From alien land to inalienable parts of China: how Qing imperial possessions became the Chinese Frontiers

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Abstract

Scholarship on the origins of modern territoriality and the modernist conception of territory has largely been confined to Europe and its colonial histories. Few attempts have been made to understand modern territoriality from an alternative epistemic starting point. This article moves beyond critiques of Eurocentrism by examining the territorial metamorphosis of the Qing Empire to modern China. Like the United States and Russia, China has retained its early modern continental colonial possessions. In order to explain the territorialisation of the multi-ethnic Qing empire, this article engages empirically with cartographic and textual representations of China from Confucian literati scholars, European Jesuit cartographers and the Manchu imperial court from the 17th to the early 19th centuries. The empirical study shows that by the early 19th century, a new territorialised conception of 'China' closely resembling that of modern territoriality had emerged. This 'modern' and Sinocentric form of territoriality encompassed areas that were hitherto seen as foreign and non-Chinese. In opposition to the extant Eurocentric historiography, this article traces the emergence of modern territoriality in imperial China to a nexus of European cartographic techniques, Qing imperial conquests and the literati synthesis of Manchu imperial and Sinocentric forms of territoriality. By showing the deep historical processes and global entanglements behind the emergence of modern China as a territorial state, the article makes a case for a polycentric account of modern territoriality

Keywords

China, International Relations, eurocentrism, territoriality, international history, territorial state

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The territorialisation of China was a remarkable historical development in the history of International Relations (IR). Despite the plight brought upon by foreign imperial powers in its 'century of humiliation', contemporary China remains one of the very few early modern colonial powers that has retained their territorial possessions till this day. Other large multi-ethnic empires such as the French, Habsburg and the Ottoman empires have disintegrated and gave rise to smaller territorial states. In contrast, and like the United States and Russia, contemporary China continues to preside over a vast continental empire that originated from violent expansions in the early modern period. As other colonial empires collapsed in the wake of the Second World War, Chinese settler-colonialism in both Inner Asia and the southwestern hinterland accelerated and transformed the social and environmental landscapes of the country's vast ethnic frontiers. In recent years, violent border clashes between China and India, the prosecutions of ethnic and religious minorities, and the pursuit of Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan has laid bare the degree of state violence justified in the name of territorial sovereignty.

Like other modern states, China as the coalescence of a people, a territory and a state remains a heavily contested notion both internally and externally. The historical process through which the three are entangled warrants further investigations. This article focuses on the conceptual emergence of China as a territory. Today, Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan are often proclaimed to be inalienable parts of the 'sacred territory of China' by state media outlets of the People's Republic of China. However, as recent as the late 19th century, two centuries after their inclusion into the Qing Empire, these places were still viewed by some Han Chinese nationalists to be outside of China (Esherick, 2006). The rejections were rooted in the ethnocultural conception of China centred around Han Chinese. In contrast to the geographic conception of China encompassing the entirety of the Qing Empire, the ethnocultural conception defines the geographic boundaries of China through the limits of Han Chinese dominated provinces. Nevertheless, despite widespread prejudice and even exclusionist views towards non-Han peoples, the geographic conception of China is flexible enough to be stretched to encompass their land and render their inhabitants Chinese. The territorialised understanding of China, in turn, enabled the Han-centric multiculturalist notion of the Chinese nation in light of dissenting voices and underlying ethnocultural tensions.

In recent years, scholars in Historical IR have begun to examine the plurality of polities and international systems that predate our present international system made up of sovereign territorial states (Kadercan, 2015, 2017; Neumann and Wigen, 2018; Phillips and Sharman, 2015, 2020; Schulz, 2019; Sharman, 2019; Spruyt, 2020). Collectively, these works have shown that the territorialisation of world politics is by no means a simple case of convergence through European colonial expansion and imposition. Instead, the emergence of modern territorial states around the world was driven by polycentric and connected historical processes across geographical and cultural contexts. In contrast, the literature on the conceptual and cartographic origins of territorial sovereignty (Branch, 2014; Elden, 2013b) has focused primarily on European ideas, technologies and European colonial experiences. Therefore, a corrective audit of the European colonial provenance of the modern sovereign territorial state is needed to enable scholars to both apprehend and evaluate coeval processes of territorialisation to European colonisations.

The epistemic transformation undergirding the formation of the second largest land territory in the world can offer crucial theoretical insights to modern territoriality. Framed in opposition to the 'West' as a historical non-Western civilisation, a future hegemonic power or a defeated Other at the hands of European imperial powers, China's colonial and imperial histories are implicitly treated as secondary and local. Seldom do IR scholars pay attention to the early modern colonial origin of present-day Chinese territory and interrogate the conflicted notions of nationhood, territory, civilisation and race encapsulated by the word China. This omission not only helps to reinforce a unipolar and diffusionist understanding of political modernity but also misses critical cues to the polycentric origins of the modern international system of territorial states. This article goes beyond merely critiquing the Eurocentric nature of the discipline's historiography and theoretical apparatus by putting forward an argument for the polycentric origins of modern territoriality.

The article examines existing IR scholarship as well as explicates the emergence of modern territoriality in China in three historical stages. In the first section, I identify the Eurocentric diffusionist historiography of modern territoriality in IR postcolonial and constructivist scholarships. This diffusionism is in part the result of a lack of engagement with non-European sources, conceptions as well as the global circulations of political technologies and knowledge. The second section argues that China is not a singular, historically continuous polity occupying a static territory inhabited by different ethnocultural groups. Instead, modern China's inheritance of the Qing Empire's territory was characterised by an epistemic transformation in the ways in which China was conceived geographically.

The second section traces the emergence of modern territoriality through three historical phases. In the first phase, the Han literati scholars of 17th-century Qing Empire continued to uphold a Sinocentric form of territoriality which defined the geographic limit of China based on the ethnocultural conception of Chinese as Han. In the second phase, I show that the introduction of European cartographic techniques and maps to China in the 17th century did not cause the Manchu court nor the Confucian literati class to adopt an 'European' geographical understanding of the world, contrary to the diffusionist understanding (see Branch, 2014). Instead, the ethnocultural conception of China coexisted alongside a distinct Manchu polyvalent form of territoriality. Notably, the imperial atlases made with the help of Jesuit missionaries depicted Qing as an internally segregated and externally borderless empire. The Han literati scholars and cartographers, sceptical of the geographic knowledge introduced by the Jesuits, continued to conceive China through ethnocultural term. The final section focuses on the emergence of a geographic understanding of China as a landmass and environment, defined by the contours of the Qing Empire, in the early 19th century. This geographic conception of China developed among reformist Han literati scholars, which resembles modern territoriality, is distinct from the ethnocultural conception of China. Using the writings of both Wei Yuan (1794–1857) and Gong Zizhen (1792–1841), two early 19th century scholar officials whose geopolitical writings had been influential to canonical Chinese nationalist intellectuals in the early 20th century, I demonstrate that modern territoriality in China had emerged without the need for a standalone conception of territory (see Elden, 2013a).

