

Gazing at the Trauma:

Tianxia, Chinese political theology, and Xi Jing-ping's address on Taiwan in 2019

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The address Chinese President Xi Jing-ping gave at the 40th anniversary of the publication of the 'Address to Taiwan's Compatriots' has caught the attention of scholars, and received a response of Taiwanese President Tsai Ying-wen. Most analysis has put emphasis on Xi's declaration that 'we do not promise to renounce the use of force' as means for 'unification'. However, what is largely overlooked is his articulation of the reason for 'unification'. In this address, Xi actually said something which did not exist in the original address in 1979, and bestowed new implication and significance to 'unification'. The 1979 address attributed the necessity for unification to a Chinese nationalist sentiment, assuming that it was shared by Taiwanese residents and even by Chinese diaspora around the world. It was for the 'ancestors' and 'descendants' that the political separation needed to be ended. Behind these rationales is the plea for maintaining the historiography of the imagined community of Chinese nation created by intellectuals of late Qing and early Republican era. These rationales, although not refuted in Xi's address in 2019, has been replaced by a discourse charged with stronger emotional elements.

What is new in Xi's address is a 'historicisation' of the Cross-Strait relation from the perspective of China-West opposition. Recounting the official discourse of 'the Hundred Years of Shame' since the Opium War, Xi defined the separation between Taiwan and China as 'a trauma that history left for Chinese nation', and the purpose of unification as 'to ease the historical trauma.' In so doing, Xi associated the unification with his overarching political ambition of 'the rejuvenation of Chinese nation'. That means, in Xi's view, Taiwan un-unified is what stands in the way of the rejuvenation of Chinese nation. As he emphasised, 'Taiwan problem, caused by the weakness of the nation, will be ended by the national resurrection.' In short, Taiwan becomes the historical trauma to be rid of or mended in China Dream.

Why is Xi's association between Taiwan and trauma note-worthy? Because trauma is, in general, a source of misunderstanding, strongly linked to identity, and potential cause of irrational action. However, Xi's discourse of historical trauma also provides us with an opportunity to review the location of trauma in the 'Chineseness' of Chinese nation. From this angle, new light would be shed on the conceptualisation of Taiwan problem, as an example of China's quest for 'tianxia', the Chinese term for 'ecumene'. Tianxia (all-under-heaven) is on the one hand too new as a term for international relations scholars in the English-speaking world, yet one too ancient in Chinese language and culture. As a term describing the world and the right order of it, it is best understood as a theopolitical term, with tian (heaven) as ultimate reality.

Through tian, one could trace the evolution of Chinese political theology: from the end of communication between heaven and earth in mythical era, to the heavenly ordained right to revolution in Shang dynasty, son-of-heaven's monopoly of right to worship tian in West Zhou dynasty, to the breaking-up of the ecumene in East Zhou, when all schools of thought were emerging, all in search of the restoration of the unified ecumene. The unification of Qin and the subsequent Han determined the structure of this political theology: Legalist ruling system under Confucian sacralisation of the heaven explicated through the 'eschatology' of the recurrence of five virtues based on thought of Yin-yang school. Therefore, China as a

civilisation, defined by the existence of philosophical thought, is the result of the trauma of witnessing the breaking-up of ecumene, restoration-unification is ingrained in this civilisation.

This aspiration for unified ecumene-tianxia was fundamentally challenged in China's encounter with the West. The depth of this challenge is best seen in the name 'China', which was unknown to Chinese until very late in the nineteenth century.ⁱ As Butler explains, being named is potentially injurious; also as Butler indicates, being named was also potentially being enabled.ⁱⁱ China as a nation is the result of this process: called China by the West, and transforming itself into a nation of China. China is what the West makes of it, while retaining the long lost quest for the restoration of the ecumene-tianxia.

Alone this line of thought, one could see the logic of Xi's address. The so-called historical trauma, crystallised in the tale of 'Hundred Years of Shame', is in fact China's realisation of the inevitable loss of a unified ecumene in its encounter with the Westphalian inter-state system. As Wang Fei-ling points out, the whole Chinese history is one of the attempt to end the emergence of an inter-state system in East Asia.ⁱⁱⁱ In this perspective, Taiwan un-unified symbolises that traumatic encounter, on the one hand, and challenges the need for a unified China as well as the sentiment of trauma (hence perceived as insulting to China), on the other. The historical trauma Xi described will not end with the 'unification', since what is to be unified is much larger.

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- i Arif, Dirlik (2018). *After Colonialism?: Taiwan's Predicament, "China"'s Hegemony and Globalization*. Taipei: Weicheng.
- ii Butler, Judith (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.
- iii Wang, Fei-ling (2017). *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*. New York: State University of New York Press.