

## Foreign concessions: the past and future of a form of shared sovereignty

A few years ago, Liu Jianjun, a former official from the city of Baoding, near Peking, achieved a measure of fame in China's media through his efforts to promote the settlement of Chinese farmers in Africa. In an interview, he described these efforts in the following way: Page | 1

The lease on land is usually 99 years. Maybe by then Africa will no longer food aid from the UN. Its industry and technology will be developed immensely. In the past, some countries called foreigners in their country colonialists. Now they want to open up and tolerate differences, giving you great deals ... and we still debate about whether we should go or not, whether it is right or wrong. Isn't this too outmoded? (Zhu Bao 1998)\*

There is more than one kind of irony to this statement. Here we have a former official appointed by the Chinese Communist Party, much of whose official historiography and identity is based on the idea of anticolonial struggle, saying that the discourse of anticolonialism is outmoded. Here we have a Chinese official offering the pure essence of developmentalism that long dominated Western discourses of Africa but were ultimately abandoned. . And here we have him, an official of a government that today operates with an ideology of national sovereignty more absolute than that of the West, adopting the liberal argument that national sovereignty should not be afforded automatic priority when it stands in the way of the free flow of goods, people and ideas (a view that, of course, was deployed by British imperialism and is therefore looked upon uneasily by contemporary Western liberals). I will argue today that we need both history and anthropology in order to understand the shifting practices of sovereignty and developmentalism that these ironies encapsulate.

Last year, the anthropologist Chris Lyttleton and I visited Golden Boten City, a "special zone" (Chinese *tequ*) just across the Chinese border in Northern Laos, which was described in an advertisement as the "most internationally modernized city in [L]ao." It had been opened a year earlier by the Chinese investment company Fu-Khing on 1600 hectares of leased land. Its central feature is a hotel-casino complex, with a cluster of shops, small eating houses, staff dormitories, and apartments surrounding it. But a conference center, a golf course, and villas are planned, and the developer's brochure implores potential investors to "believe that thousands of people will gather here in a beautiful morning or an autumn evening. They [will] live and develop here with various occupations and identities, to form a huge community, and a modern society."

In 1993, Laos and China had declared Boten and Mohan as the only national port of the two countries respectively, directly administered by the central governments. China, Laos and Thailand jointly built Laos section of Kunming-Bangkok international thoroughfare, which was radiated to Indo-China Peninsula, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, etc. It has provided necessary conditions for development and construction of the Golden Boten City.

Lying in north Laos, northeast to Louang Namtha Province, Golden Boten City is 50 km away from Louang Namtha Province, 98km from capital of Oudomxay Province, 307 km from capital of Luang Prabang, 730 km from Capital Vientiane, 240 km from Chiang Saen of Thailand, and bordered on Mohan Free Trade Area of Yunnan, China. It is next to the national frontier, 58 km away from Mengla of China, and 220 km away from Xishuangbanna. The 190-km-long Xiaomo Expressway will be completed in the end of 2006, 708 km away from Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province.

Mohan International Port of China is closely linked with Golden Boten City, and the rapid development of mutual interactions has brought hope to each other. China's special opening-up policy for Xishuangbanna Border Free Economic Cooperation Area also has enlightened Golden Boten City to develop jointly.



Figure 1: A page from Golden Boten City's brochure for investors. Courtesy of Paul T. Cohen.

Yet today, apart from a small number of Thai and Lao tourists, virtually everything and everyone in the place is Chinese, from some 3,000 employees and small business owners to the currency (only yuan are accepted), from electric sockets (electricity is also supplied from China) to beer. When we asked a local Lao driver whether Golden Boten was China or Laos, he said in fluent Chinese: "Sure it's China! China rented it." The fact that the zone has been leased by its Chinese proprietors for thirty years, with the option of renewing the lease twice, is reinforced by the guards who march around in military formations in uniforms resembling those of Chinese police, emblazoned with "Special Zone Security." The number of Lao employees has dropped from nearly 300 to a little over 100, and today Lao dealers are hired only if they can speak Chinese. But dealers' salaries of about US\$200 a month for a six-day work week are high by Lao standards. These dealers tell us that bodies of Chinese murder victims (there have been seven so far) as well as Chinese citizens accused of the crime have been whisked quietly back over the border in an apparent affirmation of Golden Boten's extraterritoriality.

What is happening here? Are we dealing with a return to premodern forms of shared sovereignty in the borderlands as China becomes powerful enough to spill over into neighbouring weak states, or is this, on the contrary, a manifestation of neoliberal globalization?