By examining the spatial reconceptualisation of China by reformist scholar officials, I demonstrate that modern territoriality had already emerged in the early 19th century. Crucially, the emergence took place prior to large-scale European imperial intrusions and the introduction of territory as an international law concept in the late 19th century. Contrary to extant Eurocentric diffusionist historical narratives on territorialisation which trace the emergence of modern territoriality to either the concept of territory or the adoption of European cartographic technologies, I argue that processes of territorialisation are contingent on specific historical, cultural and political contexts rather than the outcomes of a fixed set of prerequisites. The insights gained from this work serves to demonstrate that the territorialisation of world politics is polycentric in its origins and multifaceted in its epistemic foundation, rather than a result of European colonial expansions and the diffusion of the European modernist understanding of territory.

Modern territoriality and the territorialisation of world politics

The withering away of colonial empires after 1945 and the contemporary ubiquity of the sovereign territorial state alludes to a form of 'global sovereign state monoculture' and the triumph of Western political modernity (Phillips, 2013: 642). However, the demise of territorial heterogeneity and the coalescence of border, territory and sovereignty was not a historical inevitability (Goettlich, 2019; Phillips and Sharman, 2020). There are other ways of delimiting and controlling geographic areas and consequently other conceptions of territory (Sack, 1983: 57). Territoriality, as the use of territory for socio-political purposes, can be applied to a wide range of historical contexts. In contrast, modern territoriality which refers specifically to the conception of a bounded, demarcated space controlled by the sovereign state (Murphy, 2013), or the geographical compartmentalisation of legitimate political authority (Goettlich, 2019: 204; Ruggie, 1993), is only a historically specific form of territoriality (Sack, 1983). Although critiques of the territorial trap aimed specifically at modern territoriality (Agnew, 1994) have become a staple in IR scholarships, relatively few attempts have been made to trace its emergence beyond the context of Europe and its colonies.

There are two common approaches to explaining the ascendence of modern territoriality. The first approach, which can be described as a 'critical Euro-centred approach', focuses on modern territoriality as the strategic use of the modern conception of territory (Agnew, 2010). Modern territory here is primarily an instrument of control and a function of hierarchical relations that transcend the boundaries of the territorial state. The second approach, which I refer to as the 'Eurocentric diffusionist approach', is more attentive to the constitutive power of the modernist conception of territory itself. In other words, this line of thinking is more interested in how ideas and technologies make possible the emergence of sovereign state territories. What remains to be answered, as many have already acknowledged, is how the sovereign territorial state became universal beyond Europe (Agnew, 2010; Goettlich and Branch, 2021: 270). Nevertheless, very few existing discussions on the origins of the modern territorial state outside of Europe move beyond the conception of territory bundled with that of the Eurocentric notion of

sovereign territorial state and engage with possible alternative epistemological starting points (Halvorsen, 2019: 792). Consequently, many of the recent works in IR continue to propagate, either implicitly or explicitly, a Eurocentric understanding of the origin of the sovereign territorial state.

The first approach is commonplace in postcolonial IR scholarship. Basing their argument on the histories of settler colonies and a small number of colonial empires in Western Europe, they point to the erasure of colonial and imperial histories in the histography of concepts such as sovereignty and nation-state (Bhambra, 2016; Nisancioglu, 2020). The modernist conception of territory is principally understood to be a way to regulate and control space in order to maintain colonial and racialised hierarchical orders, notably through the conceptual separation between Europe and the colonies (Bhambra, 2016). These critical perspectives are important to bring our attention to the underlying racialised and colonial hierarchies that gave rise to the modern territorial state in some parts of the world. However, the exclusive focus on the histories of European colonialism risks replacing one set of Eurocentric concepts with another: European nation-state with European colonial state, Westphalian sovereignty with racial sovereignty and so on (de Carvalho and Leira, 2021: 239).

The second approach focuses on the constitutive power of modern territoriality and its associated forms of knowledge, concepts and techniques. This approach offers a partial correction to the risk of inflated historical accounts present in IR postcolonial critiques. Principally, the understanding of territory as the outcome of power relations organised by non-territorial logics takes for granted the modern conception of territory as the physical presence of the state in geographic space (Shah, 2012: 60). Bhambra (2016), for instance, suggests that European nation-states should be reconceptualised as imperial states on the basis that their power extends beyond their territorial boundaries. Emphasising the territorial dimension of the state, she argues, ignores the exercise of state power outside of itself (Bhambra, 2016: 345). For scholars who are more attentive to the constitutive power of modern territoriality, the very understanding of geographic space as calculative, demarcated and divisible developed through historical processes distinguishable from and predate that of the sovereign territorial state in the 19th century (Branch, 2014; Elden, 2013b; Goettlich, 2019). Neither racial nor colonial hierarchies need to be organised territorially, let alone clearly demarcated and mapped. Moreover, polities do not need to be sovereign territorial states to be historically agential or effective in governing. Thus, the modern conception of territory is not a simple detraction from the colonial origins of the state itself. Taking territory as such not only risks overlooking the diversity of how colonial rules were organised spatially, as settler colonies, urban concessions, legal extra-territoriality or company-states, but also important coeval concepts and practices beyond European colonial governance.

What the two approaches share in common is the unquestioning of the European provenance of modern territoriality itself. Recent constructivist literature on modern territoriality continue to propagate a simplistic diffusionist model when it comes to explaining the origins of the modern territorial state (Branch, 2014; Elden, 2010, 2013a, 2013b). In this diffusionist account, modern territoriality is associated exclusively with European knowledge, technology and colonial expansion. For instance, Elden's (2013b) genealogy of the modern concept of territory as the space upon which sovereignty is exercised

firmly locates the concept within the confines of European intellectual, political and colonial histories. According to him, the modern understanding of territory emerged out of a nexus of legal and philosophical ideas as well as technological changes (Elden, 2013b). Modern territoriality, Elden claims, 'first extends across Europe and from there across the globe' (Elden, 2013b: 322). The non-Western world merely acted as the laboratory where ideas and techniques associated with modern territoriality were tested and introduced to Europe (Elden, 2013b: 243–245). In Elden's (2013a) understanding, there cannot be 'territory' in the modernist sense without the concept of territory in the first place. Of course, there is a distinction between territory as a European concept and a Eurocentric concept. What is Eurocentric is not Elden's erudite genealogical account of territory but the *presumed link* between the European conception of territory and the eventual triumph of modern territoriality around the world.

In comparison, Branch's work deals with 'ancient and non-Western mapping traditions' more explicitly. Nevertheless, he, too offers a diffusionist account of modern territoriality. The central claim of his work is that the elimination of overlapping forms of authority, as well as the rise of territorial sovereignty, has been shaped by the interaction between mapping technologies (Branch, 2014: 34, 35), the geometric division of territory and the exploration of the Americas (Branch, 2014: 114). These developments eventually usurped the political organisations within Europe by the 19th century (Branch, 2014: 114). For Branch, modern territoriality is largely the result of European technological innovations and European colonial expansions, and non-Western polities such as China and Siam are mere recipients of European techniques. The technological diffusion from Europe ultimately changed mapping techniques in these places whose mapping traditions lacked Ptolemaic graticule and the geometric conception of space (Branch, 2014: 66, 67). He argues that the 'transformative adaptation of Western conceptions of space', propelled by European imperialism in the late 19th century, ultimately led to the adaptation of the 'constitutive grammar of Western spatiality' (Branch, 2014).

