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Convergences and Divergences Within the ‘New’ Greater China

ALLEN CHUN

The rise of a new China in recent years has paradoxically rendered the term “Greater China” anachronistic. It was supposed to characterize the wider regional community of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Hong Kong. But the polemics of cultural identity have taken on new meaning and hardened geopolitical relations among these societies. A newly “indigenizing” Taiwan is attempting to break out of its Cold War nationalist past, while a “democratizing” Hong Kong is struggling to guarantee its questionably autonomous status in a postcolonial era, even as an openly “capitalist” China is driven by a resurgent nationalism. All of these trends are filtered through Western narratives of borderless economies and liberal democratic aspirations in Greater China. Yet in geopolitical terms, it is apparent that what used to be viewed as relatively self-defined polities in a previous era (nationalist Taiwan, colonial Hong Kong, and socialist PRC) are now being reconfigured by competing centripetal and centrifugal tensions.

The term Greater China was used first in the 1980s to denote a radically new emerging China spawned by Deng Xiaoping’s policy of economic liberalization and the diverse transnational influences that followed. Hong Kong and Taiwan became major sources of a renaissance spanning an array of fields from the economic to the cultural. The idea of Greater China thus represented a cultural-economic domain that seemed to transcend political boundaries—but this was a space centered outside China or within the triangle formed by the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

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Ironically, despite the rise of an even Greater China in the twenty-first century, use of the term has mostly faded out. What exactly has changed?

WISHFUL THINKING

Academia has long been full of East Asian fantasies. The rise of “miracle economies”—first in Japan, then in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore—corresponded closely with the stagflation of Western capitalism in the 1970s. Scholars singled out culture as a prime determining factor in this distinctive development. The first to emphasize the role of cultural values in East Asia’s rise was the Harvard political scientist Roderick MacFarquhar in a 1980 essay in the *Economist*, “The Post-Confucian Challenge.” In a 1984 book, *In Search of an East Asian Development Model*, Peter Berger and Michael Hsiao argued for the “comparative advantage of Sinic civilization.”

The scholarly literature on East Asian capitalism shifted in the 1990s, during a period that saw the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble followed by the rise of transnational Chinese capitalism throughout East and Southeast Asia, to focus more on the overseas Chinese variety. The British scholar Gordon Redding argued that distinctive cultural mindsets and entrepreneurial practices can be found in Chinese businesses everywhere. Other scholars explored the role of Confucianism in the development of capitalism, prompting Singapore’s government to promote such a model.

The concept of Greater China, as I use the term here, is a product of different concerns and circumstances. The name became widely used in the 1990s to represent what seemed to be a new phenomenon; *The China Quarterly* devoted a special issue to the topic in 1993. In effect, the idea of Greater China referred not just to the more outward-looking China that was emerging from

its own internal political struggles and social transformations. The phenomenon had to be set in the context of wider political-economic and cultural forces.

In the 1980s, interaction and interdependency grew initially among China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, then expanded outward in Asia through links with other ethnic Chinese populations. These economic bonds developed into a broader community that shared common cultural interests and political views.

This was clearly a complex economic, cultural, and political phenomenon, but what was it really leading to—interaction, integration, or reunification? In 1993, the sinologist Harry Harding argued that Greater China meant different things in different places. For Beijing, economic interaction was a way to facilitate the eventual political reunification of China. Special economic zones were created for political as well as commercial reasons.

Hong Kong, Harding said, regarded economic ties with the mainland as a way of cushioning its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997: giving Beijing a direct stake in guaranteeing economic prosperity would preserve the territory's political viability—the possibility of autonomy after the transition. On Taiwan, in contrast, he believed economic interaction with the mainland was seen in the short term as a lever for extracting political concessions from Beijing—to deter the PRC from using force against the island and allow Taiwan a louder voice in international affairs—and possibly as an implicit way of promoting democratization.

In retrospect, Harding's reading of the political tea leaves, though it reflected the views of many experts in the West, still turned out to be wishful thinking. Each side had different interests, and Greater China at that time represented opportunities that each could exploit to maximize its interests. But I doubt economic liberalization was seen in Beijing at the time as a direct means for bringing about political reunification. Free-market capitalism was still in the making; its political ramifications came much later.

Likewise for Taiwan, the policy of expanding mainland investment suited entrepreneurial interests but was not something that could be used as political leverage against Beijing. As for Hong Kong, Beijing allowed its capitalists to invest in the China market, but never relinquished the ultimate goal regarding Hong Kong's political fate after the "return to the motherland." Most importantly, much of the transnational flows at the

time were from the periphery to the center, which broke down borders in many senses.

