

The "Empty Fortress" is an ancient Chinese military strategy found in the Thirty-Six Stratagems "to feign strength to an adversary when one is in fact extremely weak". It is employed by Beijing today in an endeavor to preserve both the territorial integrity of the Chinese state and the unity of the "Han" ethnic group, writes Joseph E Fallon.

The Western Regions -- specifically the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region -- and the Han identity are inseparable. Loss of the former would not only reduce the size of China by nearly 40 percent, it would likely shatter the "Han" ethnic group further fragmenting what remained of China.

As the RAND Corporation's 2014 report, *China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress*, noted: "despite growing military and economic power and the most stable and peaceful security environment in centuries, Beijing is consumed by insecurity and the goals of ensuring domestic stability and protecting national unity. China is especially preoccupied with suppressing internal unrest among ethnic minorities, such as the Uighurs of Xinjiang, who reside in...strategically important frontier areas.

"...Chinese leaders recognize that the country's westernmost regions are poorly defended and vulnerable to internal dissent and external threats. China's defense posture is heavily skewed toward the east, where the wealthiest and most heavily populated areas are located. But Beijing refuses to abandon the west, grant its independence, or cede large tracts of territory to its neighbors.

On the contrary, China has boldly projected an image of considerable strength in Central and South Asia to mask serious frailty. Beijing's strategy is exemplified by its promotion of the SCO [the Shanghai Cooperation Organization whose members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan], which, despite outward appearances of potency and activism, remains a loose collection of states incapable of resolute collective diplomatic, military, or economic action."

The report further states: "China's communist rulers are most fearful of unrest in the heartland -- the eastern seaboard and inland plains and river valleys where the overwhelming majority of the country's populace are concentrated."

For unrest "in the heartland" of the "Han" could lead to secession and the re-emergence of an independent, south China state. And not for the first time.

As the BBC reported in 2009 in *China's ethnic tinderbox*, "recent events suggest that China may well be increasingly insecure regarding not only these nationalities [national minorities], but also its own national integration...China's threats will most likely come from civil unrest, and perhaps internal ethnic unrest from within the so-called Han majority."

For nearly two thousand years, there have been two "Chinas" – North and South. The "boundary" between them has been considered an east-west line formed by the Huai River and Qin Mountains.

This "boundary" is not just geographic, it is historic. For a thousand years, 3rd Century AD to 13th Century AD, independent northern and southern states emerged within this geographical setting. That millennium beheld the rise and fall of "Three Kingdoms (220–280), Sixteen Kingdoms (317–420) and Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960), the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and Jin dynasty (1115–1234)."

Separate north and south states emerged, once again, in the 20th Century with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the Rise of the Warlords. While officially lasting from 1916 to 1928, all of north and south China were not effectively under direct control of a central Chinese government until the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.

The geographic "boundary" also delineates a linguistic "boundary". The north speaks Mandarin. It numbers 800 million people, or 66 percent of "Han". (Sixty three million northerners speak Jin, 5 percent of "Han"). The south speaks languages mutually unintelligible to Mandarin (or Jin) speakers and represents 29 percent of "Han" or 345 million people. Because of its diaspora community worldwide, the better known of the south Chinese languages is Cantonese, or Yue. In China, it numbers 59 million. The other south Chinese languages are Min, which numbers 75 million. The Wu: 74 million. The Gan: 48 million. The Hakka: 42 million. The Xiang: 36 million. The Pinghua: 8 million. And the Huizhou: 3 million.

The population size of the Min, Wu, Yue, Gan, Hakka, and Xiang each exceed the populations of many of the countries in Europe, Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, and South America.

With different languages comes different cultures. The University of Virginia reported in 2014, "A new cultural psychology study has found that psychological differences between the people of northern and southern China mirror the differences between community-oriented East Asia and the more individualistic Western world."

This geographic, linguistic, and cultural "boundary" also reflects an economic "boundary". The powerhouse of China's economy is located in the south – in the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and arguably Jiangsu and the city of Shanghai. The most populous city not only in China, but the world, Shanghai, an international hub of trade and commerce, is the financial heart of China.