The limitations of Branch and Elden's arguments are less about the constitutive power of European concepts, colonialism, technologies, geographical knowledge or political orderings in the non-Western world. Nor is there simply a 'non-European equivalence' of modern territoriality or modern conception of territory. I agree with Elden, Branch and others on modern territoriality as a bundle of political technologies in both conceptual and material terms (Branch, 2014, 2017; Elden, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Goettlich, 2019). The historical specificity of the very concept 'territory' illuminated by Elden serves as a reminder that, rather than simply outcomes of transhistorical human territoriality (Sack, 1983), political–geographical relations are different across historical and geographical contexts (Elden, 2013b: 18). The early modern transformation of cartography and mapping across the world, therefore, shows how political–geographical relations can be transformed by the global circulations of technologies and knowledge (Branch, 2014). However, in sharp contrast to the empirical richness of their European archival and historical focus, both scholars fall back onto a diffusionist account of scientific knowledge when faced with the challenging question of how modern territoriality becomes global.

The European provenance of both the concept and the ubiquity of modern territoriality collectively operate to uphold a historical narrative by which territory in the modern sense is the result of European historical agencies, while the rest of the world is reduced

to Europe's laboratory or willing accomplice. If we start from such a Eurocentric conception of territory, the discussion will continue to be centred around European understandings and contestations over the meanings of territory at the expense of parallel projects that both contest and informed the modernist conception of territory (Bryan in Minca et al., 2015: 97). In light of the omnipresence of European colonialism as either a structure of knowledge or a historical process, the question of how modern territoriality emerged out of transnational encounters contingent on cultural, linguistic and material specificities is regrettably stifled (Marcon, 2020).

The Eurocentric diffusionist understanding of modern territoriality is aided to a significant extent by inadequate archival research and engagement with both non-European sources and histories. In this regard, IR can benefit from the foregrounding of the mediated, interactive and circulatory nature of knowledge by historians of science and technology (Feichtinger, 2020; Livingstone, 2003). In this article, I demonstrate that non-European sources and adaptions of 'European' knowledge and technologies are not merely variations of a singular, globe-spanning form of modern territoriality, worthy only of ethnographic rather than theoretical contributions. Instead, they can advance the theoretical understanding of modern territoriality not merely as the diffusion of the coalescence of sovereignty and territory, or the ascendence of linear borders from one place, but as a polycentric, geographically and historically uneven phenomenon. Modern territoriality observed in the form of territorial sovereign states is indeed a universal phenomenon. However, such universality need not imply a uniformity in epistemic foundation, histories of emergence or the mutual intelligibility of what is being territorialised.

Rescuing territory from the nation

In IR, the historiography of China as a singular and continuous entity compounded by the additional layer of essentialised Otherness works to inhabit critical enquires into the historicity of modern China and the contested nature of China as ethnic, racial and modern territorial toponyms (see Krishna, 2017; MacKay, 2015, 2019; Phillips, 2014, 2018 for exceptions). The isomorphism between modern China and the Qing Empire has served as a vantage point for a modern theological understanding of China as a singular national subject moving through history (Duara, 1995). Consequently, diverse forms of polities, many of which controlled by people who are linguistically and culturally distinctive from what we consider as Chinese today, have been subsumed by or referred to as 'China' and Chinese dynasties. Buzan and Lawson (2015: 25, 2020) for instance, treat the transformation of imperial China to modern China as a linear progression through its 'encounter' with Western modernity and imperial powers (Buzan and Lawson, 2020). David Kang, in his discussion of East Asian international orders, makes little attempt to distinguish the significant differences between the Ming Empire and the Qing Empire. Jordan Branch, too, conflates Ming and Qing by suggesting that Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) presented Ptolemaic mapping techniques to the Qing emperor, whereas he was only active during the reign of the Ming Dynasty (Branch, 2014: 97).

The conflation or lack of attention to varying imperial formation in China negates crucial historical processes wherein different forms of territoriality were implicated in the eventual territorialisation of China. These varying forms of territoriality were not simply waiting to be transformed into modern territoriality through the fateful encounter with Europe, but also contested against, adapted to and coexisted with each other. The defeat of the Ming Empire (1368–1644) by the Qing Empire (1644–1912) created new territorial practices during its consolidation and expansion. By the mid-18th century, the Qing Empire had more than doubled the landmass of Ming-era China and bought into the empire diverse ecologies and peoples (Bello, 2016; Rowe, 2009: 73). The vast territory and ethnic mosaics of the contemporary People's Republic of China are the direct outcomes of the imperial conquests of the Qing Empire in Inner Asia. However, despite the inheritance of Qing territories by successive modern Chinese states, the transition from empire to territorial state in China was not a simple case where the Chinese 'core' retained its imperial peripheries. Prior to the establishment of the Qing Empire in China ruled by a Tungusic people known as the Manchus in the mid-17th century, the Ming Empire was ruled by Han monarchs and Confucian scholar officials, also known as literati, who presided over an East Asian regional system based on shared Confucian political norms. The conquest of Ming by the Qing Empire, despite the preservation of Ming-era political institutions, fundamentally transformed China into an ethnocultural and geographic component of the Qing imperial hierarchies (MacKay, 2019).

Retrieving and separating the contested notion of 'China' from the contemporary Chinese territory, however, does not mean focusing exclusively on ethnopolitics. On the contrary, it requires the conceptual unbundling between the ethnocultural understanding of China from the modern Chinese territory itself. As we are reminded by constructivist scholarship on modern territoriality, modern territory is not merely the state's presence in space but enabled by specific forms of spatial knowledge that naturalises modern territoriality and its historically novel forms of control and demarcation (Ruggie, 1993; Shah, 2012; Strandsbjerg, 2010). Without paying attention to both historical contingencies and the polycentric origins of modern territoriality in China, we risk reading history backwards via the lenses of contemporary Chinese ethnopolitics. For example, the contemporary plight of peoples referred to as Tibetans and Uyghurs might be understood as 'a centuries-long effort to annex their territory into national Chinese space' (Krishna, 2017: 108). In doing so, a territorialised understanding of China is projected backwards in history, something the simplistic critical perspective against modern Chinese colonialism shares in common with the Chinese nationalist histography.

The annexation and absorption of lands inhabited by people known today as Tibetans and Uyghurs into China was a relatively recent and modern endeavour. Indeed, historians have noted that prior to the collapse of the Qing Empire, both racialism and Han nationalism explicitly called into question whether non-Han peoples would be considered as Chinese once the empire is overthrown (Esherick, 2006; Leibold, 2007; Lin, 2011). The Chinese republic's inheritance of most of the Manchu Qing's conquests in 1912, as opposed to a culturally more homogeneous, albeit smaller China, was not an uncontested process (Esherick, 2006). Noting the contrast between Chinese nationalists and contemporaneous Turkish nationalists, Esherick coined the territorial inheritance as the 'Atatürk Counterfactual'(Esherick, 2006: 243). However, failing to account for the

epistemic dimension of modern territoriality, China Studies scholars often resort to an ahistorical functionalist approach that overlooks the historical processes through which territorial heterogeneity was eroded and supplanted by European conceptions of modern territoriality.

