’t just look at the territory of interest; we have to look at other areas as well. Hence, we cannot blithely discuss territory simply

in terms of history. In the cultural sphere as well, we have to look not just at Han Chinese high culture, but also at the culture of other peoples, the culture of the lower classes, and other religions. Only thus, I pointed out, can we achieve a truly pluralistic cultural perspective.

China presently faces numerous difficulties, some of which have their origins in history. As those who know Chinese history acknowledge, from the Han to Tang dynasty China had a vast empire that encompassed the entire world 天下. But in the Song dynasty, the empire shrank to a size more comparable to surrounding countries and included primarily the Han ethnic group.

During the three centuries of the Song period (960–1279), China gradually developed into a Han ethnic country, and in the surrounding regions, other nation-states came into being, resulting in a multinational regional order.

But in the thirteenth century, a strange development occurred in Chinese history: Mongols established the Mongolian empire over China. And in the Ming period, China reverted back to a Han ethnic country. Later, in the Qing period, China again became an empire encompassing many ethnic groups. Thus, Chinese history differs considerably from the history of other East Asian regions.

During the Yuan dynasty, difficulties arose between China and its neighbors. Then in the Ming dynasty China faced another difficulty: the arrival of Westerners. And in the Qing dynasty, with the expansion of the empire to include other ethnic groups, domestic ethnic issues arose. Each of these problems—difficulties with the periphery, difficulties with encounters from the West, and domestic ethnic difficulties—have a historical underpinning.

Modern China Continues to Face the Problems of a Multiethnic Country

Prof. Ge Above is the first part of my talk. In this the second part of my talk, I would like to talk about the formation of the modern Chinese state, the Republic of China. This is the government that succeeded the Qing government. As a result, the Republic of China succeeded to the three difficulties mentioned above. Previously, a Western scholar has viewed the formation of the modern Chinese state as a transition from being the entire world 天下 to being a member of the community of nations, from being the overlord in the tribute system to being a simple modern state, from being a traditional empire to being a modern nation-state.² I happen to think that this view is too

2 Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University

simple.

The Chinese view is that modern China gathers the four peripheral peoples 四裔 into one nation, and in fact, from the Qing empire through the Republic of China and into the People’s Republic of China, there have been efforts to incorporate numerous peoples into the nation. This view is expressed in the phrase 五族共和, the idea of the five ethnic groups forming one republic, the five ethnic groups being the Manchus, the Mongols, the Hui ethnic group, the Tibetans, and the Han ethnic group. We should also include, I think, the Miao ethnic group. These ethnic groups should form a single Chinese nation, the thinking goes. This idea has been pursued by Chinese scholars and politicians in continuation of the multiethnic tradition in China from the Qing empire on.

If we look at a Ming-period map of China, we see that its territory is rather limited. This limited amount of territory indicates that the Ming dynasty was ethnically a Han dynasty. But China greatly expanded in the Qing dynasty, and its great expanse of land became the basis for the territory of present-day China. According to the section on China’s geography (地理一) in the *Draft History of Qing* 清史稿 (vol. 54), China’s territory extended from Sakhalin in the east to Shule, Xinjiang, and the Pamir Mountains in the west; from the Stanovoy Range in the north to Guangdong and the South China Sea in the south. The Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China took over this expanse of land and considered it China’s territory. Hence, the government had to accede to the idea of five ethnic groups forming one republic.

A Modern State or an Empire?

Prof. Ge Hence, China developed into a peculiar nation, quite different from the modern nations of Europe and East Asia. In a previous book of mine, *Seeking Harmony in China*, I wrote the following: “China is different from European countries in that it did not develop from an empire to a nation-state. Rather, China perceives itself as an empire, but within its notion of empire are notions of a modern state. Hence, elements of empire and a modern state are mixed together.”³ Thus, I would like Western and Japanese scholars to understand the special nature of China.

These past several years I have had opportunities to visit Europe and

of California Press, 1958–1965).

3 Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhai zi Zhongguo: Chongjian you guan “Zhongguo” de lishi lunshu* 宅兹中国: 重建有关「中国」的历史论述 (Seeking Harmony in China: Historical Essays on Reconstructing the Notion of China) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011).

