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Contents

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War on the Empire's Periphery:
Asymmetric Conflict in South-West China

Abstract

The Han Chinese, who expanded from the Huang He basin, managed to conquer and assimilate the original inhabitants of what is now southern China. Their conquest of south-western (modern Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi) areas was much slower, because of the difficult terrain and opposition from aborigines. This conflict of the Chinese empire with Thai and Mong-Khmer tribes fits Andrew Mack's definition of an "asymmetric conflict", so great was the difference in war capabilities between the antagonists. Despite great costs of invasions and of subsequent quelling numerous uprising, the empire persevered in occupying the south-west; the decisive factors were: the need to protect the borders and to build a stable society in frontier areas; large immigration of the Hans into the area; strong belief of Chinese officials that their actions were morally right; the ability to use brutal and inhumane methods of warfare, including attack on civilians; lack of external constrains for the Chinese and lack of external help for the aborigines; and the aborigines' inability to influence Chinese public opinion. For these reasons, the Chinese political ability to wage war in the south-west was never undermined, which according to the theory of asymmetric conflict is the decisive factor in winning the war by the stronger of the combatants.

Definition of asymmetric conflict

Andrew Mack[1] calls a conflict "asymmetric" when there is a great disproportion of power and resources between the belligerents. One of the sides possesses the necessary potential to invade the other; the second side cannot retaliate. The difference is not only in the level of technology, but mostly in the availability of power: the stronger side does not have to, and usually believes it does not need to, use its full potential in the conflict. Its being is never in danger, in opposition to the weaker side, which has to engage in the struggle all it possesses, because its very existence is endangered. If the risks involved on both sides are similar, then the conflict is "symmetric", even if there may exist great differences in their capabilities for war. Since the stronger power regards conflict as relatively unimportant, the conflict does not take precedence over regular functioning of the state, as fully-fledged war does. For that reason, such conflicts do not increase the cohesion of society, the nation does not unify, as it usually happens when it is in serious danger. There occur disagreements about the course of war, its costs and rationale, which erode the political will to continue the struggle. In the

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[1] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict", *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, February 1975, p. 175–200.

end, the war is lost not on the battlefield, but at home. More often than not, from a purely military point of view, the stronger side is winning, but it loses politically. A classical example is the Vietnam War, in which Americans inflicted 4 million casualties at the cost of their own 50,000, yet the American society was not willing to sacrifice any more of their members, while the Vietnamese were determined to sustain any number of casualties, if it only meant victory. As Henry Kissinger said "The guerrilla wins if he does not lose".[2]

The key of Mack's argument is that "insurgents can only achieve their ends if their opponents' political capability to wage war is destroyed"[3], no matter what kind of war is actually fought (guerrilla, urban warfare etc.). They cannot defeat the stronger party militarily; they can only do it politically, by destroying the will to continue the fight. Often it is the expenses of war and the economic problems it creates, which ultimately cause the change of policy and withdrawal of the aggressor.

Ivan Arreguín-Toft offers an alternative explanation of "How the Weak Win Wars". He predicts the outcome of the conflict on the basis of the strategy employed by the combatants. The stronger side may 'directly attack' military objectives or use 'barbaric' means in order to destroy the enemy's civilian population. The weaker side may 'defend' itself 'directly' or use 'guerrilla strategy'. If both sides use direct combat methods, the stronger attacker will quickly win; however, it will lose if it attacks the weaker side indirectly (i.e. by targeting civilians, while the weaker offers regular military opposition). Barbaric acts aimed at the weaker side's civilians will cause the stronger side to win, if the other side employs guerrilla warfare. The latter combat method, however, will probably be effective only if the stronger side uses regular military attack.[4]

I will use the theory of asymmetric warfare to discuss the Chinese subjugation of the area, which now consist mainly of the three south-western provinces of China: Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi, and adjacent territories (e.g. southern part of Sichuan province). I will call the area by a general term of "south-west (of China)", because now they are the part of this country, as the effect of the historical process described below. This was a very long process in which the Chinese encountered many difficulties, and in a way, failed to achieve full success, as there still exist large non-assimilated populations in that area (for example, over 12 million Zhuangs in Guangxi, who constitute the largest national minority in the People's Republic of China). For comparison, the conquest of the south-eastern coastal area started at about the same time, ca. 2000 years ago, yet these territories are now completely sinicized, and all their aboriginal inhabitants fully assimilated.

The costs of conquering the south-west, both in cash and in manpower, were enormous and were not equalled by profits from the newly acquired lands. Therefore, two questions arise: first, why it took the Chinese state so long to conquer the south-western areas and second, why the Chinese state persevered in its effort to subjugate these lands, despite the animosity of the local people, who first opposed the invasions and, after they had been incorporated into the Chinese empire, rebelled again and again, which resulted in huge casualties and causing enormous expenses for the war effort?