Functionalist explanations are deployed to explain why 'geographical boundaries rather than cultural or racial traits' became what demarcates China (Leibold, 2007: 42). The basis of the functionalist approach is ostensibly the ethnopolitical impasse between 'small China' dominated by Han people and the rest of the empire where 'languages, cultures, customs, and religions of the native populations were distinct from those of Han Chinese' (Esherick, 2006: 232). In need of alternative explanations for the inclusion of lands inhibited by non-Chinese groups, functionalist explanations, following the arguments made by early 20th century Chinese nationalist leaders and intellectuals, often run along the lines of the Inner Asian frontier's utilities in defence and economic development (; Esherick, 2006: 247; Fiskesjö, 2006: 18; Leibold, 2007: 38). The functionalist approach brings into view the historicity of modern Chinese territory and shows that the Chinese state's inheritance of the empire's vast territories and ethnic mosaics was by no means predestined nor endogenous. However, by enfolding the territorial dimension within ethnopolitics or security concerns, it neglects the epistemological dimension of modern territoriality: how *Chinese territory*, rather than Han Chinese, became the object of the Chinese state's rule (Agnew, 2015: 780).

By collapsing the ethnocultural conception of China onto the modern territorial conception of China and taking for granted the modernist conception of territory simply as space upon which state's rule is instigated, functionalist accounts overlook the epistemic transformation which enabled the conceptual separation between inhabitants and land. Moreover, failing to account for the constitutive power of China as a geographical and territorial concept, the functionalist account often falls back to a Eurocentric narrative of China's encounter with political modernity and the international system of states to explain the Qing-China territorial metamorphosis (see Leibold, 2007: 46).

In the remainder of this article, I show how a geographic understanding of China distinct from the ethnocultural conception of China emerged among early 19th century Han literati scholars whose writings were influential to later-day Chinese nationalists intellectuals. The later-day Chinese nationalist leaders did not suddenly discover the value of the imperial frontiers to national defence and economic development in their attempt to retain the empire, but instead followed an existing form of modern territoriality formulated by reformist Han literati scholars in the early 19th century. This territorialised understanding of China encompassed the entirety of the Qing Empire's territory.

The next three sections trace this historical process in three stages: the first section focuses on important differences between the Qing Empire and the ethnocultural conception of China. It shows that after the Manchu conquest of China in the 17th century, an ethnocentric conception of China known as the *Hua-Yi* distinction existed among the Han literati-scholars alongside the ruling Manchu court's flexible repertoire of ideologies required to preside over diverse polities and peoples in the vast Eurasian steppe. The second section shows how the Sinocentric territoriality informed by the ethnocultural conception of 'China' existed alongside the Manchu court's unique form of polyvalent territoriality enabled by geographical and technological knowledge of diverse

epistemological origins in the 18th century. Finally, a geographical conception of China, enabled by both Qing imperial conquests, imperial surveys and globally circulated cartographic techniques, emerged in the 19th century against the historical backdrop of internal rebellions and external invasions.

Hua-Yi distinction and the geographic limit of China

The Manchu aristocrats maintained their minority rule over the Qing Empire for nearly three centuries. A key reason for their success was their adoption of bureaucratic institutions staffed by Confucian literati (Rowe, 2009: 27) as well as their patronage of Han elite traditions and Confucian universalism (Guy, 2002: 155; Mosca, 2020). Nevertheless, Confucianism, Chinese language and notions of Han superiority were not the basis of Qing legitimacy and rule in Inner Asia (Satoshi, 2018: 224). Different administrative and legal systems were used for Han, indigenous peoples of the Southwestern highlands of Yunnan and Guizhou, Mongols, Manchus and Inner Asian Muslims. The Manchus as a minority ruling group had strong incentives to maintain their distinction from the rest. Important civil–military appointments such as governors of important provinces and strategic postings to the frontier were off-limit to Han officials (see Mosca, 2011: 93; Perdue, 2005: 316). More importantly, the emperor's legitimacy was articulated differently to various constituencies of the empire. The Manchu emperor was not only the ruler of China but also the Great Khan to other Mongol khans, a patron of the Dalai Lama and the incarnation of *Manjusri* in the Tibetan Buddhist world (Brook et al., 2018: 123, 124, Perdue, 2009: 96). Ethnic Han people, which are often used synonymously with the 'Chinese', resembled a constituent subject within the empire rather than the imperial overlord of the Qing empire.

The Confucian world that encompassed Korea, Japan, China and Vietnam only formed one part of the geographical outlook of the Manchu court (Phillips, 2018: 746). In the early 1700s, Chinese geographers still worked from geographical records produced during the Ming dynasty which was more territorially confined (Mosca, 2011: 96, 99) and frontier policies were often formulated by Mongol ministers who could bypass the Chinese language channel (Mosca, 2011: 93). Although by the mid-18th century, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Mongolia and parts of Tibet had all become imperial possessions, the court took measures to maintain the separation between Han and frontier peoples rather than pursuing an empire-wide Confucian civilising mission (Perdue, 2005: 338, 2009: 264). The geographical limit of China, therefore, remained largely synonymous with the world controlled by the Ming empire and Han dominated political orders. China was therefore a territorial component, rather than the equivalence of the Qing Empire.

A key aspect of the East Asian Confucian international system is the *Hua-Yi* distinction, which distinguishes people considered as civilised under universal Confucian values from the ones that are not (Mosca, 2020). The Chinse character *Hua* (華), which refers to the ancient forebears of what became China, is also the official nomenclature of successive modern Chinese states. In the first English-Chinese bidirectional dictionary, the corresponding word for China is *Zhonghua* (中華), literally '*Hua* at the centre' (Morrison, 1822: 68). The character *Yi*, in classical Chinese, is often used to refer to foreigners with derogatory connotations. The *Hua-Yi* distinction has been an influential

idea in East Asian histories and often used as a form of Self–Other ordering in the historical IR of East Asia (Satoshi, 2018: 70). Countries in the Sinosphere such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Ryukyu (modern-day Okinawa), too, can invoke the discourse to position themselves as civilised vis-a-vis the barbaric Other.

The *Hua-Yi* distinction is not simply a form of Self–Other distinction. It is also a form of territoriality. Neither the '*Hua*' or the '*Yi*' are fixed ethnic or spatial designations but were manipulated by the literati class for political ends (Fiskesjö, 1999: 154). The character *Yi* refers not only to 'foreigners' from outside of China as illustrated in the common expression *Si Yi* (四夷) – foreigners from all four directions (Basu, 2014: 930) but also to non-Han people within the empire (Mosca, 2020). Indigenous groups within the realm that were deemed as inferior could be referred to as *Yi* (Ge, 2017: 42). In Tokugawa Japan, the Chinese character of *Yi* (夷) was used to describe the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido, which was then known as the *Ezochi* (蝦夷地) or 'shrimp *yi* land' (Walker, 2007: 307). The Nuosu people of southwestern China and South East Asia have been referred to as *Yi* people (夷族) until the mid-20th century. The *Hua-Yi* distinction, not dissimilar from forms of territoriality practised in other large empires, is layered, heterogenous and context-dependent (see Kadercan, 2015, 2017; Stoler and McGranahan, 2007: 9).

