Briefs | Analyses

Hong Kong, the Chinese Myth of Unity and a Federal Failure

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TWO COUNTRIES, ONE SYSTEM?

When a yellow sea of umbrellas covered the streets of Hong Kong in September 2014, the attention of the world was drawn, with a mixture of empathy and anxiety, to that cosmopolitan corner of Asia in which students, activists and common citizens were fighting in the name of "autonomy" and "democracy." After more than one century of British governance, the former colony had been returned to China in 1997, with a solemn ceremony and the promise of a special status—legally, economically and politically—under the title of "one country—two systems."

The island, together with the Kowloon Peninsula, had been cut off from the rest of China in the dramatic decades of the mid-19th century, as the imperial order of the Qing dynasty was crumbling under internal tensions and external pressures. It made its return "home" in an entirely different setting, reuniting to a completely different country from the one it had left. The weakened imperial elite of the late Qing had been replaced by a solid Communist leadership, eager to bring China back onto the international stage as a reformed socialist economy and a global economic player. After decades of republican turmoil from the 1910s to the 1930s, a civil war in the 1940s and the tragic Maoist leap into constant revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist Party in Beijing had embraced pragmatism under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping, drafting and implementing a blueprint of comprehensive reforms meant to lead the country towards a "socialism with Chinese characteristics"—whatever this means.

The political return of Hong Kong to the mainland marked an important step in this process of "redefining" (and re-empowering) China under many aspects. Geographically, it added a small but significant piece to the reconstruction of the lost territorial sovereignty. Historically and symbolically, it concluded the first phase of the rapprochement between China and the so-called Western world, started in the mid 1970s, showing that China was ready to exert again its influence over territories once part of the Empire and then occupied during a long century of humiliations. Economically, it demonstrated the readiness of Beijing to take control over a "capitalist" hotspot and let it thrive, with special

rules, and yet under the general supervision of the Communist Party.

Two visions of two systems

The nature and expression of this "supervision," however, remained vague and differently conceptualized. On the one hand, it was interpreted as an almost symbolic "supervision": an external projection of China as "one country" but internally articulated as "two systems" with well-defined prerogatives (particularly in terms of legal regulations) and different decision-making processes. On the other, it appeared as a strict form of "supervision." This approach, especially popular among members or supporters of the Communist party of China (CPC) leadership, entails a legal and political predominance of the "center" (Beijing) on the "locality" (Hong Kong), which should be gradually chiseled and implemented in order to make the boundaries between the "two systems" more and more blurred over the decades. This conceptual bifurcation was doomed to ignite the conflict that would explode first in 2014 and then, more dramatically, in 2019 and 2020, with the crushing of local resistance and the enforcement of a new "order" under the tighter surveillance of Beijing.

So, besides the political, economic and strategic interests at play in Xi Jinping's attitude facing Hong Kong (and in his success in eroding its autonomy), what does this confrontation—between the Party and the former colony, but also between quickly defined "Chinese" and "Western" values—tell us in terms of "political concepts"? Or, to be more precise, can we detect in the Hong Kong protests, and in Beijing's reaction to them, different understandings of the relationship between center and periphery, echoing different political views on power and legitimacy? Again, and in other words, is the CPC's interpretation of "one country-two systems" conceptually compatible with those of the protesters in Hong Kong and of liberal observers around the world?

Imperial and Soviet inheritances

Beijing wants to reaffirm its undisputed control over every corner of the Chinese territory. It is visible, not just in Hong Kong, but everywhere within the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and even outside, as the unresolved tensions with Taiwan still demonstrate. This necessity surely can be explained by the importation of democratic centralism from the Soviet political culture in the 1920s, and its subsequent transformation into State ideology as the Communists gained control over China in 1949. However, Marxism-Leninism (or, to be more precise, Mao Zedong's

version of that doctrine, accommodated to the local context during the struggles of the 1940s) could not have succeeded without a cultural/philosophical substrate favoring its solidification as a State ideology. In that case, it was the venerable imperial theorization of political legitimacy that paradoxically favored the implantation of the Leninist centralism, while it was concurrently reviled as a symbol of backwardness.

One of the best ways to measure the efficacy of any polity—and consequently, one of the main issues involved in the conceptualization of a "political order"—is the assessment of the "degree to which its center can control the peripheries," as Dutch historian Jeroen Duindam and German historian Sabine Dabringhaus pointed out in their comparative history of imperial orders, in 2014.