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[2]   Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars...", p. 185.

[3]   Ibid., p. 179.

[4]   Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict", *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, July 2001, p. 93–128.

First, it is necessary to understand the cause of the Chinese expansion – why the Chinese needed to go elsewhere. They were definitely the most developed group in Eastern Asia, which very early (ca. 1000 BC) achieved a high degree of technological and political advancement. The high agricultural skills allowed the Chinese population to increase quickly; after some time, the core areas in the Yellow River Basin became overpopulated. Their skills in warfare and statecraft were shaped and tested from 8th to 3rd century BC, when many of their states fought against each other.

The final winner, the unified Qin empire, was in fact a superb war machine, but one that could not be stopped, as it could not transform itself into a peaceful regime. Finding no targets at home, it struck in all possible directions. As the Chinese were agricultural people, deserts and mountains, unsuitable for cultivation, blocked their expansion to the north and west. The north-eastern Manchurian region was a viable alternative, but it was endangered by invasions of the nomads from the steppes. The terrain in the south was hilly and the climate much hotter and humid than the one to which the Yellow River people were accustomed; but the land could be tilled and the people there were less warlike than northern nomads. For these reasons, it became the main area of expansion of Han people from the densely populated north, people who had the necessary tools of war, agriculture and statecraft to overcome the original inhabitants. However, these tools were almost insufficient to tackle the mountains and people in the south-west.

There is one more point which should be discussed before turning to the main subject. It can be argued that the theory of asymmetric warfare can be applied to the conflicts on China's northern border. The "northern barbarians", i.e. nomads of the steppes of northern and central Asia, were very few in number in comparison with the Chinese, and their socio-political organization was also much simpler. Their cavalry raid style of warfare was also sufficiently different from the Chinese one, which was mostly based on infantry, firepower and extensive use of fortifications. Therefore, the conflicts between them and the Chinese can be termed "asymmetric conflict". However, there is one aspect in which the situation on China's northern frontier was different from that in southern China. Due to their military prowess, the northerners were often able to strike at the very heart of the Chinese empire and even confirm their superiority by establishing an imperial dynasty. Therefore, the conflicts with the northerners were not asymmetric in Mack's sense – the interests of China, the stronger state, really were at stake. The very existence of the Chinese state (or at least the ruling dynasty), was often endangered.[5] The wars with the northerners were never treated lightly, as peripheral conflicts – on the contrary, the main military effort (offensive or defensive[6]) was usually directed towards the north.

The mountains

The first and principal obstacle to anybody who wished to cross into what is now south-west China is the terrain. It consists mainly of high mountains, divided by deep-cut

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[5] Equalling a state with a dynasty may seem ridiculous, but in the pre-modern times the basic identification was with the ruler, not the (fluid) concept of the "state". Even China with its long history of statecraft, was in the times of subsequent dynasties called "the Great Ming" or "the Great Qing", rather than "Middle Kingdom".

[6] Famous Great Wall is the best known symbol of the latter.

river valleys. Except for Liangguang plain in the east and Yunnan-Guizhou plateau with Kunming at its centre, the area is extremely rugged. The province of Guizhou is the best example, with over 75% of its territory being mountainous (and 3% just bare rock).[7] The average height of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau is between 1200 and 2000 m in Yunnan and western Guizhou. It goes down through the hills of central Guizhou and western Guangxi which are between 1000 and 1800 m, and further down to the lowlands of Guangdong and to sea level. There is very little arable land and even relatively flat areas are dotted with karst pinnacles (which make for impressive sights, but not for good farming). Limestone karst formations dominate the territory; the rock, easily eroded by water, allows rivers to form extremely deep and steep gorges.[8] Eroded rocks form a network of underground canals and caves, into which most of the surface water sinks. As a result, despite large rainfall (800–1300 mm per year), and humid climate, Guizhou is regularly endangered by drought.[9] But the climate remains very humid, with a large variety of temperature, which is why the province was a very unhealthy place. Soldiers brought from outside were prone to many local diseases, including malaria.[10]

Until recently, the transportation network was very limited. At the end of 19th century, there were four "official roads" in Guizhou, paved, but useless for carts, as they used steps for climbing the hills. British travellers noticed no carts whatsoever in the province,[11] and even in 1995, when I travelled by bus through Guizhou, one of the province's main roads was still unpaved and muddy and in such a poor shape that trucks had to haul themselves up using tow-ropes hooked on stones and trees, so as not to slide down the slope.

The rivers, which in other provinces constituted main routes of communication in pre-modern China, flow very fast, are shallow and cut by many cataracts – therefore, only a few of them are navigable, but only for small craft and on short distances. As bad as the geographical conditions in Guizhou used to be in commerce, they were even worse for the military, as they created a logistical nightmare. Supply lines were stretched, prone to attack, and had very limited capacity. Getting supplies from outside was vital, since the local subsistence economy could not provide what was necessary.