After the collapse of the Ming Empire, the *Hua-Yi* distinction remained influential among the Han literati class in designating the geographical limit of China. It was used by both those serving the new empire and those with dissenting views to the new ruling Manchu dynasty. One emerging interpretation of the *Hua-Yi* distinction in the 17th century was that the difference between China and its Other was primarily to do with bloodline, geography and habitat rather than cultural differences (Hsiao, 2008: 7). The philosopher Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), often cited as an example of Chinese racialism, suggested that the geographical difference between *Hua* and *Yi* is irreconcilable, and therefore the boundary between the two must be maintained (Hsiao, 2008: 32). The geographical boundary of *Hua*, in his outlook, is based on the boundaries of the Ming Empire. Many Han scholar-officials serving the Manchu court continued to define China's geographic boundaries as based on the Ming Empire. During the campaign against the Dzungar Empire in 1755, emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) was openly criticised by his Grand Secretariat who claimed that what lay outside of the inner layer (present-day eastern Xinjiang) should be justifiably left to the Zunghars (Millward, 1998: 38).

In extreme cases, the ruling Manchu court itself was the target of the *Hua-Yi* distinction. In 1730, the Yongzheng Emperor (1678–1735) had to publicly rebut claims of the Manchu's foreignness by suggesting that '*Yi*' is merely a spatial designation, and therefore does not concern the legitimacy of the dynasty (quoted in Brook et al., 2018: 147). Resorting to Confucian universalism, he argued that even areas beyond the historical limits of China can produce sagely kings (Hsiao, 2008: 116). The Manchu imperial court did not banish the usage of the term *Yi*, but instead sought to vacate its ethnocultural meaning by sanctioning it in purely geographical terms in the imperial library and edicts (Liu, 2006: 87). In other words, the court sought to undermine the *Hua-Yi* distinction as a form of territoriality by disassociating geographic space from Confucian civility and virtue. The Inner Asian peoples under Qing rule, despite living beyond the limits of China, were regarded as equally civilized with the Han Chinese (Mosca, 2020: 107).

Manchu Qing and Sinocentric cartographies and territorialities

The Manchu court had its own unique, flexible and polyvalent form of territoriality that created an externally borderless yet internally segregated empire. Such flexibility was in part due to the practical necessities of presiding over a diverse Eurasian empire. Yet questions of practicality notwithstanding, this polyvalent form of territoriality was made possible by crucial transformations that were taking place in cartographic techniques and the production of geographical knowledge on a global scale (Hostetler, 2001; Simpson, 2021: 24).

The linear, demarcated borders between large Eurasian empires, namely, Russia, Qing and the Ottomans, rendered new survey techniques and maps an important set of political technologies(Goettlich and Branch, 2021: 273; Perdue, 1998: 265). Although it is tempting to lay claims to extra-European origins of modern territoriality based on these global connections, the historical realities were murkier than one form of territoriality simply replacing the other with the advent of new technologies. In China, the European scientific cartography had marginal effects on the maps made by literati scholars (Cams, 2017: 6; Hostetler, 2001, 2007; Perdue, 1998: 278) More importantly, contrary to diffusionist assumption about the impact of European technologies and knowledge, the adoption of 'European' mapping techniques by the Manchu court did not lead to modern notion of territory. Instead, the synthesis of different epistemologies and geographical knowledge enabled a distinct imperial Manchu form of territoriality.

The Qing imperial court was among the earliest users of these technological innovations, and the Qing imperial surveys were among the earliest examples of state-sponsored modern cartographic surveys. From the beginning of the 18th century, military campaigns in Central Asia and border demarcation with Russia demanded new precision mapping techniques that combined Chinese measurement units with European geometrical representation based on latitude and longitude (Cams, 2017: 193). Between 1707 and 1750, the Qing emperors commissioned a series of surveys led by both European Jesuits and Chinese officials (Hostetler, 2007; Millward, 1998; Perdue, 1998). The first comprehensive survey of the empire's territories as well as Tibet and Korea were completed in 1718. The resultant imperial atlas was produced with the aid of French Jesuits trained at the Academy of Sciences in Paris. It would be another 27 years until the Cassini Map of France was produced using similar geometric representations. Subsequent emperors throughout the 18th century ordered additional surveys that covered both newly conquered areas of Central Asia and highlands of Guizhou which had often been represented by blank space in previous versions of the atlas (Han, 2015: 131).

At first glance, the mapping activities of European Jesuits in the Qing Empire appears to confirm the constructivist diffusionist claims of the adoption of European spatial representation (Branch, 2014: 65). Yet contrary to the claims of Branch (2014), the new cartographic techniques and representation did not change 'what rulers saw as legitimate form of political rule' (p. 97). Such a simplistic claim would overlook two important factors: The first concerns the sources of geographical knowledge, like cartographic projects conducted during European colonial expansions, Qing imperial mapping too depended on a synthesis of indigenous, vernacular and 'scientific' forms of knowledge.

The imperial atlas combined geographical knowledge from sources as diverse such as Chinese maps, Manchu route books, surveys, vernacular knowledge and commercially available maps produced in Nuremberg and St Petersburg rather than relying simply on European knowledge (Cams, 2021). The findings of Western cartography were often only used when other sources of knowledge such as those of Mongol, Islamic, Buddhist and Tibetan sources had been exhausted (Mosca, 2013: 123).

The second important factor that diffusionist accounts overlook is the nature of imperial rule in Qing-China. Various forms of political authorities, from theocratic, pasture-nomadic to Confucian bureaucratic, co-existed within the empire. New cartographic representation, rather than changing the nature of Qing governance, afforded a comprehensive geographical overview to an otherwise messy ensemble of overlapping forms of political authorities and territoriality. The imperial atlases produced in the 18th century reflect a Manchu Eurasian imperial outlook and a polyvalent territoriality that consciously separates Ming-era Han provinces from the newly conquered areas of the Inner Asia Steppe (Cams, 2021: 94). The atlases enabled a form of 'imperial gaze' for the court and those at the centre of power. Seen in this light, the knowledge and techniques brought by the Jesuits were one part of the discursive repertoire consisting of geographical knowledge of various intellectual origins and problems of governance that underpinned the Manchu's minority rule.