Throughout the pre-imperial and imperial centuries, the Chinese pendulum of power had constantly, and very often dramatically, oscillated between the Imperial Court and local rulers (members of the dynastic lineage, aristocrats, landowners, provincial governors, "barbarians" and foreigners). From a comparative perspective, the Chinese case marks an interesting example in which the legitimacy of a central authority, in terms of discourse more than practice, was never seriously challenged by a theory of "shared" or "balanced" authorities. This is not to say that the mutually dependent degrees of central control and local autonomy were not debated in China. Competing options existed, as demonstrated by the recurring confrontation between proponents of the *junxian* 郡县 and the *fengjian* 封建 models: the former representing the most centralized solution and the latter leaving more room for forms of local autonomy. Studies documenting how the local societies played a key role in the implementation and even in the elaboration of imperial policies are abundant and have been conducted by prominent scholars as American historian Joseph Esherick, Chinese-Canadian political scientist Theresa Lee and Chinese historical geographer Zhou Zhenhe. However, those political actors never successfully achieved the conceptual construction of an alternative model, entailing a relation between local and central in contractual terms. State and society remained an embedded complex, sustained through the mediation of scholar-officials and thanks to a philosophical elaboration by which the "local dimension" was intended as a microcosmic reflection of the universal (imperial) order, and not as a part of it as it would occur in Western Europe (this pattern has been adamantly delineated by Korean political scientist Youngmin Kim in *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, published in 2018.)

Early 20th century: when local autonomy seemed possible

In 1911, the collapse of the imperial order had marked *de facto* the (temporary) victory of centrifugal tendencies, as the provincial gentry declared its independence from the Court laying the foundations of a new *res publica* that promised to be more local-oriented than the Qing dynasty. In the late

imperial and early republican decades, under the intellectual challenge posed by Western concepts of State, society and political power, a growing number of activists and intellectuals embraced the ideal of local self-government (*difang zizhi* 地方自治) as the keystone for a federal (*lianbang* 联邦) network of autonomous or semi-autonomous administrations (*xingzheng* 行政) that would compose the "new China." In conceptual/political terms, they were contrasting the semantics of "local government" as the mere importation of a Japanese/German system of prefectures tightly and hierarchically controlled by the center, proposing instead a radically different model in which legitimacy would flow from the bottom to the top. In this sense, they were looking with admiration at non-Chinese federal experiences as the United States of America, or Switzerland, praising foreign examples of local resistance to the brutality of centralizers and searching for similar examples within Chinese history. The old model of *fengjian* suddenly appeared as a potentially modern solution in the establishment of a more democratic State.

After the provincial secessions of 1911/1912, and before the success of Chiang Kai-shek's reunification in 1927, the adoption of a federalist institutional asset seemed to be a reasonable solution for post-imperial China. One of the most complete and detailed plans for a federal China—and at the same time one of the last attempts at providing a political alternative to the centralism of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party)—was written during the completion of the Northern Expedition by the "intellectual warlord" Chen Jiongming 陳炯明 (1878–1933). A key ally of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866–1925) during the Revolution of 1911, later governor of Guangdong, Chen opposed the Nationalists' idea of using the southern province's revenue to finance the Northern Expedition in 1923–1924. His defense of the local prerogatives of Guangzhou led him to a conflict with the "father of the Republic," which marked him as a traitor. Sun's turn to the Soviet Union had influenced his political agenda: his federalist sympathy was buried under the urge to adopt the Leninist organizational model of democratic centralism, thus fueling the conflict with Chen. After fleeing to Hong Kong (and there we are again, not coincidentally), Chen Jiongming would continue advocating for a federal solution to the division of China. In 1927, as the Guomindang was finally conquering the North, fulfilling Sun's dream of a newly reunified Republic under the control of a strong central administration, the exiled Chen published his own roadmap for an alternative national reunification.

A Chinese federalist project

In his *Modest proposal for the unification of China* (中國統一芻議 *Zhongguo tongyi chuyi*), Chen wanted to prove that a convinced federalist could also be a "national patriot." He drafted a program that, at least in his opinion, would harmoniously blend a democratic approach to local legitimacy to the need for a strong state (and for a unified military, overall). It is not the work of a philosopher, but the reflection of a "*xiucai* (秀才 talented official) of action," the man that

the American philosopher John Dewey defined as "the most impressive of all the officials whom I have met in China." Introduced by a foreword by the prominent nationalist intellectual Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869–1936), the text provides an analysis of the Chinese chaos as caused by six elements: the absence of a Constitution, the absence of a proper Parliament, an unelected president, an unchecked government, a decentralized army, dysfunctional (and non-democratic) political parties.