America and, in Asia, South Korea as well, and in my encounters with colleagues, I am often asked, “What kind of country is China? It seems like a modern country, but it also seems like a traditional empire.” In reply, I mention three features of China. First, the traditional empire has collapsed. But as a historical memory, the notion of the Celestial Empire 天朝 lives on in the conceptual sphere. Second, from the late Qing period on, China received a huge shock from the West, forcing it to abandon reforms within its traditions and adopt radical changes outside its traditions. Facing a new external environment, China had no recourse but to become a modern country.

Third and most important, China became such a peculiar modern nation owing to Japan. During the 1894 Sino-Japanese War and World War II, Japan and the Western powers, through military might, exerted great pressure on Chinese notions of ethnicity, nationhood, and internal schisms, and in reaction the Chinese people were forced to develop a huge country with centralized powers. These peculiar features of China bequeathed to present-day China many difficulties and intellectual challenges.

China Should No Longer Think of Itself as a Celestial Empire

Prof. Ge Next I would like to talk about China’s relations with its neighbors, especially Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Historically, China and its neighbors have been part of the same cultural sphere since ancient times. Some Japanese scholars assert that Asia is one, but in fact that is not true. In particular, Japan from early times has not identified with Chinese culture, South Korea has views that differ from China’s, and Vietnam regularly has conflicts with China.

We can grasp the situation by reading a historical work published in Japan in the middle of the seventeenth century, *From Civilization to Barbarianism* 華夷變態. In that work Hayashi Shunsai 林春齋 argued that China was no longer the center of civilization, but had sunk into barbarianism. Thus the center and the periphery were not uniform; China had conflicts with its neighbors. Hence I remind my Chinese readers that since it is no longer the Celestial Empire, it should not continue to think of itself as such, that China was not the source of all East Asian culture.

At the same time I would like to remind my readers abroad, especially in Japan, that China has a history of being divided up, invaded, and humiliated. A map of the late Qing period shows occupation of China by foreign countries, and a map of 1939, during World War II, shows division of much of China by the leading world powers. Thus, I believe that China must rid itself of the notion that it is the Celestial Empire, and that non-Chinese

should try to understand China better.

A Modern Multiethnic Nation or a Grand Unity?

Prof. Ge Let me take up my fourth topic of discussion. We shouldn't think that China has risen up. Simply put, China is presently beset with difficulties, especially in the areas of modernization, nation, and culture. In the area of modernization, a big topic of discussion in China is whether China should modernize along Western lines or should pursue its own path of modernization. In the area of nationhood, a big problem of discussion is whether China should seek to be a modern multiethnic nation or should seek a grand unity, in the manner of the Han, Tang, especially Qing dynasties. In the area of culture, China faces a great difficulty. Should we accept modern Western cultural values, or should we seek to preserve the special features of Chinese culture? Should we strive for parity of place for Chinese culture among the cultures of the world? Should we seek to recover the revered place occupied by Chinese culture in the cultures of East Asia or Asia? These questions are great topics of discussion in academic, cultural, and political circles in China. At issue is whether we adapt to the rest of the world, or let the rest of the world accept the unique features of Chinese culture.

Three Key Concepts: History, Sensibility, and Others

Prof. Ge Finally, I would like to say that though many people think that China has risen up and become powerful, can we really say that China is a superpower comparable to the United States? I think that the Chinese should be self-aware and exercise caution, that is, to prudently consider the situation and not harbor the illusion that China has risen up and become a superpower. Otherwise, we will not be able to build good relationships with our neighbors and make those around us feel secure. My goal in writing this small book is to call for China and the rest of Asia to rebuild a common understanding.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing three key concepts. The first of these key concepts is history. Many contemporary problems in East Asia concern history. Another key concept is sensibility. We need to be sensible in dealing with issues that arise in relations between nations. The third key concept is others. Whether the others are large or small, powerful or weak, we have to learn to perceive ourselves as others perceive us.

Thank you for your attention.

Questions and Answers

Modesty Is Essential

Moderator Thank you, Prof. Ge. Let us move on to the question and answer session. If I may, I would like to pose the first question. Neighboring countries feel pressed when we hear Chinese talk of “China having risen up,” “the revival of Chinese greatness,” and Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream.” From an external vantage point, it seems that these expressions reflect a desire to make China into a special country pursuing values other than universal worldwide values. What is the tenor of discussion within China? Do most scholars think that universal values are a burden for China?