The introduction of European cartographic techniques and representations did not prompt the court to eschew internal distinctions based on ethnocultural differences. Instead, the opposite happened, imperial mapping projects portrayed otherwise fluid boundaries between places and peoples as rigid administrative divisions (Cams, 2021: 121; Perdue, 2005: 459). The first map produced in the Jesuit Atlas series was not a complete map of the empire, but a map of the mythical Manchu homeland known as Manchuria (Elliott, 2000: 622). The aim of the mapping project was to emphasis the distinctiveness of the Manchu vis-a-vis the Han (Elliott, 2000: 603). Rather than integrating the Inner Asian territories into a Han ethnocentric conception of China, imperial mapping and surveys functioned to solidify the fuzzy ethnocultural fissures of the empire geographically.

In the various imperial atlases produced throughout the 18th century,[1] Qing territory is never depicted as homogeneous, exclusive and delineated by clearly defined external boundaries. By the time the first atlas was produced in 1717, the Qing-Russian border was already formalised in the treaty of 1689. Yet, the border was left out in surviving versions of the imperial atlas produced throughout the 18th century. One interpretation of the omission was that areas beyond the imperial spatial ordering were subject to further conquest (Cams, 2019). In a copperplate version from 1709, the only clearly defined boundaries were the internal border walls known as the 'Willow Palisade' which separated Mongolia, Manchuria and inner Han provinces (see Figure 1 for lines highlighted in green). The absence of international boundaries and exaggeration of internal boundaries communicate an internally segregated yet externally borderless world (Cams, 2019).

Parallel to the imperial gaze of the Manchu court, a Sinocentric form of territoriality remained influential in privately circulated maps produced by the Han literati. The dominant academic discourse at the time, known as *kaozheng*（考證）, focused on the search of empirically verifiable philological evidence from sources deemed acceptable to the
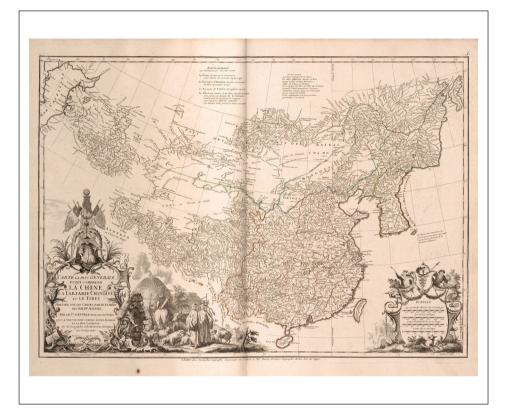
Figure 1. Atlas général de la Chine, de la Tartarie chinoise, et du Tibet: pour servir aux différentes descriptions et histoires de cet empire.
Source: Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, 1737, reprinted 1790, Paris. Library of Congress (Available at: https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7820m.gct00075/?sp=3&r=-0.043,0.124,0.935,0.468,0)

Confucian scholars (Elman, 2011). This textual empiricism and scholarly rigour paradoxically led to a stagnation and reification of older geographical understandings (Elman, 2007: 46; Mosca, 2013: 39). In the 18th century, the world maps brought by the Jesuits were dismissed as fictitious claims by scholars researching and writing about geography and military planning (Elman, 2007: 41). Han literati scholars, particularly those working on the official history of the Ming Dynasty commissioned by the Qing court, had access to the Jesuit's geographical works in the imperial collection. However, they drastically downplayed the political significance and reliability of their knowledge. The geographic knowledge brought by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) was described as 'absurd' in the imperially sanctioned history of the Ming Empire (History of Ming, 1739: 326).

The persistence of the *Hua-Yi* distinction and the geographic conception of China based on the Ming Empire can be discerned from a popular genre of maps depicting All Under Heaven. The maker of the popular 1673 version of the map, Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) was the teacher of Wan Sitong (1638–1702), who was responsible for compiling
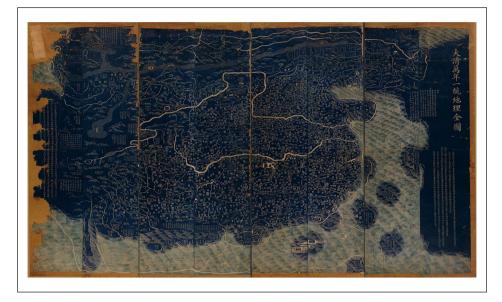
Figure 2. 大清万年一統地理全圖 Da Qing wan nian yi tong di li quan tu (complete geographical map of the great Qing Dynasty).
Source: Haung Qianren, c.1767 revised and reprinted 1810s, China. Library of Congress (Available at: https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71005060/).

the aforementioned *Ming History* which dismissed Ricci's geographic knowledge (Kutcher, 2018: 73). Huang's initial map has not survived, but later editions that are titled '*the great everlasting Qing's complete map of all under heaven*' and '*the great everlasting Qing's complete map of geography*' (hereafter as the '*complete map*') were regularly updated and reprinted until at least 1821 (Bao, 2015). The map's popularity in the 19th century is attested by the numerous surviving examples of the map produced throughout the 19th century.

In the 1810 version of the *complete map* (see Figure 2), the inscription on the map suggests that the compliers had seen the imperially commissioned maps and were aware of the territorial gains of the empire. Nevertheless, the Ming-era territory of China remains the only area drawn with relative accuracy. Much of the world outside of Han provinces are drawn in a fictional or 'metaphorical' manner. The assortment of countries and information are not corresponding to any geographical reality. For instance, a circle representing the 'Muslim homeland also known as Hami (Qumul)' – a part of the empire – floats side by side with the island representing Europe. The jarring contrast between detailed depictions of terrain and waterways within Han provinces and the complete absence of accuracy 'beyond the pale' of Han Chinese civilisation was the result of both a genuine lack of understanding and an ideologically motivated ode to Sinocentric hierarchy. In All Under Heaven, remoteness is a measurement of civility rather than one to do with physical distance (Ge, 2017: 139; Guan, 2014: 110).

Two distinctive geographic understandings of the empire emerge when we compare the imperial atlas and the *complete map.* Rather than a case of one map being more modern, scientific and accurate than the other, the two maps are the results of two forms of territoriality within the Qing imperial administration. The imperial atlas made with the help of European Jesuits depicting the vast expanse of the Eurasian continent is indicative of a nomadic outlook typical of the Eurasian Steppe, rather than a sedentary understanding of space siloed in a fixed space-society relationship (Dunnell et al, 2004; Neumann and Wigen, 2013: 314). In contrast to the boundless imperial vision of Eurasia, the Mongols, Manchus and Han subjects are confined to their ethnically defined administrative and geographic limits (MacKay, 2015: 490; Perdue, 1998: 266). In contrast, the *complete map* focuses on depicting the bureaucratic Chinese administrative divisions of prefectures known as the *Junxian* （郡縣）system and there reflects a Sinocentric form of territoriality which produces territorial order based on the perceived civility of the inhabitants of a place. The *Junxian* system is not simply a rigid administratively defined limit of China, but also the limit of the Han Chinese world vis-a-vis the 'tribal' Other (Bello, 2005).

The 'modern territoriality' of late-Qing literati statecraft writing

By the early 19th century, a 'modern' form of a geographically defined conception of China as the area controlled by the Qing empire emerged alongside the ethnocultural conception of China as the inner Han province. Both the geographical and ethnocultural conception of China helped to create a new form of Sinocentric territoriality that saw China as a bounded space with a Han-dominated core. This understanding of China found among late-Qing reformist literati thinkers closely resembles the modern conception of the sovereign, territorial state.

