

Sinicisation, the Tribute System and Dynasties: Three Concepts to Justify Colonialism and Attack non-Sinitic Diversity in the People's Republic of China

by James A. Millward

ABSTRACT

Three well-known tropes of popular understanding of China are central to the People's Republic of China's official narrative that justifies territorial expansion and efforts to assimilate non-Han peoples. These concepts are Sinicisation, the tribute system and the exceptionalist periodisation of Chinese history into "dynasties". Sinicisation and the tribute system are used by the PRC to obscure Han settler colonialism and its own annexation of Xinjiang and Tibet, by promoting the view that China always expanded and absorbed other people peacefully. Organising the Chinese past into a selective list of "dynasties" erases non-Sinitic peoples and states and gives a false sense of millennial political continuity that the PRC uses to justify human rights abuses. Though long critiqued by specialist historians, these concepts still appear in introductory and popular discussions of China, and are echoed by Western International Relations scholars and policymakers.

China | Chinese historiography | Nationalism | Colonialism | Minorities

keywords

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Introduction

On the eve of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in a speech to cadres involved in ethnic affairs at the "National Commendation Conference on Ethnicity Unity and Progress", Chinese Communist Party general secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping surveyed Chinese history to convey a message about diversity. In the speech, Xi emphasised the diverse and inclusive nature of modern China under the CCP, and the common cause shared by all the *minzus* (he used this flexible word for the officially designated ethnic groups of China, once translated "nationality", now usually rendered as "ethnicity"). "The history of China", he said, "is the history of the various *minzus* fused and assembled into a multi-origins one-body Chinese (*Zhonghua*) nation, that is, all the *minzus* jointly founded, developed, consolidated and unified the history of our great ancestral land".¹

Although his narrative ostensibly celebrated multiple peoples, Xi rooted it specifically in cultural Chineseness, which he credited with "an inherent power to seek unity".² His sweeping historical summary, scattered with allusions from

¹ Xi Jinping, 在全国民族团结进步表彰大会上的讲话 [Speech at the National Conference Commending Model Units and Individuals for Contributing to Ethnic Unity and Progress], 27 September 2019, posted on the website of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC, <https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/xwzx/201909/1136990.shtml>. The original text reads: "一部中国史, 就是一部各民族交融汇聚成多元一体中华民族的历史, 就是各民族共同缔造、发展、巩固统一的伟大祖国的历史。"

² The original text reads: "各民族之所以团结融合, 多元之所以聚为一体, 源自各民族文化上的兼收并蓄、经济上的相互依存、情感上的相互亲近, 源自中华民族追求团结统一的内生动力"。

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ancient Chinese texts, in fact comprised an update of the old myth of Sinicisation around which nationalistic Chinese historiography has been written – in China and elsewhere – for over a century.

Our long history is written by all ethnic groups. As early as the pre-Qin era, our country gradually formed into an amalgamated configuration from a nucleus coalesced from the Hua-Xia people under Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor, and the “Peoples of the Five Directions” sharing *Tianxia* [All under Heaven]. Qin’s standardisation of the written script, carriage axle-lengths, weights and measures, and customs and values, launched the process of development of China’s unified multi-national state. After that, no matter what *minzu* came into the Central Plain to live, all saw unifying *Tianxia* as their duty, and all considered themselves orthodox [*zhengtong*] in Chinese cultural terms. Even if divided like the Southern and Northern Dynasties, they all bragged that they were Chinese orthodox [*Zhonghua zhengtong*]. If in mutual confrontation, like Song, Liao, Xixia and Jin, all were called Tabghach [i.e., all were called “Chinese” by outsiders].³ When unified like Qin and Han, Sui and Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing, it was even more a case of “customs and civilization in the Six Directions are all as one, laws and decrees apply uniformly across the Nine Divisions”.⁴ The heroic style of Qin and Han, the vital spirit of Great Tang, the prosperous age of Kangxi and Qianlong emperors [of the Qing] were all history collectively forged by every *minzu*. Today, in realising the China Dream, we must closely rely on the strength of the people of every *minzu*.⁵

This carefully constructed passage reiterates central elements of the Chinese national myth, beginning with ancient, unitary origins from the ur-Chinese, Hua-Xia, under the legendary progenitors, the Yan and Yellow emperors. Xi touches on historical epochs of division that are difficult to reconcile with claims that China has enjoyed continuous political unity since ancient times. But he turns these examples around to support the myth by reference to the Neo-Confucian concept of *zhengtong* legitimacy which, as I will show below, allowed non-Chinese states to be considered Chinese. Xi’s reference to the Tabghach (the non-Chinese rulers

³ The Chinese transcription for Tabghach that Xi uses here, *taohua shi* 桃花石, literally means “peach blossom stone”. The usual transcription, *Tuoba* 拓跋, is solely phonetic – the characters do not convey particular meaning. Both “peach blossom” and “stone”, on the other hand, have special literary and aesthetic resonance in Chinese culture.

⁴ In the weeks after Xi’s speech, many Chinese media outlets published pieces explaining this historical allusion drawn from the Wang Ji biography of the *Hanshu* (Han official history), which few Chinese readers could understand.

