**empire/天下(Tiān Xià)**

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| European Perspective | Alain le Pichon | 17 Feb 2022 |

The Western concept of empire is vague, as it refers to multiple and very different historical events and episodes, covering a vast polysemic field full of ambiguity that is easily amphibological. Perhaps its strength and coherence come more from its dreamlike characters: Alexander, August, Napoleon, heroes of legend transcending Western history. It is a matter of the extraordinary and the fable rather than of logic and factual actuality despite the rigorous legal dressing of a concept stemming from Roman law. One may wonder “whether its particularly effective character is not precisely due to its ambiguous and complex nature”[[1]](#footnote-1) , making this fabulous word one of the most powerful weapons and conceptual tools in history.

- The Chinese word for empire is conventionally translated as Di-guo, “literally: country governed by an emperor, or state dependent on an imperial institution, a rather late invention, referring to the Western model, and reinterpreted with reference to the context of contemporary knowledge,” (Zhao Tingyang). It, therefore, does not belong to the “conceptual heritage” of classical Chinese thought, while the one that Zhao Tingyang proposes for our consideration, Tianxia or “Everything Under the Sky”, covers a different field of meaning and historical reality that is specifically Chinese and foreign to Western culture and history, belonging to the category of “untranslatable”.

- This debate on the concept of empire refers to a passionate context of tensions, confrontations and suspicions, found throughout history or still today in current events, leading on both sides to imaginary and speculative projections, peculiar to each culture.

The "dream of empire" extends to the whole world and the notion of universality is at the heart of this debate. The following account from Herodotus' Stories, with two episodes, one at the beginning and the other at the end, frames this fresco of the Greek world's confrontation with the Persian Empire, as the two poles, East and West, of a political vision of the world.

- The first, in Book 1, Clio, is the story of Cyrus' dream: “sleeping on the land of the Massagetae ... [he] thought he saw during his sleep the eldest son of Hystaspe (Darios) with wings on his shoulders, whose lone shaded Asia and the other Europe”, announcing the advent of the empire of Darius.

- The second, in Book VIII, Urania, is the speech of Themistocles to the Athenians after the defeat of the Persians at Salamis and their retreat to the East: “It is not we who have accomplished this feat, it is the gods and heroes whose jealousy did not want a single man to reign over Asia and Europe” denouncing the absolute hubris of the imperial project threatening the Greek city.

Reversing the meaning of this confrontation, Alexander made this alternative vision of the world, which was until then foreign and alienating, a Greek reality, the Hellenistic empire, with its future developments from the Roman to the Byzantine Empire.

The Romans, conquered by the culture of their captive, Greece, took up this Hellenistic model and, as in everything else, left its mark on it, combining the cult of imperial power with the perfect management and administration.

We could say that at both ends of the Eurasian continent, the European Union and China find themselves today in a situation which could be compared to that observed by Herodotus. The European Union as the heir to the Greek world, whose values it still claims as the only universal ones, facing off against China who assumes in the eyes of the Western world the potential role of the hegemonic imperial power invested with the virtue of universality and centrality inherent in the image of the Middle Kingdom.

The concept of Empire, the Roman “imperium” (command, power) is definitely marked by its warlike origins. The French term empereur comes from the Latin word imperator which belongs to the family of imperare (commander) or imperium. The word imperator designates a victorious general, acclaimed by his troops and having thus entitled to the triumph, this title being granted by the Senate. Julius Caesar is the first Roman ruler to bear the title, followed by Augustus.

A synthetic definition of the imperium is given by Mommsen: “Imperium designates the highest public power, including jurisdiction and military command”, as opposed to the exclusive power to defend as the people’s tribunals have it and to the subordinate power to order which belongs to the lower magistrates.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Imperium is thus an essential term in the political conception of the Roman State, intimately linked to a city, Rome “which has always been conceived as a city, even when extended to the limits of a very vast space”[[3]](#footnote-3). “The Imperium populi Romani is the land on which the powers of magistrates or promagistrates are exercised. They are powers resulting from the legal horizon of the city Rome which extends little by little on the world”[[4]](#footnote-4). This imperium has two forms: the imperium domi and the imperium militiae, depending on where the imperium is exercised. The imperium domi had authority over the city of Rome and stopped at a border marked by milestones. The imperium militiae of the Imperator was exercised outside beyond the limit of one mile from the city gates.

