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Boundaries as Protection for the Weak on the Edges of Chinese Empires

I like the conference's focus on people who cross boundaries in addition to physical structures that obstruct their movement.[1] At the same time, I want to flip the underlying assumption behind the title "barriers and borders": that boundaries are always barriers. This common assumption is reflected in both the construction and destruction of border walls: whether it is Donald Trump's erection of walls on the US-Mexican border[2] or Ronald Reagan's call to "Tear down this wall [the Berlin Wall]!"[3] or China's building the new "Southern Great Wall" with Vietnam and Myanmar and reinforcing existing walls with Mongolia and Russia.[4] I contend that boundaries -- physical or nonphysical, manmade or natural – can serve as not just barriers but also protection for the weak, especially those on the edges of powerful empires. When boundaries are torn down, it is as much for their protection function as their barrier role.

When boundaries are seen as protection, the concept can be broadened to refer to not just physical boundaries, but also non-physical ones.[5] Physical boundaries may refer to manmade mutually agreed borders, but often natural geographical barriers in history. Physical barriers are not insurmountable but can be overcome by mobilization of labor and advances in transportation technologies. When physical boundaries are levelled, those on the weaker side can still seek protection from non-physical forms. I will stretch the concept of non-physical boundaries to include de facto autonomy based on geographical distances and natural barriers, official promises of local autonomy, and identity-cultural-historical differences.

Let me situate the conception of boundaries as both protection and barriers with the China case. While the practice of drawing lines in the sand around the entire parameter of a piece of territory became universal only in the twentieth century, boundaries have existed for most of Chinese history. Chinese rulers, then and now, set up borders as barriers to block subjects from exiting and outsiders from entering. Neighbors likewise see boundaries as barriers for movements of people, goods and ideas.

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[1] The conference's parameter is: "Under what conditions do the perimeters of defined boundaries, drawn to establish margins, limits, and differences, become barriers for people, ideas, and goods that obstruct access, confine within bounds, and bar entry and participation to places or roles reserved only for some under limited conditions? Overall, we are concerned to understand origins and beginnings, processes, and mechanisms, as well as their consequences, including strategies of navigation and resistance."

[2] Jessica Learish, "U.S.-Mexico Border Wall: What It Really Looks Like," CBS news, September 22, 2022, https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/u-s-mexico-border-wall-what-it-really-looks-like/.

[3] Peter Robinson, "Tear Down This Wall." Prologue Magazine, Vol. 39, No. 2, Summer, 2007, https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/summer/berlin.html.

[4] Liyan Qi, Keith Zhai, and Lam Le, "China Fortifies Its Borders With a 'Southern Great Wall,' Citing Covid-19," The Wall Street Journal, February 2, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-fortifies-its-borders-with-a-southern-great-wall-citing-covid-19-11643814716; Iris Zhao, "China Is Building Border Walls with Vietnam and Myanmar to Keep People out, but Also In." Australian Broadcasting News, January 24, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-25/why-china-building-border-walls-with-vietnam-myanmar/13068344.

[5] I thank Hendrik Spruyt for pointing out that "boundary" is a better and broader concept than "border" for my argument. "Boundary" is also what the conference theme uses.

However, in so far as the most important people on the move historically were mass armies and imperial bureaucrats, barriers to movements also provided protection when the strong encroached on the weak.

Border demarcation can take the form of not just long lines, but also checkpoints at the outermost strategic positions along natural and defensible geographical features, especially mountains and rivers. Whether borders were lines or points, border gates or checkpoints were set up at strategic passes or choke points known as "*guan* (關 pass)." The terms "*guannei* (關內 within the pass)" and "*guanwai* (關外 beyond the pass)" are used to distinguish between "the interior (內地 *neidi*)" and the outside, to mark the end of dynastic control and Chinese civilization. Even without solid lines, people in each period knew it when they left "within the pass" and venture into "outside the pass." Diplomats and generals bid farewell at the last "*guan"* before heading out. By the same token, outsiders would enter "*guan*" as friendly visitors or hostile enemies.