South China possess the necessary infrastructure, industries, finances, and skilled work force to be an economically, viable, independent country.

On February 26, 2011, The Economist reported "Guangdong's GDP (at market exchange rates) is almost as big as Indonesia's; the output of ...Jiangsu ... exceeds Switzerland's...Guangdong exports as much as South Korea, Jiangsu as much as Taiwan. Shanghai's GDP per person is as high as Saudi Arabia's (at purchasing-power parity)."

On January 23, 2017, Global Times reported the official website of the Guangdong Provincial government declared "If Guangdong was a country, its economy would be the 16th largest in the world."

Based upon Stalin's generally accepted definition of what constitutes a nation -- "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" -- the differences between north and south China are national, not regional.

Claiming the north and south are one nation, the "Han" - 5,000 years old and descended from a single ancestor, Huangdi, the famous "Yellow Emperor" - is a 20th Century invention. Most historians agree that the word "Han" designated a dynasty and a state, not a nation.

However, like French Revolutionaries, who in order to preserve the territorial integrity of France once the monarchy that created that state had been overthrown based legitimacy of the state's borders on the French "nation", Chinese intellectuals after the fall of the Qing monarchy sought to save the borders of Imperial China by inventing the "Han" nation. Through this retroactive creation of a 'Han" nation, it was declared China was not an empire, but a nation-state with national minorities.

This narrative was promoted by the three most important Chinese political figures of the first half of the 20th Century -- Sun Yat-Sen, honored as the "Father of the Nation", his successor, Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang's Marxist rival, Mao Tse Tung. Even when Mao criticized Han chauvinism, he accepted the concept of the "Han" as a unified ethnic group.

The home of the "Han" is in eastern China along the fertile Yellow, Yangtze, and Pearl River valleys and along the coast. Control of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, lands consisting of mountains, plateaus, and deserts, protects this exposed population by providing Beijing with a natural defense barrier from invasion from the west and south.

But even more, it provides an insecure Beijing with an opportunity to promote "Han" unity. Beijing asserts there is a threat to the prosperity, security, and unity of China from secessionist Tibetans and Uighurs, and their foreigner supporters. It calls on all Chinese, national minorities and "Han", in the name of what is essentially a "Han" patriotism, to "struggle against terrorism, separatism, and extremism" collectively labeled the 'three evils.'"

Tibetans and Uighurs are often depicted as "backwards" compared to "Han" who are "advanced". According to the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China in Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China (2005) "Before the founding of New China, the ethnic minority areas suffered from low productivity, and underdeveloped economy, society and culture...The people lived in destitution... some were on the verge of extinction... with energetic assistance and aid from the state and the more-developed areas...the people's living conditions and environments have conspicuously improved."

As the BBC reported in *China's ethnic tinderbox*: "The recognition of minorities...helped the Communists' long-term goal of forging a united Chinese nation by solidifying the recognition of the Han as a unified 'majority'. Emphasizing the difference between Han and minorities helped to de-emphasize the differences within the Han community."

Despite the fundamental economic differences between the Soviet Union in 1990 and the Peoples Republic of China in 2018, China is the world's second largest economy, while the Soviet Union was a military superpower, not an economic one, the historic parallels between Russia and China of political unification and fragmentation lead Beijing to fear what happened to the Soviet Union could happen to China. The attempted economic and political reforms under President Gorbachev lead to the implosion of the Soviet Union. And once the Soviet Union lost its strategic borderlands, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the historic Russian core fragmented into three, separate states – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Should Beijing lose its own strategic borderlands, the Western Regions of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, the concern is China could similarly fragment -- into northern and southern Chinese states.

As the BBC reported in 2009, "Across the country, China is seeing a resurgence of local ethnicity and culture, most notably among southerners such as the Cantonese and Hakka, who are now classified as Han." If a resurgence in southern Chinese identity can occur in good economic times, what can Beijing expect when there is an economic downturn?

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