The terrain of south-west China can be summed up in the words of the Chinese classic:

> Country in which there are precipitous cliffs with torrents running between, deep natural hollows, confined places, tangled thickets, quagmires and crevasses, should be left with all possible speed and not approached.[12]

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[7]   Ronald D. Hill, "Guizhou", in: *Berkshire Encyclopaedia of China*, Linsun Cheng and Kerry Brown (eds.), Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009, p. 962.

[8]   Herold J. Wiens, *China's March Toward the Tropics; a Discussion of the Southward Penetration of China's Culture, Peoples, and Political Control in Relation to the Non-Han-Chinese Peoples of South China and in the Perspective of Historical and Cultural Geography*, Hamden, Conn: Shoe String Press, 1954, chp. 1.

[9]   Ibidem.

[10]   Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The "Miao" Rebellion, 1854–1873*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994, p. 20–25.

[11]   Ibidem.

[12]   Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, chp. IX, sec. 15, tran. Lionel Giles (1910), Pax Librorum Publishing, 2009, p. 32.

The people

Mack's original theory discussed the conflict between a modern, industrialized, rich and powerful state and relatively poor, often backward insurgents (who might, however, have access to modern weaponry). Imperial China was of course not an industrialized country (although during Song dynasty it almost made a breakthrough into full industrialization), but it was an enormous, centralised state, with a great ability to amass both large armies and huge amounts of material. Already in 742, the standing Tang army numbered almost half a million troops.[13] Later, in the years following An Lushan's rebellion (9th century), it grew to almost a million,[14] and then increased to 1,25 million in the 11th century, and to 4 million at the end of the Ming dynasty (17th century).[15]

Moreover, these regular armies were well organized and composed of many different kinds of troops – even the infantry, the backbone of the army, was divided into many types, such as the crossbowmen, very valuable due to their heavy fire power. In Ming times, firearms and artillery started to play an important role. For example, 2000 hand gunners were used against the southern rebellion in 1388[16] in a typical use of technological advantage by the more developed contestant. The army was supported by a network of roads and depots, and the imperial bureaucracy could mobilise additional resources if necessary (the early Ming sea expeditions under admiral Zheng He, consisting of ca. 27 000 people on board of over 300 ships, are the best illustrations of China's capabilities).

In their south-west drive, Chinese were opposed by various aboriginal peoples, mainly of Thai and Mong-Khmer ethnicity. They were not so well organised as their adversaries. It seems that their states, like the kingdom of Nanzhao in Yunnan or Mu'ege in Guizhou, were modelled after the Chinese state. This does not mean that the internal organization of their states followed the Chinese example, but that the very idea of political organization higher than tribe or clan was borrowed from their northern neighbour. However these states, especially Nanzhao, were able to achieve remarkable cohesiveness and a great degree of power, which gave them not only defensive, but also offensive capabilities.

Most of the southerners, however, lived in tribes or clans, which were their basic social and military units. For purpose of war they sometimes created large, sometimes cross-ethnic, alliances. On the other hand, they were known for constant intra- and inter-ethnic skirmishes. Such fighting incurred loss of life, property and usually led to more violence; yet at the same time provided ample opportunities for getting hands-on war experience, which made up for lack of formal training.

Most of the southern peoples valued marshal prowess, often glorified in their songs and tales. The Chinese viewed non-Hans as violent and prone to fights, including attacks on officials, and at the same time gullible and easy to cheat by the unscrupulous Chinese. When they discovered they were cheated, they often resorted to violence; the culprits

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[13] David Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300–900*, London–New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 210.

[14] Ibid., p. 238.

[15] Ibid., p. 246.

[16] Chris J. Peers, *Soldiers of the Dragon: Chinese Armies 1500 BC–AD 1840*, Oxford–New York: Osprey, 2006, p. 181.

were not easy to catch in the mountains of Miao lands.[17] The 19th century descriptions of southern hill tribes like the Miao, written by European missionaries' and Chinese officials, differed greatly from each other, but both agree on the Miao being warlike and independent. The Miao raised their sons to be brave warriors; they engaged in hunting, which gave them some martial training.[18] The Chinese called the non-acculturated Miao *xiong* ("fierce"), which shows how they perceived the latter.

