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REVIEW ESSAY

How to Hide a Chinese Empire

After millennia of imperial history, China today has distanced itself from the concept of empire. But the new forms of Chinese imperium are more subtle than territorial conquest.

JOHN DELURY — JUNE 26, 2025

HISTORY

Reviewed: *China's Galaxy Empire: Wealth, Power, War and Peace in the New Chinese Century*, John Keane, He Baoguang (Oxford University Press, May 2024).

It took a while for our thinking on contemporary China to catch up with the concept of empire.

This might seem surprising given that China is heir to one of the great imperial traditions in Eurasian history. The Han Empire was easily on par with ancient Persia and Rome; the Tang dynasty makes the Holy Roman Empire look puny by comparison; and the Great Qing held its own against Great Britain, all the way up to the Great Divergence.

The shelves of a Chinese historian's library are lined with insightful books characterizing different phases of this long *imperium sinicum* — from Yuri Pines' *Everlasting Empire* (2012), which starts with the Qin dynasty, to William Rowe's *China's Last Empire* (2012) ending it with the Qing. Filling in the gaps between are Valerie Hansen's *The Open Empire* (2000), telling the story up to 1800, and Timothy Brooks' *Troubled Empire* (2012) about the Ming and Yuan. The study of empire is the lifeblood of sinology.

As a fraction of China's history, the era after the Qing fell in 1911 is a blip — a century and change of republic coming on the heels of two millennia of empire. One can see from looking at a map how even the Republican era merely papered over continuity between early modern empire and modern nation-state. The borders of the Republic of China (founded in 1912) and the People's Republic of China (declared in 1949) are nearly coterminous with the imperial boundaries of China established thanks to Qing expansion during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Nationalist Party (KMT) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agreed on this one thing, at least: the new republic should be as big as the old empire. Their respective leaders, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong, managed to hang onto most of China's land — using force to keep Tibet and Xinjiang inside their borders and losing only Outer Mongolia, due to pressure from Moscow.

Map of the Qing dynasty and its tributary states in 1820, overlaying the borders of modern China. *(Pryaltonian/WIkicommons)*

Yet despite the imperial borders inscribed on the map of China today, and the rich body of historical scholarship on its imperial history, until recently "empire" barely seemed a relevant category of analysis for communist China. Mao Zedong was a rabid critic of empire, blaming China's weakness on the "semi-colonialism" imposed by Western imperial powers since the Opium Wars and the "semi-feudalism" of imperial Confucian culture. Mao's revolution was all about standing up to imperialist bullies, later refashioned as ending China's Century of Humiliation. The endless stream of anti-imperialist propaganda helped to suppress the idea, especially within China, that the People's Republic was itself an imperial construct.

Looking at contemporary China from the outside, there was another reason why empire as a category was overlooked. We expect empires to exert power far beyond their territorial boundaries, yet post-1949 China could do little more than defend its own. The People's Republic, while vast and populous, was also poor and weak. Their foreign wars all took place close to home: pushing the U.S. out of North Korea in 1950, and border clashes with India in 1962 and the Soviet Union in 1969.

A Chinese officer reports to command during the Sino-Vietnamese war. *(Wikicommons)*

The only war that might have been labeled "neo-imperialist" was Deng Xiaoping's ill-fated incursion into Vietnam in 1979, to punish Vietnam's invasion of Chinese-backed Cambodia. Yet the poor military performance of the People's Liberation Army only seemed to confirm the notion that China was unworthy of the epithet "empire." Indeed, this curious case of one communist nation invading another communist country provided the opening puzzle of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), an influential study of how nationalism achieved hegemonic status as the only legitimate form of statehood, chasing empires off the face of the earth.

China's invasion of Vietnam, moreover, was the exception that proved Deng's rule, or "only iron law," that economic development was the priority above all else. His framework of reform and opening-up in the 1980s generated soaring economic growth, especially in the countryside, but also fed hopes for political change. By 1989, Tibetans had rebelled and students were occupying Tiananmen Square in revolt. Yet even when Deng ordered tanks to clear the streets of the capital, massacring peaceful protestors in the early morning of June 4th, Americans saw it as the desperate act of a crumbling communist dictatorship, rather than the self-policing of an empire facing revolution from within.

The "evil empire," after all, was headquartered not in Beijing but in Moscow. By the end of 1989, the dramatic events in Tiananmen Square were overshadowed by those taking place at the Berlin Wall. As the Soviet empire imploded, ending its Communist Party rule and liberating over a dozen "socialist republics" into sovereign nation-states, it was easy to imagine that the People's Republic of China was also destined for the ash heap of history.