Prof. Ge There are indeed many people who think that China has risen up and become a strong superpower, but I personally think that this is not true, that we have to proceed cautiously. In fact, China today has three problems that prevent it from being a strong country. One is the gap between rich and poor. Presently, the number of rich people in China is rapidly increasing, but more people are poor. Another is that China has a population of 1.4 billion, so whenever one looks at per capita figures, China appears not to be such a strong country. Per capita income still hovers at low levels. The third is that China has regional disparities. The gaps between east and west China, and between urban areas and rural areas, are tremendous. From this perspective, we cannot say that China has become a superpower, and in particular, that it is comparable to the United States. On the contrary, China needs to exercise humility, to avoid pressing other countries and keep a low posture, and to maintain good relations with neighbors and the world at large.

Moderator Thank you. Would that more Chinese approach such matters as sensibly as our speaker.

Prof. Ge Scholars have their own stances and ways of thinking. They cannot take the place of politicians, nor can they represent the common people. Scholars have to be rational, but ordinary people tend to be emotional, and politicians seek practical advantage. The rationality of scholars, the interest seeking of politicians, and the emotionality of ordinary people do not necessarily align.

Moderator Thank you. Now let us take questions from the audience.

Territorial Issues Require Sensible Responses

Question I would like to ask two questions. First, China presents the image of a modern country and also the traditional image of being the entire world 天下, of being an empire. In dealing with territorial issues in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, China seems to act more like an empire. You ask that neighboring countries be understanding of China’s circumstances, but if neighboring countries perceive China as having expansionist proclivities, how should they respond? My second question concerns the heads-of-state meeting between Chairman Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. From the Chinese point of view, why do you think that Chairman Xi Jinping decided to meet with Prime Minister Abe at this particular time?

Prof. Ge The first question is related to the Chinese notion of being the entire world 天下, the nature of its empire, and its view of the surrounding territory. When a modern nation-state grows out of an empire, it is inevitable that it encounter territorial conflicts. I do not think that China’s territorial conflicts stem entirely from its view of itself as an empire. Whether a territorial dispute is connected to China’s perception of itself as an empire depends on its view of the disputed territory in question. For instance, we view Yunnan and Northeast China as definitely belonging to China, because China took over the territory of the Qing empire. In contrast, territorial issues in the East China and South China seas require that we carefully discuss issues in detail, because during the time of the Qing empire, territory in the East China sea was not demarcated. In the case of Northeast China, the area north of Northeast China was ceded to Russia by the Treaty of Nerchinsk. Hence, whether it is appropriate for China to claim this territory requires a separate discussion. Though I don’t personally endorse the Chinese imperial system or perspective, whether China should revive imperial notions and whether China should reclaim territory occupied by the Qing empire are separate issues. That is my answer to the first question.

As for the second question, I must apologize. As a university professor, I have no connections with top-level politicians. So I have no way of knowing why a heads-of-state meeting was realized at this time. As a scholar, I advocate sensible thinking and action between nations, so I am glad to see the two nations’ leaders meeting, and I am glad to see a breakthrough in the formerly strained relations of the two nations. But I have no way of knowing why the breakthrough occurred now or what was discussed. In China, ordinary people know little about politics occurring at the highest levels of government.

Let me add to my answer to the first question. Nowadays territorial issues

are resolved through negotiations and treaties. China may still harbor a bit of imperialistic thinking, but in fact, to deal with disputes with other nations, it has to rely on negotiations and treaties, as there is no alternative. Now, politicians, when they consider matters, seek advantages. But they can also seek advantages sensibly, so seeking advantages isn't incompatible with being sensible. And if they think sensibly, they think how to avoid disputes and conflicts and figure out how to arrive at a solution that both sides will accept. Of course, we cannot expect too much of our politicians, but we can hope that in seeking advantages, they consider matters sensibly.

Self-Determination Is No Panacea

Question What do you think of the principle of self-determination? This is a principle put forth by Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin, so it may reflect Western values. But you did mention that in China elements of empire and a modern state are mixed together, and you did bring up the example of Northeast China. Well, the Manchus formerly occupied the Northeast, and they were an independent ethnic group. Now their ethnic identity has diminished, but the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Tibetans in Tibet have a strong sense of ethnic identity and are seeking independence or greater autonomy. Could you tell us your thoughts on these matters?