Hence, the following constants constitute the conceptual model of empire:

- The City, the sacred space attributed by the gods to the Roman community and governed by the immutable rules of supreme political power: the imperium domi, remains the universal model of the Empire, exponentially extended to the surrounding known world.

- The city delegates the power of conquest, the imperium militiae, to a military chief elected by its troops, leading him to the “triumph” by which he is recognized as imperator.

- From Augustus, the imperator cumulates then the two powers: the imperium domi and the imperium militiae, military power of absolute conquest.

- These two functions are both marked by a sacred character; they proceed from the gods and accomplish a divine project in which the sacred nature of the emperor is revealed.

The encounter with Christianity brings about a profound paradigm shift, linked to monotheism and its universal outlook. Two paradigms will confront each other:

- The first, imposed with Constantine’s conversion, leading to the confusion of the religious model and the political model. The emperor is then the all-powerful representative of the one God, thus justified in his project of universal domination.

- The second, on the contrary, theorized by St. Augustine, clearly distinguishes the two models: the purely terrestrial political one, accommodating the imperfection of the things of this world within the terrestrial City. The other of a heavenly nature “is not of this world”, the City of God from which the first must nevertheless draw inspiration. These two paradigms will then confront each other, in the successive avatars that the concept of Empire has taken on in the West.

The model took very different forms, depending on countries, language and cultures. In Germanic cultures and lands, under the name of Reich, while claiming to be based on the Roman model, it has taken on a clearly different meaning. Carl Schmitt sees the Reich as an area susceptible to domination, not so much by a city as by a people: “as a great spatial order based on the people, carried by the people...equal to the task.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Con-substantial to the history of the formation of German identity, linked to the Holy German Empire, as to that of the Orthodox world, through the Byzantine Empire, it is undoubtedly more heterogeneous to the history of France, from its Very Christian Kings to the Republic, to the point that J. Le Goff tells us that empire is not a European concept[[6]](#footnote-6). But it inspired, in depth, the French Revolution, just as the colonial project. Different may have been the forms in history, one constant remains, its first principle: domination by arms.

Thus, coming from Asia, from the Assyrians, introduced in Persia by the Medes, adopted by Alexander and installed in the Hellenistic world, taken up and amplified by Rome, the model of empire has not stopped haunting the memory and the spirit of the West, defining its history and its grip on the world despite ideological references and formal appearances of its political models. It animates, in depth, its vision of the world, it inspires its strategy.

The idea is constantly alive in political philosophy where, from Dante to Vico and Machiavelli, the Empire is seen as the best way to ensure peace. Dante, in his Monarchy, legitimizes this warlike origin of imperial power. It is God who conferred on Romulus the legitimacy of power through the trial of his battle with Remus, entitling him with the mission to federate the universal empire under the Pax Romana, prelude to Christian Peace.

Progressively the concept has accommodated with different forms of organization, whether republics like Athens or later Venice, monarchies like Austria in the 19th century, or confederations like the Holy Roman Empire, to democracies such as French, British Empire, the American of today, or more generally the “global pyramid of authority” of the “liberal empire” described by Toni Negri.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nevertheless, the idea remains that the West's vocation is to extend the system and its universal values to the rest of the world. Taking over from the ideal model of Christianity, whose paradigm remains Saint Augustine's City of God, these values are today those of democracy and human rights, just as they could once have been those of the Marxist revolution and popular democracy.

With China today, having recovered its greatness, appearing as the second world power, the field seems open for these two deeply different conceptual models to confronting each other on the scene of international political debate.

1. Jean Luc Chappey, La notion d’empire avant l’empire, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Theodor Mommsen, Le Droit Public Romain, Roman Public Law 1874 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pierrre Boilley, antoine Marès, in Monde(s) 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Id. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carl Schmitt, Sur la notion de Rich en droit international 1939 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jacques Le Goff, in Le Renversement du Ciel, ouvrage collectif Transcultura A. le Pichon, Moussa Sow, CNRS Ed. 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Empire. Paris, Éd. Exils, 2000, 559 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)