With this question in mind, I now want to take you back to 1872, when an American Vice Consul in Shanghai gathered a small group of American and British investors to purchase a strip of land, on which they built a railway to demonstrate the advantages of this new mode of transportation to reluctant Chinese officials. As we know from Hobsbawm (1968), railroad building was the core of British capitalism at the time, sustaining the steel and coal industry, and it was in need of new markets. In 1876, the Qing government bought the line, but instead of operating it tore it up (Pong 1973). In a letter to the British authorities, Feng Janguang, the circuit commissioner of Shanghai, justified this action by arguing that accepting a railway that was run by a foreign authority would establish a precedent whereby real estate built by citizens of other nations could become extraterritorialised, i.e. exempted from the sovereign authority of the Qing. This would raise a complex set of concerns: railway employees, both foreign and Chinese protégés, ignoring orders of local officials; disputes between railway and local authorities over land use and accidents; attempts by Chinese businessmen to evade the authority of the Qing by hiring foreign front-men. All of this was already happening in the foreign concessions on the Chinese coast, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the weakening empire proved unable to prevent the construction of much larger foreign-owned railways, by Russia and Japan.

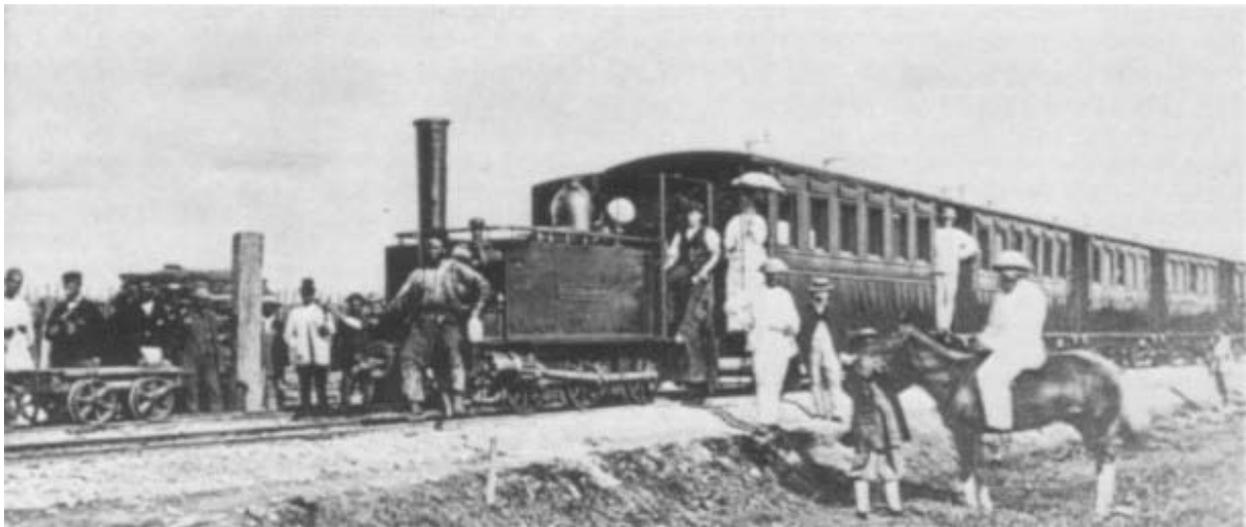


Figure 2. The Wusong Railway. Source: [www.irsociety.co.uk/Archives/52/Woosung.jpg](http://www.irsociety.co.uk/Archives/52/Woosung.jpg)

In the brief period of the Wusong Railway's operation, the train hit and killed a local resident. The engine driver, David Banks, was tried and acquitted by the British consular court in Shanghai. The defence argued that the victim had committed suicide, or else had been encouraged by the Chinese

authorities to kill himself in order to raise opposition to the railway. Thirty-five years later, an American named Henry Demenil killed a Tibetan lama while passing through a village in China's Yunnan Province. District Attorney Arthur Bassett of the U.S. District Court for China brought the case to court in Shanghai in 1907. The judge acquitted Demenil, concluding that the killing was due to the defendant's nervous condition and physical debilitation, brought on by the "rarefied mountain air" and the loneliness of the place (Kayaoglu 2007).

### *Extraterritoriality*

What was a U.S. District Court doing in China? When Qing China was defeated in the two Opium Wars, in 1842 and 1860, it was forced to sign treaties with the Western powers and Japan that exempted nationals of those states from the jurisdiction of China's courts, and allowed them instead to be tried according to the laws of their own nations. This provision, known as extraterritoriality, had previously been granted foreigners by only two governments: the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman sultan at the end of the eighteenth century, and Meiji Japan in the mid-nineteenth century after its forced opening to trade with the West. In the mid-1880s, 44 Western consular courts operated in treaty ports in Japan. In 1926, there were 121 Western and Japanese consular courts in China.