From the economical point of view, the aborigines benefited from being close to their resource bases (i.e. their own villages). Their economy was often relatively simple, based on slash-and-burn agriculture, producing little surplus necessary for waging a prolonged war, and it was vulnerable to loss of territory.[19] They fought near their own villages, which could be an asset, but also a liability. Fighting with their backs pressed to the walls of their homes, the tribal warriors were determined to win, but had no place to manoeuvre – their loss could very well mean the total annihilation not only of themselves, but also of their families and relatives. The Hunanese Miao uprising of 1735–36 is an example of both determination and annihilation: the tribesmen were in such despair that many of them killed their wives and children before going to fight against the Chinese, in order to be completely free in their action. For a moment they actually prevailed, as the Chinese generals and troops were helpless. However, the new emperor, Qianlong, reorganized the campaign and mobilised armies of seven provinces to fight the insurgents. When imperial troops crushed the rebellion, they killed no less than 18,000 warriors and destroyed over 1200 hill forts.[20]

From fighting local powers to asymmetric warfare

The earliest to conquer southern China was the first unified Chinese dynasty – the Qin (221–206 BC), under the First Emperor. In the face of massive Chinese invasion, the southern tribes often resorted to guerrilla war, using their knowledge of the terrain, for example during great offensives by the Qin state. It was only when the Chinese ran out of supplies and their armies started to crumble that the Yue people took the initiative to defeat them. The Chinese had to mount yet another offensive before they were able to establish their administrative units in nowadays' Guangdong.[21]

After Qin collapsed in 206 BC, the Han dynasty, which followed it, paused to reorganize itself before it turned its attention to the south. Finally, under the extremely energetic emperor Wu (141–87 BC) it managed to reconquer the territories of today's Guangdong province, and pushed even farther to the south (into the Red River delta, now northern Vietnam) and south-west (southern Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan). The control of these south-western territories was rather weak – the historian Mark Lewis states that although

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[17] Donald Sutton, "Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century", in: *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, P. K. Crossley, H. Siu and D. S. Sutton (eds.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 201.

[18] Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou...*, p. 35.

[19] Slash-and-burn agriculture needs a much larger area to produce a given amount of crops than more developed kinds of agriculture. If the process of burning is repeated too often, the soil is quickly depleted and destroyed by erosion. This leads to dramatic decrease in agricultural output and often to starvation.

[20] Wiens, *China's March Toward the Tropics...*, p. 190.

[21] Hans Van de Ven, *Warfare in Chinese History*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2000, p. 133–134.

the rulers of the local states of Yelang and Dian were granted titles by the Han emperor, the area was effectively outside the Chinese borders; the Chinese commanderies, which were set up there, consisted of small, dispersed garrisons.[22]

During Western Han dynasty rebellions were few, because the very small number of the Han Chinese in the south-west did not pose a threat to the aborigine people. It was only during the Eastern Han that a larger influx of Chinese settlers caused tensions: over 50 uprisings broke out during this period. What greatly changed the situation in south-west was the submission of several Ailao princes with their whole domains (over 550 000 people). They voluntarily accepted the suzerainty of the emperor, and some Tibetan princes did the same. The Chinese did not replace the original, native social structures with their own, so the princes retained a large degree of freedom. Since there was no large-scale Chinese colonization, it was the aborigines who became stronger and adopted some Chinese methods of government. After the final collapse of the Hans, the south of China was ruled by a succession of dynasties (first the Jin and then the so-called Southern Dynasties). All these states usually had no real control over large parts of the territories they claimed as their own in the south and south-west, where the native princes ruled and grew in strength. As the Chinese dynasties could not protect Chinese settlers who did not live close to the main cities, the colonization of the area was halted.[23]

The great Tang dynasty linked Yunnan and Guizhou to China proper with roads, but in the western part of the area a strong, independent kingdom of Nanzhao rose out in the territories formerly ruled by the Ailao princes. In Tang sources the south, scarcely populated by the Chinese, is described as malaria-ridden, exotic and dangerous, a place of exile for disgraced officials. During Tang times, many valleys and basins were slowly but steadily occupied by Chinese immigrants, who turned swamps into agricultural grounds using their superior technology.[24] At the same time, local non-Han chieftains from areas adjacent to the border pledged loyalty to the Tang, in exchange for access to Chinese markets. They all received official titles of various ranks, so the near-frontier land (on paper) looked as if it was governed according to the Chinese administrative pattern. These so-called haltered-and-bridled prefectures (*jimi fuzhou*), very numerous (over five hundred at a certain time) were in fact buffer zones, and the Tangs had no direct control over them, neither taxed them, nor received tribute from them. The Chinese court had even less control over six larger "prefectures", which lay behind the "haltered-and-bridled" zone. When the need arose, the Tangs enlisted the help of yet another type of allies, so-called "dependent kingdoms". All these layered buffer zones were useful in the almost incessant warfare between Tang China, Tibet and Nanzhao. The loyalty of these "prefectural lords" was fluid and often they turned sides, as the Tangs realized when they discovered large contingents of troops, belonging to their supposed allies, taking part in the Nanzhao invasion of China

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[22] Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 151–152.

[23] Hans Bielenstein, "Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han Dynasty, and Later Han", in: *Cambridge History of China: Volume I: the Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. – A.D. 220*, D. Twitchett and M. Loewe (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 269–273.

[24] Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 15–20.

in the 9th century.[25] The beginning of the 10th century saw the collapse of both Tang and Tibetan empires and a change of rulers in Nanzhao, who established the kingdom of Dali. For a while there were no "strong actors" interested in south-western areas.

The pattern of establishing buffer zones was repeated during the Song dynasty, which followed the Tang. During this dynasty, population movements and the development of southern economic zones caused the centre of Chinese civilization to shift south, from the Huang He basin into the Yangtze basin. Large growth of population in Song times was temporarily halted by the Mongol invasion and plague, but it was resumed in Ming and Qing times. Following the movement of Chinese population centres further south, as well as the increase in Chinese population, the pressure exerted on the south-west also increased.

It was the Mongols who did the "dirty job" of destroying the kingdom of Dali and invading Guizhou and Guangxi. John E. Herman calls the Mongol invasion of Yunnan "a pivotal point of the history of the region".[26] The invasion removed one remaining strong political actor, who could challenge the supremacy of the Chinese empire. It directly included Yunnan into the borders of the empire, although the actual control over the area remained weak. The Mongols were the first to impose taxation on some of the people there, and tried to establish more direct rule. Their number was much too small and their forces found themselves extremely thinly stretched, although they only tried to hold garrisons in key positions and posts along the most strategic routes and were often unable to cope even with relatively minor uprisings. In fact they were in the classical position of an army occupying too great an area of a hostile land with too few troops to do so. Therefore, they were under constant attacks from guerrilla fighters. The only thing they could do was to coerce and lure local chieftains, clan-leaders etc. to rule for them as "local officials" (*tuguan*). This was the beginning of the *tusi* system, which was further developed by the last imperial dynasties, Ming and Qing, which followed the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty.

The *tusi* system was developed in response to the need to administer huge and basically alien territory, without having the adequate number of troops and quantity of resources to do so. The Chinese concentrated their power in the key areas, allowing the natives to govern themselves in the less important ones. They acknowledged members of local elites as representatives of the empire and granted them official titles (sometimes with an allotted salary). The difference between the *tusi* and the earlier *jimi* areas laid in the degree of control: the Chinese at least tried to assess how large is the area ruled by any particular *tusi*, its population and tax-paying abilities; they could not do it with "haltered-and-bridles" prefectures.

The *tusi* system was a further step towards regular, direct rule by officials appointed by the emperor. Their titles were usually hereditary, or they were chosen by the local population, but they had to be confirmed by the emperor. They had different degrees of independence within their domains. The so-called civil *tusi* were under control of the Board of Civil Appointments and their titles mirrored the Chinese administrative degrees (chief of prefecture, county etc.). They operated in areas which already had rather large Han Chinese

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[25] John E. Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007, p. 32–36.

[26] Ibid., p. 69.

populations and were under much stricter control of the Chinese officials. Over military *tusi*, supervised by the Board of War, the Chinese had very little control. Military *tusi* usually ruled in frontier areas: either outside empire boundaries, which they swore to protect (forming yet another kind of protective buffer) or in very remote areas inside China. These were "internal frontier lands" which may also be called "internal colonies" of the empire. Inside their domains, military *tusi* had full control and ruled according to their traditional customs.[27]

In the provinces where the Chinese presence was long established, civilian *tusi* were the norm. During Ming times, in Sichuan province 95% of the 343 appointed *tusi* were military ones; in Guizhou, 83% of 244 *tusi* were military ones, while for more sinicized Guangxi the reverse was true: 92 % of appointed *tusi* were civilian ones.[28] When Han Chinese population grew and/or the local people became more acculturated to Chinese ways, the state tried to change the status of *tusi*, from military to civilian. Next step was the policy of *gaitu guilu*, i.e. replacing the *tusi* by the Chinese officials. Establishing Guizhou province in 1413 (although it occupied only half of today's Guizhou) was a symbolic representation of the process. Sometimes the state did not "wait" for the influx of Chinese settlers, but acted more actively: emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty actively induced (or simply forced) massive Han Chinese immigration into new province.

The more Han Chinese settled in the aborigine people areas and the more actively the Chinese state supervised and intervened in *tusi* affairs, or even tried to displace them altogether, the more native peoples tried to oppose the state. By Ming times, the powerful southern kingdoms (such as Nanzhao) had already disappeared. What remained were the domains of "hill tribes" and clan holdings, some of them quite large and well governed (and also able to field large armies). Such was the case of She *tusi* family, which during the so-called She-An rebellion raised a massive, 250,000-strong army; Guiyang was besieged for almost a year in 1622 and southern Sichuan (including the city of Chongqing) was sacked.[29] Most of the conflicts, however, had a more local character: the Miao, Yao or other groups were conducting guerilla-style war (the later part of She-An rebellion also turned into this type of war).

Even after 150 or more years of Chinese rule over the south-west, the Chinese only had a small degree of control in many territories. In the 18th century in western Henan, bordering with Guizhou, the authorities had to rely on military colonies to control "pacified" Miaos and blockade those who did not accept Chinese rule.[30] In mid-19th century Hu Linyi, prefect in Guizhou, described it as a border region, extremely hard to control, because of the harsh terrain and warlike tribes, engaged in constant skirmishes.[31]

Local conflicts were very numerous. In Ming times there were no less than 90 tribal uprisings. In the early years of the Qing rule there were large rebellions in 1670s and 1680s.

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[27] Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou...*, p. 39–41.
[28] Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist...*, p. 108.
[29] Ibid., p. 180.
[30] Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China, Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864*, Harvard East Asian series 49, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 47.
[31] Ibid., p. 117.

The second half of the Qing dynasty (1796–1911) saw 350 of them, and the real number was probably higher, as the officials preferred not to report smaller incidents, or to classify them as common banditry, in order to present their administration as more efficient. Their growth in number was caused by increasing population pressure, which led to stiff competition for scarce resources; the number of administrative units also increased, which led to more incidents being recorded.[32]

The rebellions were also extremely costly to suppress. The War of Great and Small Golden River in Eastern Tibet, which ended in 1749, cost the empire 80 million *taels*[33] of silver[34] and of course many soldiers and officers were killed. The great Miao uprising of 1795–1806 facilitated another rebellion of the White Lotus sect (1796–1805).The government spent 120 million taels fighting these wars, spending all the surplus the previous emperors had accumulated.[35] The draining of the treasury greatly weakened the Qing empire, which declined more and more further into the 19th century progressed. Interestingly, the definition of war did not depend on the severity or length of the conflict. Emperor Qianlong did not count suppression of three Muslim rebellions or eleven years long Miao uprising (1794–1804) among his Ten Military Victories, even though doing so would bring the number up to fourteen. These were internal struggles, unworthy of the name of war or commemoration.[36]

Why China won?

Let us once more recall the most basic statement of Andrew Mack's theory: the weaker side can only win if it destroys the stronger side's political capability (or "political will") to continue fighting. This is exactly what the Miao, Yao and other groups never really managed to achieve. They won battles, even wars, but ultimately they lost.

Mack formulates three hypotheses concerning the factors which may cause the stronger side to continue its fight against the insurgents. The first factor is the degree of "openness" or "closeness" of the political system. In democracies, the public opinion has much to say, and dissenting voices, including those which question the legitimacy or the cost of the war, are allowed to speak. This weakens the resolution to continue the war. Mack notes that some of the asymmetric conflicts in the 20th century were won by centralised, "closed" or simply totalitarian states. Imperial China was not a totalitarian state, but certainly an authoritarian one, with a strong tendency towards absolutism. Its "public opinion", if it existed at all, consisted mainly of the Confucian literati, many of whom were employed in the state bureaucracy. Therefore, as long as they supported the war effort and the strain on economy was not great enough as to cause peasant unrest, there was no "real" opposition to prolonged conflict. At the same time Confucian officials considered it as their duty to work for the benefit of the people; if war costs increased, their support for the conflict often diminished.

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[32] Norma Diamond, "The Miao and Poison: Interactions on China's Southwest Frontier", *Ethnology*,Vol. 27, No. 1, January 1988, p. 12.

[33] Unit of weight, also used a unit of currency; most often one silver *tael* equalled 37,5 g.

[34] Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou...*, p. 194.

[35] Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989*, London–New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 10.

[36] Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Culture of War in China: Empire and the Military Under the Qing Dynasty*, London–New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 23.

Donald Sutton presents a summary of the Miao-related policies proposed by high imperial officials in the 18th and 19th century: although they differed on the issue of whether the Miao should be "quarantined" or assimilated (usually by bringing in more Han settlers), they unanimously opposed the idea that Han people, could on their own initiative cross into Miao territory, stay there and cooperate with the Miao. There was no question of "equality of cultures" – the path was one-directional, towards culture and civilization, understood as Chinese culture and civilization. People moving in the opposite direction were branded "Han traitors". From this point of view, creating special zones, where Miao would govern themselves, and limiting their contact with the Hans, made sense. It was a way of containing the danger, "quarantining" the possible harmful influences.[37]

Arreguín-Toft disputes the assumption that authoritarian states are more effective in combat, stating that such states' command economy is usually less effective than in democratic states, and their troops have lower morale because of the people's generally low support for the state.[38] Although his arguments may be true now, one cannot apply them to Ming or early Qing China. The Chinese economy was then among the best developed in the world. The troops' loyalty and quality was usually the best during the early years of dynasty and later it declined, but even then the army was supported by a relatively well organized state administration (until the middle Qing period it was probably the best administration of the world). There were hardly any countries, democratic or authoritarian, which could be favourably compared to China at the height of its imperial power.

The situation described above changed in 19th century, when the administration was corrupt, unwieldy and ineffective, which was one of the reasons why the dynasty was almost brought down by a series of rebellions. The most famous of them was the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864), but there were also strong ethnic movements of the Muslims from north-west (1862–1877) and Yunnan (1856–1873), and of the Miao in Guizhou (1854–73). The initial success of the latter can be mainly attributed to the poor quality of administration and troops, some of which were 70% under strength.[39] However, the Chinese empire had such an immense size and productivity, that when capable leaders did emerge, they were able to muster enough troops and resources to deal with the danger.

Mack's second factor which may cause the stronger side to continue its fight against the insurgents is the strong presence of settlers from the metropolis, who wish to retain their links with it, in the territory where the conflict takes place. In southern China this was probably the key factor. First, the state encouraged Han immigration, and sometimes even coerced the Hans to go to the frontiers (as emperor Hongwu did in the late 14th century[40]). But even when the state withdrew its presence, the Han Chinese settlers were still immigrating into the area. Therefore, the number of Han people in southern China was steadily increasing. The Chinese empire could tolerate groups of non-Hans governing themselves according to their own customs, but not the groups of Hans outside imperial jurisdiction. As they had important technological and political skills, they could form

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[37] Sutton, "Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier....", p. 201.
[38] Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 9.
[39] Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou...*, p. 83.
[40] Herman*, Amid the Clouds and Mist...*, p. 87–91.

dangerous dissenting groups. On the other hand, many of the Chinese believed they have a right for being protected by the state, used to settle their legal matters in Chinese institutions etc. so they demanded that such institutions should be established. For these reasons, when the sufficient amount of the Hans settled in a given area, the state felt compelled to establish its governmental agencies there.

The encroachment of Han farmers onto the territories occupied (or claimed) by the non-Hans often caused local conflicts, which tended to escalate into larger ones, and Chinese state sometimes tried to curb Han migration by delimiting borders that Han settlers were forbidden to cross.[41] Such borders were also established in southern China, like the one defining the so-called Miao-frontierland in western Hunan: a wall built in Ming times and rebuilt by the Qing.[42] Usually, those frontier-defining efforts were in vain, and land-hungry Chinese peasants still wandered into other people's lands, often displacing the original owners. In the end, the bureaucracy had no other choice, but to follow the settlers and establish administrative institutions on these territories.

Mack's third factor is the protection of certain important interests of the metropolis endangered by the insurgents, even though the survival of the metropolis is never in danger. In case of south-western China (or Taiwan for that matter), such interest was possibly the protection of borders. All of these areas were on the fringes of the Chinese state, which always tried to organize a sort of "defence in depth" by wrapping itself in a multi-layer cocoon. The outer layer of this cocoon were the vassal states, followed by the *tusi*-ruled areas, then by military-governed commanderies (including military colonies). At the core of the cocoon were the inner lands of the empire, ruled by civilian bureaucrats. Strengthening control over the border areas made inner China more secure. The neighbouring (sometimes formally vassal) states were able not only to withstand Chinese attacks, e.g. Nanzhao troops massacred the invading Tang army in 754.[43] When China was weaker, its neighbours sometimes launched successful invasions into Chinese heartland, as did the above-mentioned Nanzhao when it besieged Chengdu in 829.[44] Sometimes, the *tusi* could also be dangerously powerful, as they proved to be during the so-called She-An rebellion, when Guiyang was invested for almost a year by an almost 250,000-strong army in 1622 and southern Sichuan (including the city of Chongqing) was sacked.[45] Such large scale conflicts fall outside the definition of an "asymmetric war", but I mention them because they provide a reason for the Chinese to take good care of protection of their frontiers.

Another of the important interests of the metropolis endangered by insurgents, and also one of strategic importance, was the establishing and upholding of a peaceful and orderly society in frontier areas, safe for both their native population and the incoming Chinese. In order to achieve this aim, expanding Chinese rule and changing it from indirect to more direct forms was seen as beneficial. The indirect *tusi* system was perceived as disorderly, and direct forms of government – as an expression of order and the emperor's

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[41] John R. Shepherd, *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier, 1600–1800*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993.

[42] Sutton, "Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier....", p. 201.

[43] Van de Ven, *Warfare in Chinese History*..., p. 133–134.

[44] Ibid., p. 167.

[45] Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist...*, p. 180.

benevolence.[46] Ideas related to social stability were expressed in various forms by Chinese officials, but never doubted in principle, even by these administrators who argued for (temporarily) slowing down the actual process of such administrative change.

Mack also raises the question of morality of the war. When the public opinion at home perceives the war as immoral, it will turn against it, thus diminishing the state's ability to carry on fighting until victory is achieved. In the case of China's operations against its minority groups, the action of certain officials could be condemned, but issue, whether it is moral or not to subjugate other people, and "grant them" Chinese style administration was never really questioned. The basic state structure, Confucian bureaucracy, perceived itself as inherently moral. Confucian bureaucrats also perceived the extension of Chinese rule as moral and beneficial to the people, even if the people might have been (temporarily) opposed to such extension; in such cases, according to Confucian officials, the people's opposition was due to the fact that they had no proper understanding of the social world. Overcoming (by force, if necessary) that opposition was justified, just as justified as a parent who forces his child to do something which child may perceive as unpleasant, but which ultimately will do it good.[47] It must also be noted that the opponents, often illiterate and/or with no knowledge of Chinese language, had basically no chance to present their story. Even if they had some knowledge of Chinese or even some classical Confucian education, there was no free press available to them in order to disseminate their views. The only form of "newspaper" in pre-modern China was the governmental gazetteer.

Hiyasuki Miyakawa discusses the role in confucianization (which to large extent coincided with sinification) played by Chinese who lived among southern "barbarians". He gives examples of officials sent to remote border areas, where they set up schools, instructed in proper customs, introduced Chinese-style marital customs and burial rites, sometimes actively persecuting shamans who resisted such changes and tried to defend native customs. The adoption of Chinese dress was also perceived as an important step towards civilization. The Miyakawa's study clearly shows that all these officials, across centuries, had remarkably consistent attitudes towards non-Chinese culture, treating it (at best) as worthless, at worst – as harmful.[48] They never really questioned their own stance on other cultures. Such deep conviction of one's own moral and civilizational superiority was certainly important in sustaining the civilizing efforts, regardless of how costly – or how bloody they might be.

There were also rather weak constraints on barbaric ways of warfare and targeting the civilians, which according to Arreguín-Toft are effective means of guerrilla-style warfare. As Bruce Elleman puts it, the Chinese generals would generally avoid war, but when it came to blows, they drew no quarter. No humanitarian laws and conventions were developed, and "in the Chinese way of thinking there was no universal law governing war, since the

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[46]   Sutton, "Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier...", p. 218.

[47]   The theory and nature of Confucian "civilizing project", as he calls it, including the metaphor of peripherial people as children, is more fully developed by Stevan Harrell in his introduction to *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, Studies on ethnic groups in China, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.

[48]   Hisayuki Miyakawa, "The Confucianization of Southern China." in: *The Confucian Persuasion*, A. Wright (ed.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960, p. 21–47.

highest possible military and political goal was to achieve unity. As a result, the slaughter of innocent civilians and non-combatants was commonplace".[49] Liang Qichao, one of the most enlightened 19th century Chinese thinkers, commented without much remorse on the outcome of the Miao uprising: "...the suppression this time had some characteristics of fundamental solution".[50] To understand how fundamental the solution was, let us look at the assessment one of the officials compiled: 4,9 out of 7 million people died, private property worth 25milion *taels* of silver was destroyed, and the costs of the war to the state amounted to ca. 80 million *taels* of silver.[51] The numbers are almost surely inflated, but the butchery was unquestionable.

In 1460, after capitulation of one Miao tribe, 1565 boys were castrated, 329 of whom died as a result. The governor was admonished by the emperor for his excessive cruelty, but the fate of the prisoners was not an unusual one. Seven years earlier, after another quelled aboriginal rebellion, the Chinese had too many eunuchs to be sent to the emperor's court, so they were distributed among the regional officials.[52]

The last *tusi* offices were abandoned by the People's Republic of China in the 1950s. Also at that time, some more warlike people, like the Nuosu Yi from Liangshan, were finally and fully subjugated (in the first half of the 20th century they were still almost completely free of any state control, and often raided neighbours, capturing people for slavery). Such raids and short-lived uprisings against the land reform among the Yi and Yao, were the last acts of a several hundred year-long war between southwestern peoples and the Chinese empire, a war which more often than not was asymmetric in character. These last rebellions were quickly dealt with and regular, strong Chinese administration was established in those areas. The processes of Chinese immigration into non-Han territories and assimilation of the non-Han people, which were ultimately crucial to the overall Chinese victory, continue and even accelerate now, due to effective transportation (by both road and rail), mass media and popular culture, and of course, mass education in Chinese and with Chinese curriculum.

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[49]   Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989...*, p. 7.

[50]   Ssŭ-yü Têng, *China's Response to the West; a Documentary Survey, 1839–1923*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 268.

[51]   Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou...*, p. 164.

[52]   Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 16.

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