Greater China represented a larger than national conceptual entity, but it was one in which China ironically played a subsidiary role. At the same time, the idea was a projection of sinologists' transnational aspirations and culturalist narratives. Since then, China has, if anything, become even "greater," comparatively speaking, yet the parallel decline in the usage of this term to characterize the state of the region now reveals the fictive nature of those projections. Such cultural theories may be just as subjectively Eurocentric as the depiction of other global struggles as a "clash of civilizations."

COLLUSIVE CAPITALISM

The current fixation with the rise of China, especially after its transition to a free-market economy, overlooks the fact that there has been a long history of debates over the rise and fall of China's civilization (and economy) over the last few millennia. In the PRC, Maoist-era Marxist historians debated the significance of the "sprouts of capitalism" that appeared in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries yet apparently failed to bloom. Later, interest in this topic was rekindled by books such as Mark Elvin's *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Andre Gunder Frank's *ReOrient*, Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*, and Giovanni Arrighi's *Adam Smith in Beijing*, among many others.

In order to understand the evolution from old to new Greater China, one must look beyond the advent of a capitalist economy. The demise of Maoist socialism paved the way for a restructuring of the political regime in relation to the economy that would also be fueled by a resurgent nationalism. Instead of being the end point of progress, the opening of the free market served as a catalyst for co-opting entrepreneurial capitalism into serving the consolidation of the single party-state.

Free rein was initially given to investors from Hong Kong and Taiwan to set up special economic zones on the mainland, but the price of gaining access to the Chinese market was cooperation with Beijing in other regards. The first to ardently support reunification of Hong Kong with China or express confidence in the future of a post-1997 Hong Kong were rich oligarchs. Unlike the "apolitical" capitalism that was characteristic of Hong Kong in the 1970s, capitalist interests in the post-1997 era

were most likely to support Beijing's positions and steer clear of supporting local democratization in order to protect their own interests. This unholy alliance between business and the new regime became the foundation of the new order. *Guanxi* (crony) capitalism served to advance a deeper political agenda.

Yasheng Huang's 2008 book *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics* is an analysis of the transition from early private entrepreneurialism in rural China to a later phase of state-controlled, urban-based capitalism. His account provides a basis for understanding the new PRC economy, which has been simplistically miscast in neoliberal terms. Huang highlights the success of initial rural reforms, while emphasizing the role of private, small-scale entrepreneurship in the takeoff process. His criticism of state-owned, *guanxi*-based enterprises points to the emergence of *guanxi* as a prevailing practice of everyday life and more importantly as the foundation of corporatist state capitalism itself. This has allowed corruption, inefficient capital use, pollution, and state expropriation of land to become systemic problems.

CULTURAL COERCION

Unfolding in parallel with Deng's liberalization of a market economy in China was a gradual renaissance of all forms of Chinese culture and civilization. This was a symptom of the decline of socialist dogma, which had suppressed "tradition" as a conflicting ideology. The emergence of "identity" was permitted by the lifting of taboos on tradition, history, and custom. Now they could be promoted as politically neutral or legitimizing attributes of the nation.

The long-term investment made by the government in archaeological discovery and preservation, exemplified in the excavation of the first Qin emperor's mausoleum and its terracotta warriors, became a showcase for national pride and a powerful symbol of unity. This has been accompanied by explicit encouragement of patriotic fervor in politics and education. Its expression through a territorialist foreign policy has heightened regional anxiety over borders.

The fermenting of a new national consciousness served as a crucial element in building popular support for liberalization of the economy. Economic progress reversed centuries of "national humiliation." In the extreme, this unleashed na-

tionalist sentiments that showed, at least to the outside world, a new face of Chineseness. Policy did not have to be based on a belief in individual freedom or "Western" ideas of democracy. Indeed, the party-state's politics militated against them.

The expansion of China's government-sponsored Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese-language and China studies, explicitly represents the worldwide cultural diffusion of this political agenda. One can recognize the academic nature of the Confucius Institutes and the common role of cultural dissemination in foreign policy. But to characterize this as "soft power," using the political scientist Joseph Nye's term, would suggest that the Institutes and their practices have primarily been based on assuagement, co-optation and other forms of positive persuasion rather than more coercive political tactics.

The Institutes' funding for educational programs and support for academic research have been substantial. But their efforts to promote Beijing's political interests reflect the wording of their

institutional contracts, which enjoin them not to contravene "the laws and regulations of China."

In practice, the coercive tactics used by the Institutes in their pursuit of these political objectives have been anything

but soft. Their numerous attempts to foment student protests at universities abroad and use their leverage to shut down campus events involving the Dalai Lama, prohibit support for the Falun Gong spiritual movement, and promote their own official policies in course-teaching have resulted in many of the overseas Institutes being shut down.