Chen's solution to the broken Chinese State is then articulated along the following lines: unifying the army; creating a political union for a permanent institutional stability (a significant move, by which he tries to conceptually disentangle "federalism" from the idea of division or fragmentation); putting power back into the people's hands, thus defeating the "two jackals from the same cave" (the Southern one-party policies of Jiang's Guomindang and the Northern military cliques, who both prevent the emergence of a democratic China); preserving the multi-ethnic nature of the traditional Empire in the new Chinese federation, as the first step to an Asian federation. In some cases (as with the federal blueprint drafted by Chen Jiongming 陈炯明 in 1927) this concept would also lead to the imagination of a grass-root structure of democratically elected county and provincial governments, supervised by a US-inspired (and almost Jeffersonian) federal administration.

A dystopia for the Hong Kongers

Chen's blueprint remained a utopia. As for Chinese federalism in general, it missed the window of opportunity that had been opened in the decades of the early Republic. Already in the mid-1920s, a decentralized China had ceased to be considered a viable option, politically and conceptually. The closure of this path is reflected in the fate of the aforementioned term *fengjian*. For centuries, it has been used by the opponents of centralist authoritarianism to define a more decentralized and balanced political system, and then by proponents of modern Chinese federalism to anchor their model in some historical precedent. Eventually, *fengjian* started being used by Marxist intellectuals to translate the negative concept of "feudalism." Consequently, an original neutral, or even positive historical concept (associated by Confucianists to the golden age of the Zhou king and contrasted to the tyrannical centralization of the Qin), became irreversibly (and negatively) associated with pre-modern values. Within the inescapable Marxist teleology, it was exactly "*fengjian*/feudalism" that had been obstructing the linear and evolutionary progress of Chinese history for centuries.

This conceptual shift from "decentralization" (as a potential solution to many of the political problems plaguing China) to "feudalization" (as a totally negative historical experience) was facilitated by the traumatic experience of the actual political and territorial division of China in the warlord era. With this conceptual shift, federalism became synonymous with the preservation of those traditional "local loyalties" that

had repeatedly undermined national unity and left China vulnerable to external attacks. In the end, as Indian historian Prasenjit Duara noted in *Rescuing history from the nation. Questioning narratives of modern China* (1995), "the interplay of power politics and authoritative language enabled the hegemonic, centralizing nationalist narrative to destroy and ideologically bury the federalist alternative early in the history of modern China."

The doom destiny of "two systems" facing "one country"

To Hong Kong again, for our conclusion. This brief historical survey of the conceptual debate around federalism in modern China, suggests that the centralizing agenda of Xi's Communist Party found a fertile terrain in the imperial allergy to a well-defined theorization of "shared legitimacies." Between 2014 and 2020, the new "nationalist" agenda of Xi Jinping imposed the need to reaffirm an undisputedly marked "sovereignty." This tendency was not only visible with the intention to establish a more solid and visible authority on the former British colony, but also in the dispute on the possession of the strategically important islands in the South China Sea, as well as in Xinjiang or Tibet, or in the increasingly confrontational tone with Taiwan. This "nationalist" strategy also entails a growing global projection in terms of power policy: the Belt and Road initiative, above all, coupled with a more active role in the international *fora*.

In this political climate, the aforementioned "conceptual struggle" over the meaning of Hong Kong's autonomy resulted in its progressive dismantlement. In December 2020, the Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong was sentenced to 13 months in jail, while the pro-democracy media owner Jimmy Lai was accused of fraud and arrested. The former member of the Hong Kong's Council Ted Hui sought asylum in the UK. While the world copes with the COVID-19 pandemic, the old myth of political unity as the only possible antidote to chaos—a legacy stretching back to classic thinkers as Han Fei, and analyzed by Isreali sinologist Yuri Pines in his magisterial reflection on the "Everlasting Empire"—reverberates once more in the narrative of the "authoritarian success" in fighting the virus and in the gradual, but irreversible, absorption of the "two systems" into the "one country."

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