The conference examines boundaries and borders for states versus empires. China was historically both states and empires. Chinese history is often presented in terms of clean dynastic cycles, which begin with Xia (a mythical period), Shang (1600-1046 BCE), and Zhou (1045-256 BCE), through Qin (221-206 BCE), Han (202 BCE – 220 CE), Jin (265-420), Sui (581-618), Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279), Yuan (1279-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911), and ends with the Republic of China (1912-1949) and the People's Republic (1949-present). This gives the impression that unity has been the norm. The conventional chronology recognizes division in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (770-221 BC), the Three Kingdoms (220-265), the Eastern Jin and Southern Kingdoms (317-439), the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960) eras but treat them as interregnums destined to be unified rather than multistate systems in their own right. The presumption that China was always a unified empire is most belied by the very Chinese term for China, "*zhongguo* (中國)." When "*zhongguo*" was first coined in the classical period, it referred to "central states" in the plural form. The Chinese language does not distinguish between the singular and plural forms, thus the latter was easily buried in history.

Boundary demarcation was sharp in eras of competing states as in modern times. Sovereign territoriality was practiced despite the absence of a word for it.[6] Border lines were clearly drawn. Strategic positions were militarily defended and lost. Already in the Spring and Autumn period, boundaries became increasingly hardened with checkpoints established along borders. Envoys who wished to cross a third state to their destinations had to seek permission or risk seizure and death. In the Warring States period, the territorial aspect of sovereign states was increasingly "marked by the building of chains of watch stations and forts at strategic points, and ultimately the creation of large defensive walls along the boundaries of the various states."[7]

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[6] Hendrik Spruyt noted at the conference that borders imply mutual respect for territorial sovereignty. However, "[e]ven in Europe, territorial sovereignty did not always have the present-day normative conception of mutual respect for territorial integrity… In the so-called age of reason, territorial sovereignty was understood in terms of the right of war… Such an anarchical conception of sovereignty legitimized any territorial acquisition. The formalization of boundaries further provided a 'legal concept . . . through which the expansion and contraction of power in the form of territory could be measured.'" See Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.154.

[7] Mark E. Lewis, "Warring States Political History," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC*, edited by Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, 587–650, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.629. See Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.6.

Boundary demarcation was more variable in eras of unified empires, giving rise to the common (mis-)perception that China had only frontiers but no borders in history. A dynasty's maximum territorial reach was often marked by long walls in the north but points in other directions. Despite the existence of border gates, armies from "outside the passes" would eye the riches of China and marched into lands "within the passes." China-based emperors would be tempted to genuinely rule "all under heaven" and marched out from "within the passes." When conquest was victorious, pre-war borders were demolished and new borders were put up to fence in newly conquered territories and subjugated populations. New possessions would also be formally "entered into the imperial domain (入版圖 *ru bantu*)." Victories, however, were often fleeting. Natural barriers – distances, mountains, rivers, deserts, wastelands, diseases, jungles – had immense stopping power for armies and bureaucrats. Chinese imperial troops were repeatedly pushed back by not just formidable enemies, but also immense costs.

The first Qin dynasty set the example. After it conquered all Warring States and established the first empire, it tore down pre-existing walls between states. It further conquered the Ordos region within the band of the Yellow River in the northwest and built new walls to consolidate new gains. (Such walls were made of stomped earth which easily fell into disuse and required reconstruction.) Elsewhere, the farthest territorial reach was marked by dots of imperial offices. The Ming, after failed attempts at subjugating the Mongols, built the defensive Great Wall with durable stones across the northern frontier that we still see remnants of today. In the northeast, the Han dynasty conquered the northern Korean peninsula but would later be expelled from the Yalu River and then the Liao River, before the Qing which originated from Manchuria restored the borders with Korea to the Yalu. In the northwest, border gates were set up along the narrow Gansu Corridor, the only access as confined by mountains and deserts. In the southwest, the Yunnan and Tibetan plateaus with their high altitudes, long distances and lethal tropical diseases protected independent kingdoms until Ming and Qing times. The southeast is less protected by altitudes but more by distances and tropic diseases. The Han and subsequent dynasties occupied northern Vietnam until local rulers broke free in the aftermath of a war with the Song (1075–1077). A border was drawn which has remained more or less in place until modern times.