TAIWAN'S BURDEN OF HISTORY

From the perspective of Taiwan and Hong Kong, facing inward, it is easy to read policy in literal terms. Taiwan has been undergoing a process of indigenization (officially termed multiculturalism). In the extreme version, which led to the success of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), indigenization represented giving priority to the rights of ethnic Taiwanese, who constituted the majority of the population. This was a reversal of the policy platform of the Kuomintang (KMT), which had advocated the defense of traditional China as the core mission of Taiwan, the Republic of China (ROC). The totalitarian extent to which Chineseness was enforced during four decades

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of KMT rule under Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo was a product not only of the KMT's Cold War struggle with the PRC but also of a perceived need to sinicize Taiwan after 50 years of Japanese rule.

Indigenization gradually brought about the current rift between political factions favoring reunification with the mainland and those upholding independence. The trend toward indigenization also produced new narratives of history that began to emphasize early centuries of settlement by Taiwanese and Austronesian aborigines, thus implying Taiwan's local rootedness, along with earlier periods of colonial occupation by the Dutch and Spanish.

Indigenization was in actuality the result of Taiwan's expulsion from the United Nations in 1971, just as the opening of its economy was a response to its outcast status. The trend toward indigenization was one side of the KMT's survival policy, which involved not only a move away from sino-centric concerns toward a pragmatic Taiwan-based view but also the cultivation of ethnic Taiwanese support. Eventually they became the KMT's largest faction.

These complex interests explain why political positions on Taiwan are clouded by ambiguity. No one so far has disavowed the existence of the ROC, despite its loss of international recognition. Taiwanese commercial ventures continue to invest in the PRC (as long as their interests are protected), while other sorts of interaction are tightly regulated. The Cold War between Taiwan and the PRC continues, but despite the nationalist rhetoric spewed on both sides, no one is actually declaring reunification or independence in concrete terms. So what are people really talking about, except their anachronistic cultural imaginings?

People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are waging fictive wars. Militarily, a stalemate was declared a long time ago. In the 1950s, PRC forces were unable to take over the island of Quemoy, just off the Fujian coast, despite daily bombardment. So who today in Taiwan is intimidated by Beijing's threats of missile testing?

Despite the fog of rhetoric, the reality is clear. Today, many Taiwanese advocate cultural autonomy as a basis for political independence, but they forget that real independence was once possible, surely in 1949 and 1971. Taiwan's leaders failed to seize the opportunity because they refused to abandon their goal of retaking the mainland. Only after it became a lost cause did they shift gears;

they have no one to blame but themselves. Nonetheless, Taiwan has been de facto independent from the PRC since 1949. Yet few have dared to state this fact officially at the risk of reigniting a real war.

For most of the Maoist era, China was absorbed by its own affairs. During its recent nationalist awakening, since the return of Hong Kong, Beijing has widened its embrace to all parts of the old empire that extended back over 3,000 years of unbroken civilization, not to mention unoccupied islands in the South China Sea. What makes Taiwanese think they are better off than Hong Kongers? Cultural independence amounts to little, as Tibet and Xinjiang show. If the Chinese nationalists were willing to wait 268 years for the fall of the Qing dynasty to reestablish the destiny of that unbroken civilization, surely Taiwan's reunification with the mainland is no urgent matter.

HONG KONG'S PECULIAR PLIGHT

Hong Kong's historical experience leading up to its repatriation in 1997 was rather different. Despite its status as a colony since 1841, its inhabitants' main relationship was with China. British interests vis-à-vis China, in light of Britain's own imperial decline leading up to and beyond World War II, made this colony a peculiar survivor. The Cold War nationalist conflict between the PRC and the KMT eventually catalyzed Hong Kong's transformation into a free trade port.

The main consequence of this change was the evolution of a utilitarian society, which brought about a deliberately apolitical popular culture. From 1967 to 1984 (the free trade port era, popularly referred to as "a borrowed place and a borrowed time"), nationalist sentiment began to wane to the point of not being rooted to any political homeland—whether China, Taiwan, or Britain. During this era of political alienation from the two Chinas, British colonialism softened considerably. The liminal public sphere that emerged gave birth to a Hong Kong "identity" as well as the discursive disappearance of the "colony" (the government began using the term "territory" instead) until its repatriation in 1997.

In short, Hong Kong's history was less the product of British-Chinese interactions per se than a complex process involving overlapping colonialisms, nationalisms, and modernities. These trends reflected the global political forces driving them as well as the complexity of cultural conflict and interaction taking place in specific local contexts.

In the long run, the British colonial era represented an important preamble and foundation for the post-1997 era. The transition has been characterized too simplistically in East-West terms or as the continuation of capitalism in the new era of “autonomous” rule.