The establishment of extraterritoriality was simultaneous to the establishment of concessions, also known as treaty ports, in which Western powers and the Qing exercised a form of joint, or more precisely parallel, administration that John King Fairbank called "synarchy." The division of sovereignty was neither strictly territorial nor national. There were areas rented by foreign governments – as many as nine in Tianjin – in which authority of officials appointed by these dominated, but there was also more diffuse powers that foreign civil, military and even corporate authorities exercised over buildings and infrastructural installations outside these.



Extending foreign protection to certain local subjects too had its precedent in the Ottoman Empire, where it was generally Christians who enjoyed the protection of foreign powers. In a limited form, extraterritoriality had also been practiced in China earlier, in the foreign trading factories at Canton. These constituted an enclave in which only men were allowed to live. They were prohibited from going outside its boundaries, and contacts with them were strictly regulated. This earlier system of extraterritoriality was consistent with the imperial logic in which various groups of the population could be governed according to differing laws, and which accommodated diverse forms of shared or overlapping sovereignty, fuzzy boundaries, and complex tributary relationships that involved nomadic tribes. As James Hevia (1998) has pointed out, in China's case the imperial logic also allowed a relationship with Tibet in which both sides saw themselves the centre and the other as the tributary.

But the extraterritoriality imposed on China in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century -- which foresaw no such limits on the movement of foreigners -- was an entirely different matter. It occurred at a time when legal pluralism was considered inconsistent with modernization, and the Westphalian system of territorial nation-states with precise borders and exclusive, absolute and equal sovereignty over their subjects had acquired a global reach. Its imposition meant that the Western powers did not consider the Qing government capable of exercising the functions expected of a modern nation. Yet as the case of the Wusong railway demonstrates, extraterritoriality gave the Qing government huge disincentives against accepting foreign investment, which could have helped it acquire what Western powers would have recognized as modernity. The provisions of extraterritoriality were abrogated only in the 1940s, when China was fighting a war with Japan on the side of the US and Great Britain.

Extraterritoriality was central to China's experience both of Western colonialism and of modernization. Based on treaty stipulations, China was forced to surrender degrees of sovereign power: control of customs and security in treaty ports, legal jurisdiction over non-nationals, foreign concessions, privileged treatment of foreign business and missionary activity. For China's political leaders, foreign concessions in port cities, and later the state of Manchukuo, a de facto Japanese protectorate that was established in 1932 and collapsed in 1945, were at once a burning humiliation and a lesson in industrialization, urban planning, and public administration (cf. Duara 2009). As Prasenjit Duara points out, although Manchukuo and the concessions were semicolonial formations, they do not lend themselves well to the usual conceptualizations of colonialism that stress underdevelopment and traditional forms of exploitation, because they received massive foreign investment in industry, infrastructure and public amenities.