⁵ Xi Jinping, 在全国民族团结进步表彰大会上的讲话 [Speech at the National Conference Commending Model Units and Individuals for Contributing to Ethnic Unity and Progress], cit. Original text: “我们悠久的历史是各民族共同书写的。早在先秦时期, 我国就逐渐形成了以炎黄华夏为凝聚核心、“五方之民”共天下的交融格局。秦国”书同文, 车同轨, 量同衡, 行同伦”, 开启了中国统一的多民族国家发展的历程。此后, 无论哪个民族入主中原, 都以统一天下为己任, 都以中华文化的正统自居。分立如南北朝, 都自诩中华正统; 对峙如宋辽夏金, 都被称为”桃花石”; 统一如秦汉、隋唐、元明清, 更是”六合同风, 九州共贯”。秦汉雄风、大唐气象、康乾盛世, 都是各民族共同铸就的历史。今天, 我们实现中国梦, 就要紧紧依靠各族人民的力量。”

of the Wei state, 386–535) may seem odd here, since it dates from an era of division, and Neo-Confucian scholars later argued it was illegitimate. But Xi uses a highly Sinicised transcription of “Tabghach”, *Taohua shi*: few Chinese would recognise in characters meaning “peach blossom stone” a reference to the tribal khans of the Tuoba Northern Wei.⁶

Mainly, though, even as Xi repeatedly credits the plurality of *minzu* for the greatness of China, he stresses the epochs of powerful, large and unitary empires, Qin, Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing, that dominate the list of “Chinese dynasties”. These are the periods of greatest territorial extent of the states recognised as part of Chinese history. Xi’s main point, then, is to highlight Chinese imperial greatness. In addressing this convention of non-Han *minzu* cadres, Xi generously extends credit for the grandeur of China to non-Han groups as well as to the Han. But at the same time, he has rolled them all up into his glorious story in a way that precludes non-Chinese *minzus* from having any histories of their own.

1. Sinicisation, the tribute system and the notion of Confucian peace

Implicit in Xi’s speech are several core tropes of Chinese historiography common not only to official PRC narratives, but to textbook histories and other introductory or summary accounts of China written in English and other languages. They are, in short, things people think they know about China, even when they know little about China. To start with, Sinicisation: in this context, this is the notion that peoples in the vicinity of China, and even those who conquered China, simply turned Chinese due to the attraction of Chinese culture.⁷ For this reason, it is argued, China grew to its current vast continental size peacefully, not through imperial conquest. Second is the idea of China’s long continuity: despite lengthy eras of division, non-Chinese rulers and mutual antagonism among states in China, it is said that China is one of the oldest continuous states, or civilisations, in the world.

⁶ Xi’s speech is correct that the word “Tabghach” was in fact used for centuries even after the fall of the Northern Wei by Turks and other peoples in Mongolia, Central Asia and even Byzantium to refer to whatever state happened to be geographical north China at the time. The word Khitai (from the Khitan people who ruled the Liao state, is another example of the same phenomenon: it provided the word Khitai still used in Turkic and many Slavic languages for “China”, and is the source of the antiquated English word Cathay. In similar fashion, non-Sinitic name “Tabghach” of a particular state in north China became the foreigners’ generic term for China.

⁷ “Sinicisation” is also used to refer to deliberate measures to adopt or impose Chinese institutions and customs. Though the distinction can be fuzzy in the literature, here I am referring primarily to the claim that neighbours and conquerors of China throughout history spontaneously turned Chinese: this is what Xi called China’s “inherent power to seek unity”, a rephrasing of Liang Qichao’s “Chinese assimilative power” (*Zhongguo tonghua li*). See Julia C. Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity. Chinese Discourses on History, Historiography, and Nationalism (1900s-1920s)*, Leiden, Brill, 2017, p. 2 et *passim*.

There's another trope Xi did not mention in that particular speech, but which is related to the notion that China became China without military conquest – an idea we might call “Confucian peace”.⁸ The international dimension of the Confucian peace idea was recently re-stated by top PRC diplomats. At a meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, between top officials from the PRC Foreign Ministry and the US State Department in March 2021, Chinese Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, Yang Jiechi, declared, “we do not believe in invading through the use of force”.⁹ (His unstated subtext, “unlike the United States”, was clear). In a February 2022 press conference about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, then State Councillor and then Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that “When it comes to peace and security, China has the best record among major countries. We have never invaded other countries or engaged in proxy wars, nor have we ever sought spheres of influence or participated in military bloc confrontations.”¹⁰ Leaving aside the many empirical problems with Wang's assertion (for example, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war) or the question of whether “we” refers to the PRC or all Chinese states for all time, the notion that China has managed international relations peacefully is indeed commonly held, and is often attributed to the “tributary system”, another key tenet of standard Chinese historiography.

The thirteenth edition of Robert Art and Robert Jervis' *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (2017), a textbook used in international relations classes at my own institution, Georgetown, as well as elsewhere in the United States and internationally, asserts the following:

By the fourteenth century, these Sinicized states [China, Japan and Korea] had evolved a set international rules and institutions known as the “tribute system,” with China clearly the hegemon and operating under a presumption of inequality, which resulted in a clear hierarchy and lasting peace.¹¹

This appears in a short chapter by David C. Kang, summarising arguments from his books,¹² within a section entitled “The Mitigation of Anarchy” and sandwiched

⁸ As far as I know, the term “Confucian peace” was coined by Victoria Hui, whom I heard use it in conference papers and personal communications.

⁹ US Department of State, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting*, Anchorage, