9 Politics of Identities and the Making of the ‘Greater China’ Subregion in the Post-Cold War Era

Ngai-Ling Sum

The ‘Greater China’ subregion (that is, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southern China) which provides my focus below differs from the other subregions analyzed in this collection. Some of the latter have a long history or, at least, an institutional and organizational infrastructure that gives them a certain path-dependent solidity and coherence. The ‘Greater China’ subregion, for all that it has an invented history provided by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), is a recent product of largely bottom-up exchanges among economic and social actors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and southern China. To the extent that it is now gaining institutional shape, it is in the form of network-like patterns which are partly influenced by path-shaping struggles around the politics of identity and the reimagination of the subregion.

These identity struggles and reimaginations are connected, in turn, to the strategic context constituted by global–regional–national changes. The latter comprise: the globalization and triadization of capitalism (linked to, but not reducible to, the crisis of Atlantic Fordism, and expansion of specific commodity chains); the end of the Cold War, which was marked by bipolarity in geopolitical and security terms, and the scope this has created for an increased importance of Japan and China as the current and emerging regional hegemons in a more multipolar world; and the contradictory rise of more cosmopolitan and ‘tribal’ identities alongside nationalist ones. These changes provide the contexts in which economic, social and political actors in the subregion pursue their competitive, security, and nationalist goals. This leads to a complex interplay of geo-economic, geopolitical, and nationalist discourses/strategies and creates the space for wide-ranging and often contradictory interests/identities for subregional social forces.

Thus this chapter argues that the making of the ‘Greater China’ subregion is dominated by geo-economic and nationalist discourses/
strategies. These are constituted and facilitated in and through a strategic network of transnational and translocal actors with an imagined community of interests. Moreover, given the socially embedded character of such networks, they are also discursively articulated with other identities/interests related to other geometries of powers. For example, the geo-economic identity of a subregion may become a focus of intervention or interruption by competing global/regional hegemons. In the case of ‘Greater China’, for example, the subregion is being showcased both as a geopolitical hub for ‘democracy’ by the US/UK and as a ‘nationalist’ powerhouse by the PRC. In this regard, social forces in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are increasingly confronted with dilemma-full opportunities rooted in the interpenetration of the geo-economic/national and geopolitical time and space. The resulting conjuncture is characterized by a dialectical interplay of ‘multiple consciousness’ which marks this subregion as contested space. These clashes of discourses/practices come to be (in)fused with power and ideology and thereby engender what can be seen as politics of identities in the subregion. Such identity struggles not only mark the subregion as a contested space; they also mark it as a space of reimagination (for example, ‘Greater China’ as a high-tech subregion or ‘Greater Shanghai’ as the new centre of economic gravity for the twenty-first century). Let us start with the geo-economic discourses and the strategies of the PRC.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DOMINANT GEO-ECONOMIC/NATIONALIST DISCOURSES AND STRATEGIES IN THE ‘GREATER CHINA’ SUBREGION

The geo-economic discourses and strategies: the ‘Open Door’ project of the PRC

By the late 1970s, the Chinese leadership, especially Deng Xiaoping, had realized the need to construct a new hegemonic project that could offer a better living standard by ‘opening the door’ of China and to rejoin the world. The discourses and strategies of the ‘open door’ create opportunities for China to participate more fully in the global–regional–national nexus. Proposals for pioneering experimental sites have found resonance within the party elites and among key coastal-provincial actors in Guangdong and Fujian. These actors began to demand ‘special/flexible measures’ that would permit the creation of new geo-economic discourses and strategies that reconnect China to the global–regional system(s).