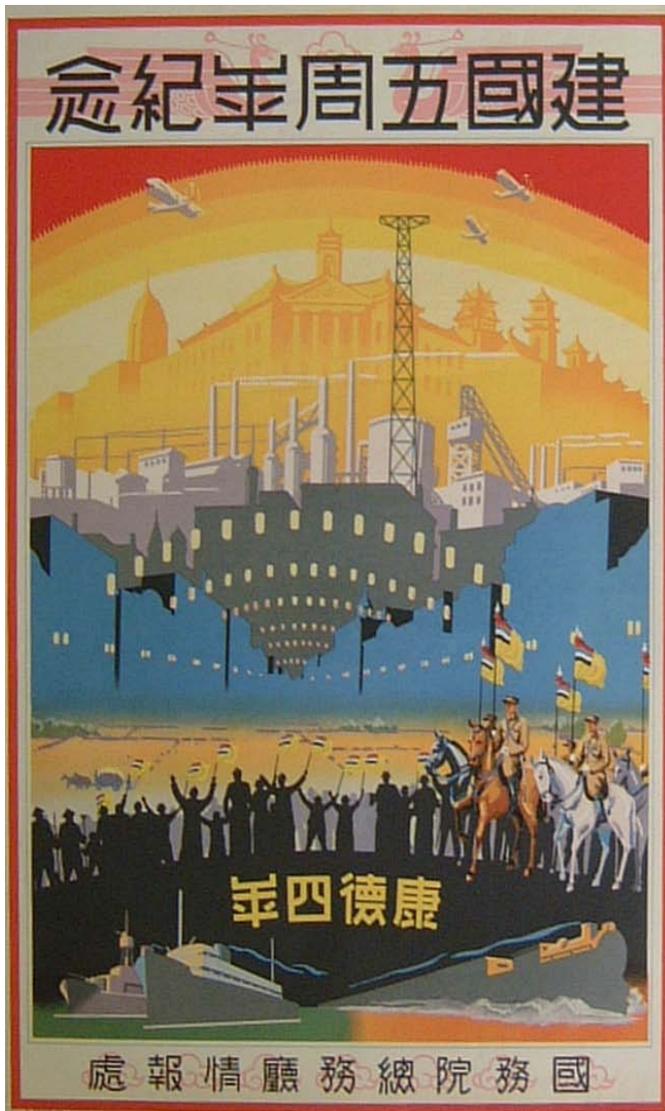


Figure 2: A Manchukuo propaganda poster. Source: [www.japanfocus.org](http://www.japanfocus.org)

On the face of it, Manchukuo's Japanese imperial ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, which emphasized an East Asian autarky based on shared cultural values and opposed to those of the colonialist West, was exactly the opposite of the universalist ideology of free trade that underlay the establishment of treaty ports. Yet in both cases, the Chinese were to supply land and labour, and the Westerners or Japanese would furnish technology, capital, management, and political and military leadership. For reasons that will become clear later, it is worth noting that the establishment of Manchukuo was preceded by the transformation of Zhang Zuolin's warlord administration in Manchuria into a Japanese client state by extending it a series of loans for railway construction and other infrastructure projects. As Duara writes: a simple model of economic exploitation was to be

supplemented (if not replaced) by high levels of investment, the development of new modes of mobilization and identity production, and a rhetoric of brotherhood and regional federalism.

Duara shows that the chief Japanese ideologist of Manchukuo, Matsuoka Yosuke, was convinced of the Japanese-led project's inclusiveness and benefits for the prosperity of the Chinese people, and distinguished these sharply from the racist nature of Western imperialism. The business magnates, magistrates and military officers who ran the treaty ports were indeed likely to hold a racist view of the world; indeed one can argue that the very way in which extraterritoriality was made to fit the modern nation-state system was based on it. Yet this did not diminish their own conviction that the liberal model of governance and justice they were offering to the Chinese, along with the flourishing finance, arts, and press, was far more beneficial for their development than the oppressive militarism practiced by the Japanese in Manchukuo.

#### *Treaty ports and special zones*

Diplomatic historian Eileen Scully described concessions in China as “anomalous zones” in which government suspends fundamental norms. This is remarkably similar to the way critics of neoliberalism have applied philosopher Giorgio Agamben's (2005) notion of exception to places in which national rules are suspended and human beings can be stripped of their rights and dignity. Such “zones of exception” most obviously include places such as Guantanamo Bay, but anthropologist Aihwa Ong has argued that all manner of zones of exception – such as free trade areas, export manufacturing zones, or construction sites populated by foreign workers – in which prevalent labour and civil rights are suspended are crucial for the functioning of flexible capitalism in the world and in Asia in particular. Yet while the genealogy of zones of exception is linked to the ideology of free trade, it is not simply neoliberal doctrine that is behind their recent proliferation. In what follows I will argue that China has now taken on a leading role in promoting modernization through zones of exception, not only in China but also outside it. Although this model seems to fit with the neoliberal approach to the global economy, the Chinese state in fact plays a major economic and political role in the establishment and operation of these zones – the government initiating some of them, state banks providing credit, state construction companies building facilities, state resources companies exploiting them -- just as Western powers did in the operation of concessions. In fact, recipient governments increasingly see this model of development as an alternative to the World Bank's free-market orthodoxy.

How has this come about? The lesson in modernization that concessions offered was not forgotten by China's Communist leaders. China's post-1978 development crucially relied on the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), a form of "internal concession" within which foreign investors as well as their Chinese employees, in exchange for helping develop the nation, were given greater economic and social freedom than elsewhere. While these freedoms were significant for people's everyday lives and the running of business, they were of course relative: the zones' administration was firmly integrated into the national Party and state bureaucracies, and state enterprises flocking to them were some of their main beneficiaries. Like the treaty ports, the first 14 special economic zones were set up around coastal cities (and in some cases, like Queshi Island off the coast of Swatow, new free trade zones were in fact identical to the old treaty ports. On this island, the old foreign consulates were reused as government offices of the FTZ). These zones have subsequently lost significance, but the current Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau operate on a similar principle: they are spaces of interaction between Chinese and foreign capital in which the rules are relaxed and to which Chinese citizens' access is limited.

One can discern a remarkably similar silhouette of extraterritoriality emerging around Chinese concessions in various places in Africa, Southeast Asia, South America and the Pacific as China becomes an increasingly significant overseas investor and development aid donor. To begin with, across the border from China, three of the four "Special Regions" in northern Burma (Kokang, Mong La, and the Shan State No. 2 Special Region) are run by ethnic Chinese elites that regularly appeal to China's government for support (ICG 2009). When Kokang was occupied by Burmese government troops earlier this year, the thirty thousand refugees who fled across the border to China were described in Chinese reports as ethnic Chinese. These populations go back to earlier waves of migration from China (including those of Kuomintang soldiers and Red Guards), but they fit neatly into the *tequ* logic: today, they benefit from renewed inflows of migration and investment and use Chinese currency and the Chinese language, and are connected to China's telephone network and power grid (in more than one sense) (*Haitang Shequ* n.d., 51nb.com 2009). Farther afield, the first Chinese-run Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone in Africa opened in Zambia in 2007 (Alden et al. 2008:15), and four further zones are planned. ZTE, a Chinese telecommunications company, has received a 100-thousand-hectare oil palm concession in Congo-Kinshasa (Bräutigam and Tang 2009:697). In 2008 a group of Chinese investors in Uganda reportedly signed a 99-year lease for the development of a 518 km<sup>2</sup> Lake Victoria East Africa Free Trade Zone with its own legislative structures and plans to attract 500,000 Chinese settlers (World Chinese Federation 2008). Plans for the zone, one of the largest in the world, are said to include an airport, a free

port serving five East African countries, roads, a power plant, a water purification plant, mining, an agriculture demonstration zone, a fishery, a golf club, a sports village, a university, headquarters of a new China-Africa Volunteer Corps, and residential real estate consisting of 200 thousand bungalow-style buildings. According to some reports, by 2007, there were 28 so-called Baoding Villages in 17 African countries, with a total population of 7,000 Chinese farmers engaging in agriculture on rented land and united into a transnational council that set unified rules for the villages. In addition, Chinese mining, logging, oil, and energy projects across continents also operate as concessions (in the case of power plants, often under a BOT system), although these have more limited populations and a narrower range of Chinese-local interactions.

The current Chinese leaseholds are not of the same order of imposition as the treaty ports in China, “where the overlap between the law of power (gunboats) and the power of law (extraterritoriality) was palpable” (Scully 1995). But there are notable similarities. To begin with, lease rights, including extension options, typically range between 60 and 99 years. Trade rights are clearly privileged, legal jurisdiction vague and de facto security is maintained either by Chinese forces or by local armies that are in effect seconded to site management. In addition, there are also other less readily acknowledged comparisons that signal these concessions as a contemporary version of “soft extraterritoriality.” Scully writes that despite dreams of Western trade and investment opening up the Chinese commodity market in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was in fact the management and employment of prostitution by Western entrepreneurs that had a greater impact within the informal economy of the Chinese treaty ports, in particular Shanghai.

The brisk trade conducted by American sex workers in Shanghai and by their male compatriots who profited from brothels and gambling casinos reveals the existence of two, competing, China markets; one “legitimate” (at least under the unequal treaties forced upon China), a potential outlet for America's production glut if Chinese could be remade into conspicuous consumers; the other deeply corrupt, overtly predatory, transnational, transracial, conducted without regard to a “national interest.” The latter market offered a wider range of illicit goods than consumers might find in ordinary boomtowns because it was located on the borderlands of empire, where Chinese authorities were pre-empted from exercising control over their own territory and where the policing capabilities of the pre-empting great powers were overextended and problematic. (Scully 1995:64)

Here Scully points to something more than just superficial similarity with special zones like Boten or those in Burma, where next to gambling, prostitution, drugs and erotic entertainment are mainstays of the economy. Her point recalls that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), who (unlike those scholars who have celebrated a future post-nation-state world as a state of liberation) have suggested that a paradigm of power that rules through differential hierarchies may indeed be coming to replace the modern paradigm of the nation-state, but this power will be no more benign than the old one. While I do not think that Hardt and Negri's framework is adequate to describe the world as it endeavours to do, it may be applicable in the emerging new interstitial world of concessions.

### *The return of the concession*

In recent years, the concession model has been growing more prominent in the global economy. Concessions have never entirely disappeared from the world map. In postcolonial times, they survived as extractive enclaves run by oil companies or mining giants, which continued to exercise state-like coercive and sometimes welfare functions of the state. But today, the concession model has expanded to cover all sorts of purposes. My colleague Sandra Evers does research in Madagascar, where the largest investment to date is a 6,000 hectare mining concession by Rio Tinto. Rio Tinto also supports the World Wildlife Fund's effort to convert 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Madagascar into conservation areas.<sup>†</sup> The two projects have very different aims, but both involve the displacement of people and the implementation of new governance regimes as powerful non-state actors (Rio Tinto and WWF) devise strategies to mitigate the effects of displacement and undertake social responsibility commitments. The most ambitious project in Madagascar is a plan by Daewoo, supported by the Korean government, to lease 1.3 million hectares (3.25 million acres) of land – half the size of Belgium – for food crop production. The project, which partly triggered the 2009 coup that removed the president who had negotiated it, is now on hold, but it is indicative of a new trend in which corporate ventures are linked to strategic decisions by cash-rich, land-poor states that scout the world for concessions to ensure their food security. At the end of 2006, concessions covered nearly 15% of Cambodia's arable land, and the Kuwaiti government has proposed to lease land to grow rice on an area that some sources suggest is 100,000 ha. Cambodia is also said to have been approached by Qatar for a 300,000 ha concession; Qatar also wants to lease 100,000 ha in the Philippines (AFP 2009).

Even before the current trend began, and based partly on different concerns, some American politicians and scholars advocated the return to limiting the absolute sovereignty of certain states. Martin Indyk, an assistant secretary of state under Bill Clinton, has argued for the establishment of a UN protectorate in

Palestine. In effect, something similar has happened in Bosnia and in Kosovo. The prominent political scientist Stephen Krasner writes:

In the future, better domestic governance in badly governed, failed, and occupied polities will require the transcendence of accepted rules, including the creation of shared sovereignty in specific areas. In some areas, decent governance may require some new form of trusteeship. ... Contemporary Afghanistan and Iraq are the obvious cases in point. ... Shared sovereignty, arrangements under which individuals chosen by international organizations, powerful states, or ad hoc entities would share authority with nationals over some aspects of domestic sovereignty, would be a useful addition to the policy repertoire (Krasner 2007).

What for Krasner is a cause for enthusiasm is a source of anxiety for Duara: “Is it possible to think of Manchukuo as the beginning of an imperialism that culminates with ... Iraq?” No doubt, the United States is the source of many current extraterritorial tendencies, including its use of private military contractors in Iraq, the so-called extraordinary renditions, Guantanamo Bay, and U.S. resistance to the International War Crimes Tribunal, which in a limited sense signals the end of extraterritoriality as far as wars go. Yet while there may be parallels between Manchukuo and Iraq, I want to argue that there are far more obvious parallels between the treaty ports and China’s emerging overseas concessions, and that it is erroneous to identify the concessionary model of development with neoliberalism. The concessionary model of development is by no means uniquely Chinese, not even in its state-supported form. But there is an assertiveness and enthusiasm to the promotion of concessions as engines of modernization for the countries they are established in (but whose jurisdiction they are partly removed from) that is peculiar to Chinese projects, perhaps, as I have suggested, for historical reasons.

In the Chinese discourse, concessions are seen as “model units” that, by disseminating their advanced practices (economic and technological as well as values and behavior), will pull up the rest of the country they are inserted in. The way the legal constructions of the concessions are described, for example, the 99-year concession in Uganda, bear a similarity to Western concessions in Chinese history (notably Hong Kong) that is likely to be intentional rather than uncanny: to Chinese readers, it may well conjure up a vision of a future replete with skyscrapers and horserace tracks. In this discourse, poverty eradication, school building and opium replacement (a scheme under which Chinese companies investing in Laos can receive state subsidies for planting other crops in opium-growing areas) can be unproblematically and seamlessly connected to offshore oil or gambling.

Rather than checking the spread of concessions, then, the current “post-neoliberal moment,” in which there is frustration with *both* the financial prescriptions of neoliberal economics *and* the individual-empowerment approach to development and the kind of state capitalism represented by China suddenly has a wider appeal, may actually speed it up. Not only have special zones played a central role in China’s modernization throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its continued experimentation with them reflects the fact that China is currently less averse than Western states are to what Aihwa Ong (2000) calls “graduated sovereignty... whereby citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits are subjected to different kinds of surveillance and in practice enjoy different sets of civil, political and economic rights.” Graduated sovereignty, she suggests, can strengthen state power and protections in certain areas, but not in others. Ong’s argument was based on Southeast Asia, and it has been suggested by others, such as Xiang Biao (2009), that applying a differentiated approach to governing their populations – that is, having different sets of rules for different groups of people – is generally more acceptable in contemporary East and Southeast Asia than in Europe and North America, where the political and legal homogeneity of the population is still officially a fundamental tenet of the modern political system (although recent proposals for the treatment of immigrants and refugees in Western Europe, or Gypsies in Eastern Europe, may well suggest the erosion of this system).