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America's triumphant, unipolar moment in the wake of the Cold War bought Beijing yet another reprieve, further delaying the conception of China-as-empire. After rebounding from the near-death experience of 1989, the CCP under Deng Xiaoping's heirs, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, put China back on the path of relentless economic growth. Yet Beijing continued to get away with posturing as the historical victim of imperialism and eternal enemy of empire. From negotiating favorable terms of entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, to securing "common but differentiated responsibilities" in the prolonged negotiations over a global climate treaty, China positioned itself as an innocent and virtuous developing country, firmly aligned with the postcolonial Global South. The surge in neo-imperialist American militarism in the wake of September 11 2001, fought with little regard for sovereign borders, helped to make China look tame by comparison. A title like Ross Terrill's *The New Chinese Empire* was an outlier in 2004.

"The great Qing Dynasty's complete map of all under heaven" (大清万年一统天下全图), Huang Qianren, 1767. *(Brown University Library)*

As the Chinese economy roared into the 21st century, the shadow of empire started to creep into academic discourse in the PRC. Prominent thinkers such as Zhao Tingyang and Wang Hui turned to Confucian philosophy to contribute to contemporary political theory and opened the Pandora's box of imperial ideals that were woven into the fabric of Confucianism. Chinese scholars of international relations got in on this neo-classical game, most prominently the work of Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University. As a so-called "Chinese School of IR" emerged, the vocabulary of traditional thought, especially the talismanic phrase "all under heaven" (天下), offered a way to talk about imperial orders without using the unpleasant word "empire."

Chinese academics walked a tightrope as they sought to revive imperial Confucian philosophy without sounding neo-imperialist. They got help from a curious feature of modern Chinese, which contains a raft of loan-words generated in the 19th century to translate foreign terms first into Japanese and from there into Chinese. Among the neologisms was "empire" (帝国), a new word that looks ancient by fusing the second character in the word for emperor (皇帝) together with the word for state (国). With this official translation, contemporary scholars could avoid the stain of imperialism.

Even after the stunning spectacle of the Olympic Games in 2008, when the world gaped in awe at the hypermodernity of Beijing, the phrase "Chinese empire" remained of interest mostly to historians rather than political scientists. Yet by 2012, a pivotal year of power transition for the CCP, China could no longer be described with words like "backward," "weak" or "impoverished." Orville Schell and I charted in our 2013 book *Wealth and Power* how those two concepts (富强), an elusive goal pursued by generations of Chinese thinkers and leaders from the Opium Wars to today, was now all but achieved. The question facing China's new political and intellectual leadership was: What next? Odd Arne Westad hinted at an answer in the title of his book *Restless Empire* (2012), a survey of the history of Chinese foreign relations during roughly the same period. Empire was edging its way from historical studies into international politics.

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It took the emergence of an emperor-like leader to get non-historians talking about China as an empire. Six months into Xi Jinping's tenure as Party chief, *The Economist* captured the zeitgeist by photoshopping Xi's face onto the body of a Qing emperor, holding a glass of champagne in one hand and New Year's party horn in the other. "Let's party like it's 1793," the caption read, alluding to the famous Macartney mission when King George III asked Emperor Qianlong for permission to open an embassy in Beijing and improve market access for British merchants. Qianlong snubbed the envoy, sending Macartney home empty-handed. The British would return with a navy during the Opium Wars, using gunboat diplomacy and "unequal treaties" (不平等条约) to force the political and economic access denied them earlier. Now, in 2013, Xi Jinping was turning back the clock to before the Century of Humiliation. His grandiose talk of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese people" (中华民族伟大复兴) sounded more like Emperor Qianlong than Comrade Deng.

The *Economist* cover in May 2013.

Even the *Economist* cartoonists might not have foreseen the degree to which Xi would assume the trappings of an emperor over the next decade. He micromanaged affairs both foreign and domestic by centralizing decision-making structures and eliminating potential rivals in a sweeping anti-corruption campaign. He abolished term limits on his tenure as president and engendered a culture of fealty that harkened back to aspects of the Mao era. "Xi Jinping Thought" was written into the Party constitution and a new app, Study the Great Nation, was launched as a way for CCP members to demonstrate their devotion to Xi. At the 20th Party Congress in late 2022, Xi extended his reign for another five years and unveiled a ruling Standing Committee stacked with loyalists. The unceremonious removal of a white-haired Hu Jintao from Congress proceedings seemed to symbolize the total dominance of Xi Jinping over what he called the "new era."