The Manchu Qing was most successful at overcoming physical boundaries, first conquering the Ming "within the passes" and then marching out to dominate Central Asian empires "outside the passes." Even the seemingly unassailable Great Wall that had protected the Ming against the Mongols did not stop the Manchus. Border gates were manned by people and people could be incentivized to open gates to welcome enemy troops. The Qing gradually erased natural barriers for conquest – or protection against conquest – with revolution in logistics and increasing use of cannons. To block Central Asians' exit routes to the north and the west, the Qing drew lines in the sand with Russia in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. The Zunghar Mongols were eventually wiped out in a genocide in 1755-77 after the Qing brought the riches of the interior by magazine lines. The Yunnan plateau had already come under Ming rule. The Qing encroached further and further uplands on the Tibetan plateau, carving out Eastern Tibet for incorporation with the neighboring provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan.

After the Qing collapsed, the ensuing republic claimed all of the Qing's territory "outside the passes" as well as "inside." The People's Republic of China, born after WWII when all powers were drawing borders in the sand, readily turned points into lines and sent the People's Liberation Army to enforce its will over Xinjing and Tibet. Even the Tibetan plateau, that had long protected its inhabitants like the Swiss Alps in Europe, was conquered when Mao Zedong's mass troops marched into Lhasa. This was the first time in history that Chinese could overcome the high altitude and long distances involved. Borders and checkpoints used to fence in Chinese subjects, now the expanded and fully-garrisoned border lines

fenced in also Central Asians. Yesterday's "barbarians" -- who were not just "beyond the passes" but were also seen as beyond the pale of Chinese civilization – became assimilated as Chinese minorities.

When physical boundaries -- manmade or natural -- are bypassed or bulldozed, what may remain is some measure of local autonomy. Local autonomy may take the form of de facto autonomy when the imperial center has limited capacity for direct rule. It may also take the form of official promises as laid down in the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement made with the Dalai Lama at gunpoint, and the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and the 1990 Basic Law for Hong Kong. De facto autonomy is more reliable than paper autonomy as the protection comes from the lack of capacity to erode autonomy rather than the lack of will to do so.

When the inks of paper promises are also effaced, the last protection is a distinctive culture and identity along with a different language. It is worth adding that Vietnam and Korea long learned that lines in the sand and paper agreements did not offer sufficient protection -- they adopted Chinese history writing as "boundary maintenance" to establish "a record of autonomy" against renewed Chinese domination.[8] Those under Chinese rule are deprived of even their own historical records. What is left is what James Scott calls infrapolitics of everyday forms of resistance under extreme domination.[9] Turkic-speaking peoples in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Tibet have distinctive cultural identities and languages that the powerful do not understand well. Yet, for precisely this reason, they have long been subject to cultural assimilation as well as political repression under Chinese rule.[10] Before Xi Jinping, "minorities" could still largely preserve their languages (though called "dialects") even though material advancement would require command of Mandarin Chinese. Under Xi, coercive assimilation to Sinicize minorities has gone to the logical extreme: putting Uighurs in concentration camps and Tibetan children in boarding schools, that is, genocide.[11] AI technologies such as iris scanning, face recognition, voice recognition, biometric data and tracking apps have further enabled the high-capacity state to penetrate individual's and household's every utterance and move.

Hongkongers in 2019 began to wake up to the still distant but increasingly plausible future: "Today's Xinjiang/Tibet, Tomorrow's Hong Kong."[12] Hong Kong historically enjoyed de facto autonomy – along with most of Guangdong and Guangxi south of the Ling Mountains – for the first millennium. Hong Kong came under tighter imperial rule in the Song era which did not control large swathes of northern China and was thus incentivized to develop formerly frontier regions. Hong Kong formally lied "outside the pass" under British colonialism. Even today, people in Hong Kong call the mainland across the Shenzhen River "the interior (*neidi*)."

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[8] David C Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 35, 39.

[9] James C Scott, "Chapter Seven: The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups," *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 183-201.