Orvar Löfgren (1999) has likened the transition to the modern state to one from an avocado to a coconut, where internal borders are abolished but external ones strengthened. Yet in China, the avocado has never disappeared: the walls around the city have been maintained through the household registration system. Today, it is no longer effectively used to prevent migration, but rather as a tool for the differential governance of more or less desirable segments of the population, largely on the basis of their contribution to economic development. The limitations of rights imposed on foreign workers (wages, contracts, civil status, differentiation by nationality) in Singapore or Malaysia function in a similar way and serve similar goals. Southeast Asian states inherited this legal pluralism – if you want to put it in positive terms – or racism, if you want to put it in negative ones, from British colonial rule. Indeed, even as the colonial metropolises built their coconut states, differentiated communitarian governance remained typical of the colonies, and not just those of Britain. I am referring here not so much to the well-known racial/religious categorization that, say, South Africa or India inherited, as to institutional arrangements such as the congregation system in the French colonies, in which all Chinese were required to register with an organisation representing his dialect group. This system has effectively been resurrected by the de facto party-state that Cambodia currently is, and it currently links the

political elites of Cambodia and China through a patronage network of Chinese-Cambodian entrepreneurs in an arrangement that implies a tacit sharing of sovereignty and erodes the boundaries of citizenship.

So let me sum up. I started by recalling the role of extraterritoriality and concessions in the spread of global modernity in the era of imperialism, and suggested that while they appeared to have been thrown onto the rubbish-heap of history in the era of decolonization, they have been making a comeback in various forms, underpinned by the economic logic of flexible capitalism, the securitizing logic of post-9/11, and I might add the cosmopolitan logic that questions the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. I argued further that extraterritoriality and concessions were central for China's experience of its own modernization, and that they appear to have a place in the new vision of China as the engine of global modernization. Southeast Asia, both thanks to its relative propensity to legal pluralism and differentiated governance and its recent use of "special zones" for economic development, may see a more extensive revival of concessions as China continues its development export. A master plan for the economic development of Northern Laos, prepared by Chinese specialists on behalf of the Yunnan Province Reform and Development Commission and presented to the Lao government at the end of 2008, envisages setting up new free trade zones along the country's borders and developing tourism concessions, operated and controlled by contractors (Northern Laos 2008). At the same time, and especially in the Southeast Asian borderlands of China, the modernizing ideology of "special zones" meets and builds on another, premodern but still relatively recent imperial logic of shared sovereignty (Leach 1960). That logic, whose historical memory is still alive (Diana 2009), was in some ways the opposite of the concessionary one: in it, rulers of marginal polities had a tributary relationship to empires (notably the Chinese but sometimes multiple ones), which claimed nominal overlordship over them but did not interfere with internal governance.

What sort of governance Chinese concessions might bring is not easy to tell. Most Western accounts associate Chinese projects overseas with corruption, plunder of resources, indifference to human and labour rights and to the environment. Yet at the same time, the appearance of young Chinese volunteers overseas, made possible by expanding middle-class lifestyles, is a reality, and negotiations are reportedly on the way to set up a branch of a Chinese university in Phnom Penh to teach accounting. While certain types of concessional agreements, especially in Africa, have included school and hospital construction (such as the 32 hospitals included in a mining contract with Congo-Kinshasa), for the time being, the spread of small, private Chinese clinics run by migrants – including at Golden Boten City -- is a

far more significant development. Although they are expensive by local standards and the credentials of their doctors are hard to verify, they are locally seen as superior to existing health care options. One possible outcome of new social responsibility guidelines is that we may see an expansion of education and health projects. The Chinese master plan for Northern Laos, for instance, calls for the setting up of vocational schools and “special trainings to the rural poor labors, one person from each household” (Northern Laos 2008:90).

So if indeed concessions, by whatever name, reappear on the world map, and if some of them will be Chinese-run, it is likely that, like their historical predecessors, they will simultaneously become enclaves of vice and order, harsh exploitation and skills transmission, new epidemics and professional health care, cosmopolitanism and racism. The forms of governance and sociality that they give rise to, not least the implications of extraterritoriality, will need careful study. But these new-old polities of “graduated sovereignty” already appear to meet an aspiration that is perhaps shared by large numbers of officials and ordinary people: the desire to believe in the possibility of progress. What the Chinese state and Chinese investors are offering is the affirmation and attainability of progress through hard work, in the social evolutionist language of Northern European colonisers:

The mentalities of most people are still at the starting stage of agricultural economic development, which is unsuitable for development of market economy and economic globalization. Their awareness of development, competition, openness and self-reliance and hard working still need to be improved (Northern Laos 2008:15).