Now that the CCP had a new emperor, the People's Republic came increasingly to be seen as an empire. A notable example was the reception of Xi's signature foreign policy, the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI). Initially welcomed in capital-poor countries as a grand promise of infrastructure investment, the BRI envisioned a world in which all roads lead to Beijing. For all the feel-good talk of connectivity and synergy, the BRI projected a sinocentric *mappa mundi* that, combined with Xi's autocratic instincts, felt tantamount to empire building.

A steady stream of books debated whether China's expanding presence in Asia, Africa and the Americas had the trappings of empire, including Howard French's *China's Second Continent* (2015), Will Doig's *High-Speed Empire* (2018), Tom Miller's *China's Asian Dream* (2019) and Raffaello Pantucci's *Sinostan* (2022). Meanwhile, various geopolitical tomes framed the U.S.-China relationship as an imperial rivalry, such as Rory Medcalf's *Indo-Pacific Empire* (2021), Jeffrey Mankoff's *Empires of Eurasia* (2022), Ho-fung Hung's *Clash of Empires* (2022) and Stuart Rollo's *Terminus* (2023).

As Xi nudged domestic politics in China back down the path of one-man rule, foreign policy slogans such as "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体) took on an ominous tone. As with the BRI, Xi's mantra of "new type of great power relations" (新型大国关系) for the G2, and the increasingly competitive tenor of U.S.-China relations, also contributed to the emergence of a discourse of empire. Just as the United States went from champion of decolonization, in the rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson and FDR, to Cold War superpower seen in much of the world as neo-imperialist, so too have perceptions of China shifted in the Xi era.

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Where will this burgeoning discourse of China-as-empire take us next? To outer and inner space, say Australian political philosopher John Keane and political scientist He Baoguang in their fresh contribution to the literature, *China's Galaxy Empire: Wealth, Power, War and Peace in the New Chinese Century* (Oxford University Press, May 2024).

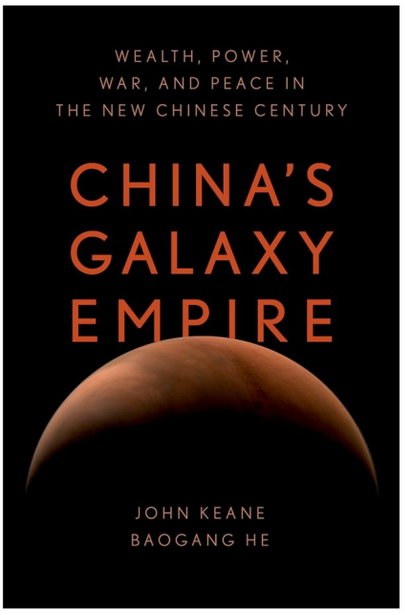
Keane and He have no hesitation in calling contemporary China an empire. They write:

> If by the word 'empire' we mean a polity whose transformative power stretches well beyond its borders in such matters as banking and credit systems, capital investment, cultural symbols, governing arrangements, and military strength, then China, whatever its diplomats, scholars, and officials say, is fast becoming an empire with a planetary reach.

The real question, they maintain, is what kind of empire is it? Their answer: a galactic one.

Keane and He start with the literal dimension of this emerging galaxy empire, drawing our attention to China's sophisticated and well-resourced pursuit of dominance in outer space. If a watershed moment for China's economic rise occurred in 2010, when it overtook Japan as the second largest economy in the world — second only to the U.S. — then the galactic tipping point came in 2021, when a pair of taikonauts docked at Tiangong ("heavenly palace") Space Station, establishing our solar system's second permanent space station.

But while the new space race is an important piece of the puzzle, the authors' main meaning is metaphorical. They want to help the reader comprehend the "massive galaxy of dynamically entangled institutions and activities gravitationally centered on its Beijing-led heartland." Keane and He acknowledge that the PRC also practices traditional forms of empire, implementing "internal colonialism" in Xinjiang and Tibet, and coveting Taiwan for geopolitical reasons that would look familiar to a Victorian strategist. But they insist that there is more to the story. China is developing a novel type of empire that reaches beyond conventional power politics of the kind that drove the Great Game among imperial states in the 19th century. "China, unlike earlier European empires," they write, "is not a land-based and land-hungry empire." The key to comprehending Chinese imperium is instead to recognize its "post-territorial qualities."



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The book is at its most persuasive when it illustrates the workings of this shape-shifting hegemony with concrete examples from the worlds of transportation, communications and finance. The authors chart how the state-owned shipping behemoth COSCO, headquartered in Shanghai, leased transport hubs in Piraeus, Valencia and Rotterdam to link the European market to its other terminals that dotted the world's coasts from Abu Dhabi to Peru, integrating commercial services around its massive fleet of 1,300 vessels. While American military planners fret about the PLA base in Djibouti, worrying China will follow the U.S. neo-imperial model by establishing garrisons around the world, COSCO's endless flow of goods, labor and capital reveals more about Chinese global power and influence. As Washington tightens American borders with walls and tariffs, Beijing champions cross-border connectivity and international trade. "Fluid mobility is the currency of China's galaxy empire," Keane and He observe.