The emergence of this form of modern territoriality occurred as the Han literati class gradually gained access to imperial atlases and became alerted by the impending threats of European imperialism. However, far from a passive acceptance of European norms, the late-Qing literati form of 'modern territoriality' was the outcome of both new geographical knowledge and the reworking of Manchu polyvalent territoriality and universalism with a distinctively Sinocentric outlook. This form of Sinocentric 'modern territoriality' predates the formal introduction of territory and sovereignty as Western international law concepts. In this section, I illustrate the late-Qing 'modern territoriality' through both changes in cartographic techniques and the emergence of literati statecraft writings on the Inner Asian frontiers of the Empire.

Han literati scholars' role in the governance beyond the Han Chinese provinces was restricted in the earlier years of the empire. However, many of them gained employments in the imperial institutes of learning. As a result, many scholars were directly involved in, or were given archival access to court survey maps and official documents of Inner Asia (Mosca, 2011: 102). By the 1830s, imperial atlases began to publicly appear on the commercial print market available to common readers (Zhang, 2020: 130). The example shown here is an 1842 reproduction (see Figure 3) of an 1832 map titled *Imperial Qing*
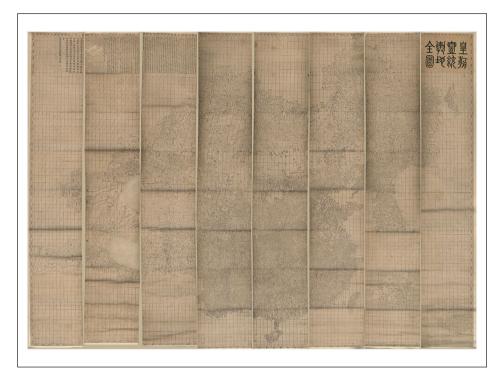
Figure 3. 皇朝一統與地全圖 Huang chao yi tong yu di quan tu (Qing Empire's complete map of All Under Heaven).
Source: Li Zhaoluo. 1832 reprinted in 1842 China. Library of Congress (Available at: https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7820.ct003405/?r=-0.236,-0.083,1.573,0.787,0).

Geography Map. The author of the map is Li Zhaoluo (1769–1841), a member of the prestigious *Hanlin* Academy that served the emperor's scholarly and secretarial needs.

The map was made based on a copy of an 18th-century imperial atlas by an official who was overseeing a legal code revision (Zhang, 2020: 130). The commercial reproduction of this map would be the first time for many people outside the inner circle of power to be able to visualise the relative size of the frontier area. The map marked the locations and names of frontier groups in Inner Asia, Sakhalin and Taiwan. Since it is no longer a map of All Under Heaven, only the Qing Empire and Joseon Korea are depicted. Neighbouring foreign countries are only marked by their names along the external borderlines of the empire. Some of these names are archaic and do not correspond to the political realities of neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, in the map, the Qing empire is both territorially demarcated and geographically finite. More importantly perhaps, the inner provinces are no longer distinguishable visually from the frontier regions.

The shift in the geographic understanding of China was concurrent with an imperial crisis induced by both internal and external foes. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Qing Empire was engulfed by economic depression, corruption and a series of large-scale ethnic and peasant rebellions. The narrow historical window between the perceived

start of imperial decline and the first Opium War in 1842 saw the emergence of a body of statecraft writings known as *Jingshi* (經世) by Confucian literati scholars which covered issues such as political economy, war and hydraulics (Kuhn, 2002: 19–20; Rowe, 2009: 159). These reform-minded thinkers were seen by later-day Chinese revolutionary thinkers as the precursors of China's modernisation. Here I engage with two of the more famous reformist literati scholars, Gong Zizhen (1792–1841) and Wei Yuan (1794–1857). Their geographic writings have been formative to the prominent political thinkers Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) involved in both late-Qing constitutional reform and the founding of the republic (Wang, 2014b).

The imperial atlas left a strong impression on Gong who worked as a clerk in the court's printing office in 1812. He remarked in a poem that the atlas was historically unprecedented (Zhang, 2020: 129). Gong wrote extensively on geography and the empire's non-Han frontier regions. Although he was a low ranking official, his influence was bolstered by his association with more prominent political figures such as viceroy Lin Zexu (1785–1850) – the official who later became the scapegoat of the first Opium War and was banished to a frontier post in Xinjiang in 1841. His 1820 treatise suggesting that Xinjiang should be converted into a Chinese province in light of the Muslim rebellions led by Jahangir Khoja (1788–1828) has been seen by later-day Chinese nationalist thinkers as prophetic.

In this treatise entitled 'A Proposal For Establishing a Province in Western Regions' (西域置行省議), Gong locates China at the eastern end of the Eurasian continent rather than the centre of the civilised realm and notes that there are 'numberless countries in the Four Seas' and that China, albeit the greatest of them all, is just one among many (Gong, 1820 (trans. Wright, 1987): 663). He then goes on specifying that the 'Country of the Great Qing' is the same as China since ancient time (Gong, 1820). Gong's proposal not only predated and foreshadowed the intensification of Qing colonialism in the Inner Asian frontiers in the latter half of the 19th century, but also heralded a larger shift that was taking place in Han literati scholars' conception of China and Sinocentric territoriality.

More importantly, the Sinocentric understanding of China did not disappear with the newfound geographically defined boundaries of China. Instead, Gong synthesised the Manchu polyvalent territoriality with a Sinocentric view over the entire empire. On one hand, following Manchu Qing imperial discourse of universalism, Gong Zizhen explicitly extended the older, and more ethnocentric conception China by suggesting that earlier (ethnocultural) conceptions of China do not encapsulate the vastness of the Qing Empire (Gong, 1820: 664). On the other hand, Gong continued to use the term China, *Zhongguo*, to distinguish between Xinjiang and the Han inner realm. Whereas this dual usage of China as both the empire and the ethnic core might seem confusing to a contemporary observer, for Gong, the territorially defined conception of China stretching into Inner Asia and the ethnocultural notion of China as inner provinces were not mutually exclusive.

Instead of extending the ethnocultural conception of China to non-Han peoples, Gong used environmental difference between Inner Asia and Eastern parts of the country as well as topographical features including waterways and mountains to define the external boundaries of Chinese territory. However, this does not mean that Gong is adopting a

non-hierarchical understanding of peoples within the empire, since the prerequisite for Xinjiang to be converted into a province from a military colony is the relocation of excess population from all over China and the establishment of Confucian bureaucratic administration in the frontier. Gong was aware of the 'tribes' and 'Muslim areas' of Xinjiang, but in his vision, they would eventually come under the forms of regular administration used in the inner provinces (Gong, 1820: 671).