Nowadays, such language is associated with neoliberalism; yet it is better seen as an older and more universal language of “work harder and your life will be as good as ours:” a hope of catching up that, for all the recent microcredit fads, global modernization theory’s erstwhile Western propagandists no longer seem to offer. That hope continues to resonate in China, and I dare say it does so in many poor societies. As the anthropologist James Ferguson (2006:186) writes, “some contemporary Africans seem to feel a sort of nostalgia for the modern.” His Zambian mineworker informants “said, in effect, ‘We used to be modern—or, at least, well on our way—but now we’ve been denied that opportunity.’ Modernity, for them, was not an anticipated future but a dream to be remembered from the past” (ibid.) Ferguson suggests that Africans increasingly see modernity not as something to be attained but as a global status hierarchy one is born into. Yet the Chinese entrepreneurs they encounter confound this picture. An article in *Global Times*, the *People’s Daily’s* popular offshoot, relates that a driver in South Africa asked the reporter if “you Chinese are the richest people in the world.” The author comments

that “Robert’s views are representative of the respect a very large number of lower-class South African blacks have for success. Because of this respect ... they want to learn from the Chinese.” It is easy to dismiss such stories as self-congratulatory state propaganda, but the sentiments they convey are likely to be real for at least some.

### *Applying anthropology to history*

How does an anthropological perspective on history help us do so? Is the mutual reliance of anthropology and history simply an outcome of the requirement that any sound understanding of a society, in my view at least, must involve both a grounded, ethnographic view and historical depth? I hope what I have said demonstrates that there is more to it

I have cited Prasenjit Duara, a historian whose work I, an anthropologist, have found consistently inspiring. Perhaps because he is an historian who works with the perspective of a hundred years, Duara sees common patterns in the operation of states wielding their power through very different ideologies. In this way he avoids the pitfalls of some anthropologists whose epistemologies of power and suffering are excessively focused on the current (or just past) neoliberal moment. Apart from its political position on the global Left that English-speaking anthropology has adopted since the 1980s in atonement for its colonial complicity, there is a deeper reason for this: anthropology, even where it was at the service of the nation-state, has tended to avoid the nation-state as a political category, and accentuated those processes and relationships that cut against its grain. Anthropology’s relationship with colonialism ensured that it developed as the study of those who could not be (or should not be allowed to be) nations. In many ways this legacy continues, as anthropologists continue focusing on groups, though no longer necessarily remote tribes, who have a different story to tell. Today, anthropologists retain their ability to tell these stories, but they attempt – in the felicitous words of a colleague – to grasp larger social processes without being just scribes of the local, marginal or minimal in which those processes are refracted. Contemporary anthropology is thus highly attuned to investigating the effects of the global market on human lives, but relatively uninterested in the depredations of national governments when they cannot be linked to the global market. In this respect, it usefully complements history, which by and large continues to be researched, taught, displayed and disseminated as a study of nations. Partly for that reason, it remained attentive to the limits of the reach of market logic throughout modernity: Fernand Braudel’s (1979) conceptualization of the state as a power acting above, and in some cases

against, market logic in early modern international trade is relevant here. For me, then, anthropology and history are complementary as much because of their respective methodological or ideological blind spots as because of their subjects and methods.

In this respect, what I am proposing differs from the famous seminars by anthropologist Clifford Geertz and historian Robert Darnton in Princeton in the 1980s, to which my learned colleague Herman Roodenburg referred in his lecture here two months ago. For Geertz and Darnton, anthropology and history were to work not in complementary but in identical ways, except that one worked in space and the other in time. At the centre of that collaboration was the rehabilitation of the social and cultural within a (mostly Western) history that was then predominantly concerned with the political. At about the same time, subaltern studies, with a similar focus on non-elites but in the postcolonial context, and pioneered mostly by historians, resonated deeply with anthropologists. It seems to me that these perspectives have now become firmly established in history, and that interest has turned, or should rightfully turn, back to political history that has been somewhat neglected in the past twenty years. Yet it is clear that the national conceptualizations of political history will no longer do. The perspective that anthropology today can contribute to the study of global history is not only, and not so much, the “native voice” that asserts the existence of alternative modernities by virtue of its position. Rather, it enables us to see history in the light of non-European historiographic traditions, allowing conceptualizations of modernity and modernization that help us understand what is happening in the world today.

It remains for me to thank the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences for lending their support to an undertaking that requires more than the usual share of interfaculty cooperation and institutional flexibility, and my teachers who, in the flesh and through their writing, have helped me along my intellectual journey.

I have spoken.

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\* Translation by Zhang Juan. According to Liu, by 2007, 7,000 Chinese peasants had settled in 28 farming concessions (“Baoding villages”) in 17 African countries (see Zhang 2009).

† <http://www.worldwildlife.org/what/wherewework/madagascar/projects.html> (accessed 4 April 2009).