If COSCO exemplifies the galaxy empire in transportation, the technology conglomerate Tencent tells the story of China's "global galaxy of networked, digital communications media." Founded as a private business venture, Tencent has come to dominate the end-user online existence for almost a billion people. Chinese people game and get news on QQ, and stream music and shows on WeTV and KuGou, never leaving the Tencent metaverse. WeChat, the jewel in Tencent's crown, is much more than a messaging service. Here Keane and He wax philosophical, describing WeChat as a portal to the empire sitting in the palm of your hand, serving as "the galaxy empire's steamship, railroad, semaphore, telegraph, postal service, radio, telephone, and television combined."

They might have added one more technology to the list: banking. The universe of finance emerges along with communications and transportation as central to the authors' thesis, and China's empire-building in the financial sector makes for engaging reading. Keane and He map China's effort to create an alternate infrastructure for international banking transactions through CIPS (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System), China's alternative to SWIFT, and Beijing's push to get ahead of cryptocurrency by establishing the digital renminbi (e-CNY) in 2021. "The imperial quest to spread usage of its currency," they write, "functionally requires efforts to make new digital financial rules and set up standards on cross-border digital transactions, risk supervision, and data management." The ultimate goal of these measures is for the Chinese yuan to replace the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency.

Throughout, the authors offer reminders of the fragility of imperial systems. Among the many causes of empire's decline and fall, they highlight the factor of public trust. When legitimacy fades in the eyes of the people, it is a matter of time before the imperial regime itself goes with it. Keane and He point out the many ways in which the CCP struggles to maintain the people's trust within the borders of the PRC, not to mention the challenges ahead to convince non-Chinese peoples. Ongoing "mutinies" break out against the imperial system in its heartland— most dramatically during the anti-lockdown blank-paper demonstrations of late 2022. And in the periphery provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet, grinding resistance and occasional rebellions are met by police force and invasive surveillance.

There is a third site of borderland rebellion: Hong Kong. As a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, Hong Kong is a test case for whether Beijing can persuade people in the outlands to accept the Chinese empire. But for the majority of Hong Kongers, write Keane and He, Beijing's "financial, political, and cultural power is deemed illegitimate." Even though the city has been "tamed" on the surface, the empire failed to win over people's hearts and minds, boding ill for Beijing's odds of winning over publics across the expanding galaxy of its influence.

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China's Galaxy Empire will not be the last word on the question of China-as-empire, and the book was not written for that purpose. On the contrary, its essayistic chapters and loose structure reflect a desire to provoke and prod — to get the reader thinking in fresh ways about the unique nature of China's emerging global, and astral, power. There are digressions into theories of capitalism and democracy that fail to shed much new light on the complex political economy of the PRC. And we might end up with a better metaphor than the galactic to describe the nature of contemporary Chinese imperium. But the authors move the conversation forward by helping the reader "pay attention to its dynamic — constantly evolving and shape-shifting — features."

Having spent the past two years in Rome, a city that oozes empire, it strikes me that the idea of China-as-empire is here to stay. The question is what kind of imperium China chooses to exercise, and how the empire on the opposite shore of the Pacific responds. Will the PLA deploy its growing might further afield, challenging the global military dominance of the U.S.? Will Beijing intervene to put friendly politicians in power in Latin America or Africa? Will China use its global assets to respond to a humanitarian crisis — a climate emergency, for example — then stay put even after the crisis abates?

It seems likely that China will remain a self-denying empire. A leadership indoctrinated in Leninist anti-imperialism, and a public reared on nationalist fables of victimhood in the Century of Humiliation, are easily blinded to their own imperial nature. In this respect, 21st-century China displays an uncanny resemblance to 20th-century America, which clung to its mythic self-conception as empire's enemy even as it assumed an unprecedented orbit of power. We are in a world dominated by two Goliaths, both of whom think they are David. May they never come to blows. ∎

Header: Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1978. (Michel Lipchitz/AP)

John Delury is a historian of modern China, a Senior Fellow at Asia Society, and a visiting professor at John Cabot University in Rome. He is the author of *Agents of Subversion* (2022) and co-author with Orville Schell of *Wealth and Power* (2013). His work on empire has been supported by the Tsao Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome and the Melvin Goo Writing Fellowship from the East-West Center.