Gong's treatise is included in an 1826 volume of statecraft writing compiled by Wei Yuan. Wei was a classmate of Gong who studied with him under the auspice of a distinguished scholar in Beijing (Elman, 2011: 382). Wei is chiefly known for the first significant Chinese scholarly work on European maritime empires in the wake of the First Opium War. He knew Li Zhaoluo – the maker of the 1832 map – well and was influenced by him intellectually. He devoted a significant portion of the aforementioned 1826 volume to affairs of the Empire's Inner Asian frontiers. In the 1826 essay entitled *A Response to Questions Regarding the North-western Peripheral Regions* (答人問西北邊域書), he argued against the proposal to abandon key cities in Xinjiang including Kashgar and Yarakand to the Muslim rebels by the military governor of Xinjiang (Wang, 2014a: 79).

Like Gong, Wei too was influenced by textual and cartographic records of the frontiers and had a geographically bounded conception of the empire. He admits in his writing that he has never been to the frontiers in person and based his entire argument solely on books and maps. In the essay, Wei outlines the various peoples living along the empire's frontiers and defined the country's land boundaries with neighbouring countries. Interestingly, the essay makes an explicit remark on the enormity of Russia and states that it has never belonged to China historically. Like Gong, he also use the word 'China' to refer to both the entirety of the Qing empire and the Han provinces specifically. For example, Xinjiang is said to be a solution to overpopulation and unemployment in 'China', which is full of people and running out of land (Wei, 1826).

Wei gave a comprehensive geographical overview of Chinese territory in his 1842 book *A Military History of Celestial Dynasty* (聖武紀) describing regions from Sakhalin Island in the North Eastern Pacific to the Tibetan frontier with Gurkha (Wang, 2014a: 80). Wei, for the first time in Chinese sources, presents a total and coherent geographical understanding of China that not only discarded the earlier segmented view of the frontier regions but also shows that beyond the realm lays a connected outside world (Mosca, 2013: 271). To understand China's positioning within this interconnected world, the empire itself is reconceptualised as a spatially contagious and geographically defined entity surrounded by potential foes and allies.

Conclusion

The epistemic transformation that occurred in late-Qing Sinophone discourse gave rise to a distinctive understanding of China as a territory, in addition to a people and a state. This geographical reimagination of China proved to be influential in providing the conceptual vocabularies for later-day canonical nationalist thinkers to both deny and conceive of the Chinese nation in multicultural and multi-ethnic terms based on a territorialised understanding of China. The revolutionary intellectual Liang Qichao, for instance, defined the Chinese nation based on China's geography conceived in terms of

the Qing Empire's territories (Wang, 2014b). The geographic conception of China, and spatial bifurcation between Han and non-Han areas of the country informed in part by Qing imperial spatial ordering of various ethnocultural constituents, helped to engender the Nationalist and Communist regimes' problematisations of ethnocultural diversity within China (Leibold, 2007).

The theoretical implications of forms of knowledge and practices outside of the 'Western' world go beyond narrow, albeit important, critiques of Eurocentrism. However, since modern territoriality in IR has often been swept under the straitjacket of European colonialism, the polycentric origins of modern territoriality are often negated. Concepts such as modern territoriality are often both moored in European analytical ideal type and the disparity between how much is known about the histories of the 'West' compared with the 'rest'(Drayton and Motadel, 2018). Despite the ostensible universality of territorial sovereignty, modern territoriality is not enabled by a predetermined set of conceptual and material apparatus which can be used to explain the transformation of the international system into a system of territorial states. Instead, when studied 'from below' and autochthonously, a polycentric understanding of modern territoriality appears to be more convincing than a diffusionist account that privileges a specific epistemology. Contrary to Branch (2014) and Elden's (2013a) articulations, the emergence of modern territoriality in late-Qing China required neither the Sinophone equivalent of 'territory' nor the adoption of the 'Western grammar of spatiality' (Branch, 2014: 667). It is possible to be trapped territorially even without the word 'territory' itself (Watanabe, 2018).

Seen in this light, the later-day Chinese nationalist leaders were not forced to adopt modern territoriality in the face of European imperialism but followed a pre-existing territorialised understanding of China in their experiments of nation-building and state-building. This suggests that modern territoriality has multiple, albeit connected origins around the world rather than emerging from a singular epistemic or technological transformation.

Recognising polycentricity and mutability does not mean that the concepts and theories derived from non-Western societies and cultures can readily transcend the ethnocentrism of IR (Acharya, 2016: 60). Scholars of global history have rightly pointed out the risk of replacing one hegemonic universal account with another by prioritising histories that are most entangled with European or other imperial projects (Drayton and Motadel, 2018: 14). Similarly, critics of Global IR are critical of the inadvertent reification of the irreconcilable binary between the West and the non-West (Murray, 2020). However, rather than reifying a new global imaginary (Anderl and Witt, 2020), Global IR's engagement with global history and its emphasis on the polycentric character of the world known as 'modern' can also highlight the very limit of concept and theory with universal aspiration (Phillips, 2016). Engagement with the situated character of seemingly global forms of knowledge and practices in historical contexts that do not automatically privilege anglophone or European histories can carve out a way between incessant critiques and the essentialising rhetoric of inclusion and diversity. One way to do this is by engaging with archival sources, visual materials and writings in non-European languages that might have relatively little to say about how devasting and omnipresent European colonialism has been.

My critique of the Eurocentric historiography of the modern sovereign territorial state in extant IR scholarship, critical or otherwise, seeks to address the concerns raised by critics of Global IR. Specifically, through my empirical study, I have sought to problematise the bundling of China as a Sinocentric ethnocultural concept within the territorial limit of the Qing dynasty. In doing so, the simple binary of anti-Eurocentric IR and Eurocentric IR is put into question. Retrieving the territorialisation of China as an important transformation in the histories of IR is not in itself a counter-hegemonic project, but another acute reminder of how the naturalisation of 'non-Western' concepts and practices are themselves implicated in violent structures of domination.

Finally, by bringing attention to the emergence of modern territoriality in late imperial China, this article has shown the deep historical processes behind contemporary China's volatile territorial disputes from the Himalayan borderlands to the Taiwan Strait. The imperial legacies of the Qing Empire's expansion are at the root of the ethnopolitical conflicts and territorial disputes in contemporary China. Although China is by no means unique in evaporating the territorial distinctions between colonies and the empire itself, its territorialisation is unique in the sense that China was transformed from a geographical and cultural component of the Qing Empire to the retroactively pronounced core and the proprietor of that empire. The emergence of modern territoriality and the subsequent consolidation of the empire from a patchwork of diverse political authorities to a singular Chinese territory meant that the conditions that required the indirect, patchwork forms of governance are either obscured or excessively problematised. Nation-building and state-building process therefore entailed the eradication of other imperial visions, nationalist aspirations and forms of territoriality within the former empire. The contemporary political impetus towards territorial recuperation and Sinicisation efforts among minority groups are some of the latest attempts to actualise a territorialised understanding of China. The repressions in Xinjiang and Tibet, militant stance towards Taiwan and crackdown of social movements in Hong Kong are all acuate reminders that the inalienability of Chinese territory warrants the assimilation or eradication of those deemed as aliens.

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Note

1. You can access digital reproductions of these atlases via: https://qingmaps.org

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