[10] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Cultural Diversity and Coercive Cultural Homogenization in Chinese History," Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, eds., *Diversity And Its Discontents: Culture And Order In World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 93-112.

[11] Nury Turkel, *No Escape: The True Story of China's Genocide of the Uyghurs*, Handover Square Press, 2022; Tibet Action Institute, *Separated From Their Families, Hidden From The World: China's Vast System of Colonial Boarding Schools Inside Tibet*, December 2011, https://tibetaction.net/campaigns/colonialboardingschools/#report-pdf

[12] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Would Hong Kong become like Xinjiang and Tibet?" Wordpress blog, June 1, 2020, https://victoriatbhui.wordpress.com/2020/06/01/would-hong-kong-become-like-xinjiang/

Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong, when he still enjoyed the freedom to lobby for Hong Kong in western capitals, called Hong Kong the "new Berlin" in the global struggle between freedom and dictatorship.[13] Other activists have adopted John F. Kennedy's "I am a Berliner" to "We are all Hongkongers."[14] Yet, tearing down Hong Kong's boundaries with mainland China has had the opposite political meanings of tearing down the Berlin Wall. While Hong Kong still technically maintains border controls, the central government has erased physical and non-physical boundaries to dominate Hong Kong: constructing the Hong Kong-Guangzhou high-speed railway and Hong Kong-Macau-Zhuhai Bridge;[15] flooding Hong Kong with central government officials, state-owned and quasi-state-owned investments, and mainland residents; and most of all, shredding the paper promise of "two systems" under "one country." With the National (should be read "Regime") Security Law obliterating the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law since 2020,[16] Hong Kong has been redrawn to lie "within the passes," politically even if not geographically. The central government has fenced in behind prison walls all known opposition who did not manage to flee mass arrests.[17]

When physical boundaries come down, cultural and identity boundaries go up. In the 2010s, a once fluid, hybrid, plural and pluralist Hongkonger identity became increasingly hardened into a singular identity. During the anti-extradition protests of 2019, the participation of as many as 2 million out of a population of 7.4 million was driven as much by fear of extradition as the "we-them" anti-Beijing Hong Kong identity. Shared experiences with street protests and police abuses further coalesced a "community of resistance" and a "community of suffering."[18] The strength of the local identity as well as the scale and intensity of the 2019 protests, in turn, explain why political repression is accompanied by cultural repression to impose "patriotic education" and Mandarin instruction in the Cantonese-speaking city.

The very last bastion on the edges of the Chinese empire is Taiwan. The Taiwan Strait did not present sufficient stopping power for the Qing, and certainly will not block Xi Jinping's much stronger military. If Taiwan is not to be "entered into" Xi Jinping's imperial domain, it needs more protection than its own small army, distinctive history and culture.

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[13] Reuters Staff, "My Town Is the New Cold War's Berlin: Hong Kong Activist Joshua Wong," Reuters, September 9, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-germany/my-town-is-the-new-cold-wars-berlin-hong-kong-activist-joshua-wong-idUSKCN1VU0X4.

[14] Hong Kong Democracy Council, Facebook post, August 4, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/hkdc.us/posts/former-us-president-john-f-kennedy-explained-in-his-ich-bin-ein-berliner-i-am-a-/323157485714790/

[15] Johnny Harris, "China is erasing its border with Hong Kong," Vox Borders, July 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQyxG4vTyZ8&ab_channel=Vox

[16] Michael C. Davis, *Making Hong Kong China: The Rollback of Human Rights and the Rule of Law*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

[17] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Crackdown: Hong Kong Faces Tiananmen 2.0," *Journal of Democracy*, 31, 5, Oct. 2020, pp. 122-37; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Hong Kong's New Police State," *The Diplomat Magazine*, Issue 79, June 2021 (https://magazine.thediplomat.com/#/issues/-MaXSLu2HEPCMriYTU0K/read)

[18] Ngok Ma, *Community of Resistance: 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement* (反抗的共同體：二〇一九香港反送中運動), Taipei: Left Bank Culture, 2020; Kin-man Chan, *Sufferings and Resistance: Letters From Prison* (受苦與反抗：陳健民・獄中書簡), Taipei: Lianjing, 2022.