Yet there is one clear difference that distinguishes Hong Kong from Taiwan. It has never enjoyed nor can it ever claim independence, in spite of its achievements or special characteristics. If there was any single legacy of its British colonial experience that facilitated Hong Kong’s current subservience to Beijing, the largest obstacle to democratization, it was the colonial government’s Legislative Assembly. The governor was of course appointed directly by London, but so were members of the legislature. The Assembly was always a rubber stamp—an agent of the colonial administration that served the interests of its functional constituencies (mostly business and local political elites), not the interests of the people. Beijing simply adopted Hong Kong’s existing institutions and filled them with oligarchic business elites and the political functionaries they carried favor with. Colonialism lives on in practice.

Another neglected phenomenon that deserves mention is the role that Hong Kong corporate capitalism played, and not only in promoting economic development in China. More importantly, Hong Kong investors obtain privileges from the central government, and Beijing has used those conditions as leverage to twist the Hong Kong business sector’s arm to support its political agenda, especially when it comes to nationalist conformity and the suppression of local democracy.

GRAVITATIONAL GEOPOLITICS

The phenomenon that has altered the old Greater China irrevocably is the new rise of China, propelled by economic growth emanating from the center. With this sustained growth, the core of the global market has gravitated toward China, and the weight of that market alone has changed the global balance of power.

As the mainland’s growth took off, it was clear that Hong Kong and Taiwan were no longer the source of Greater China’s economic and cultural renaissance and had begun to pale by comparison. In order to gain access to the market they coveted,

outsiders had to play by Beijing’s rules. Foreign corporations had to conform to the official line in matters pertaining to national sensitivities. Taiwanese entrepreneurial interests had to censor any mention of Taiwan’s independence as a condition for doing business. Hong Kong business interests were even more dependent on expanding into the China market in order to survive. Chineseness was not just a cultural label; it became a politicized norm.

Taiwan today is perhaps most threatened not by China’s cultural nationalism but by the potentially dependent relationship created by further free trade agreements with Beijing. The Sunflower Movement in 2014, initiated by student radicals occupying the Legislative Yuan, was primarily a protest against the KMT government’s proposed Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement with China. Corporate interests supporting the KMT argued that the pact would enhance economic growth on both sides, while critics warned that it would make Taiwan vulnerable to Chinese political influence.

The student protest culminated with a rally attended by an estimated 350,000 people.

While the protest caused a stalemate that has prevented ratification of the bill, its political effect came much later, when January 2016 elections

resulted in an overwhelming defeat for the KMT and enabled three student protesters running for the upstart New Power Party to win seats in the Legislative Yuan. Ultimately, the Sunflower Movement did not directly escalate the trend toward independence, but it increased popular awareness of the complex ramifications of the new Greater China.

In Hong Kong, much attention has been paid, especially by the global media, to the plight of democracy and Beijing’s resistance to establishing free direct elections for the territory’s chief executive and legislature, which provoked the Umbrella Movement street protests in 2014. However, democracy in Hong Kong is not a new cause prompted by the change of regime in 1997. Until then it was a movement that had a history of more than three decades yet was merely given lip service by the British rulers as well as a Western media that took for granted Hong Kong’s status as a colony.

It is easy to criticize the Chinese government for its totalitarian tactics and its aim of reintegrating

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Hong Kong into the national whole, but the politics of the nation-state has its own dynamics that can explain the tensions between Hong Kong and China, even setting democracy aside. Before 1997, Hong Kongers had generally been receptive to the prospect of the territory's return to China, partly due to its inevitability and their own powerlessness. They had begun to make accommodations of all kinds to facilitate not just reintegration but also new opportunities. Both the corporate and entertainment sectors realized that they could not survive by relying on Hong Kong's market alone—mutual accommodation with the mainland had always been the bottom line for a new future.

Beijing, in pursuit of hegemonic control of Hong Kong society, has made unilateral attempts to revise school curricula and make Mandarin a common colloquial language, but to be fair this is no worse than what the KMT implemented in

postwar Taiwan. Tensions on both sides have increasingly transformed relations into a clash of cultures and identities, in contrast with the apolitical illusion cultivated in the colonial era with Hong Kong's cosmopolitan capitalist lifestyle of the 1970s and '80s.

Greater China in the "postcolonial" era will be marked by convergences as well as divergences. This is a context created and dominated by the rise of a new China. Its consequences will be felt differently by Taiwan and Hong Kong, primarily because they are situated differently as a result of distinctly local political experiences. Nonetheless, the dynamics of this emerging galactic polity are not unlike those of other celestial systems, with their gravitational pushes and pulls. To what degree local political will and new strategic visions can influence the course of its development as a whole is anyone's guess. ■