Prof. Ge Ethnic self-determination is a notion originating in the modern West, especially modern Europe. The Italian Giuseppe Mazzini said that one people belong to one country. But this ideal is often not realized. For example, in Europe, a single country often has a number of ethnic groups living side by side. Belgium, for instance, has Germanophones, Dutchophones, and Francophones. I don't think that ethnic self-determination is a panacea. For example, the Ukraine has problems with Russian-speaking Crimea, Spain has problems with Catalan-speaking Catalonia, Canada has problems with the independence movement in French-speaking Quebec, and Serbia was divided by ethnic tensions.

Hence, ethnic self-determination is an ideal to strive for, but nation-states do not form just on the basis of the principle of one people, one state. The notion of one people, one state cannot be realized just anywhere. The historical conditions must be ripe for such a development. In a country with a modern state already formed, citizens cannot divide up the country just because several ethnic groups inhabit the same country. In fact, if we look at China's Xinjiang province, we find that Uyghurs constitute a majority in the region, but there are also Kazakhs and Tajiks. So, what should be done? In a world of increasing population flows and mixtures, ethnic self-determination

is not going to solve all sorts of problems by itself. In fact, in some parts of the West, it is precisely in the countries where people advocate ethnic self-determination as an immutable principle that there are wars and schisms. The American scholar Lucian Pye once said something that deeply impressed me. He said that ethnic identity can sometimes create a state and sometimes destroy a state.

What Is Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream?

Question Last year, when I visited China, I noticed all over China these gigantic posters with young women and the wording “the Chinese dream.” Alongside such posters were propagandistic posters proclaiming the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. When I asked Chinese friends, especially Shanghai intellectuals, about the Chinese dream, they said that the Chinese dream is Xi Jinping’s dream. It is around sixty-five years since the founding of the People’s Republic. What I would like to ask is whether Xi Jinping’s Chinese dream represents a turn away from traditional Communist Party rule based on Marxism-Leninism of the past sixty or so years and a turn toward the tradition of Chinese universalism 天下主義.

Prof. Ge The Chinese dream has two meanings. One is that since late in the Qing dynasty, the Chinese nation desired to be strong and prosperous. Because China was weak, from the late Qing period, China suffered abuse, bullying, and humiliation at the hands of the Western powers and Japan. China’s goal for many years has been to become strong and prosperous. The American scholar Benjamin Schwartz wrote a book about the late Qing period titled *In Search of Wealth and Power*.⁴ As we can see from the title of this book, China has dreamed of becoming rich and powerful for many, many years. Another meaning is the Chinese dream promoted by Xi Jinping. Whether his notion of the Chinese dream is the century-old dream of the Chinese nation to become rich and powerful, I don’t know. I am not a politician, nor am I a member of the Communist Party, so I can’t stand here in place of him and answer what he has in mind when he speaks of the Chinese dream. If his notion of the Chinese dream is the traditional notion, that is fine. The Communist Party has held the reins of power for sixty-five years. Before the Communist Party, there was the Republic of China. And even

4 *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964). Translated into Japanese by Hirano Kenichirō as 中国の近代化と知識人：嚴復と西洋 (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1978). Translated into Chinese by Ye Fengmei as 寻求富强：严复与西方 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1996).

further back there was the Guangxu emperor and the Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing dynasty. Throughout this entire period there was a desire to make China into a rich, powerful, and complete nation. Thus, there is some connection, I think, between the traditional notion of the Chinese dream and Xi Jinping's notion of the Chinese dream. No doubt, there is also political motivation for trotting out the notion of the Chinese dream at this time. My reason for thinking this is that if the nation achieves the Chinese dream of becoming rich and powerful, the Communist Party and the present government become legitimate and seem sensible. So there are political motives behind the Chinese dream. What is important is not whether we call this thinking "the Chinese dream," but the means used and systems put in place to realize the Chinese dream. If the Chinese dream means wealth and power for the whole nation—not just an individual or political faction or government—only then is the Chinese dream sensible indeed. This is the Chinese dream that the Chinese nation has aspired to for the past century.

Moderator That concludes our press conference today. We thank Prof. Ge for his talk about taking a historical perspective, using a sensible approach, and treating others with respect. Thank you very much!

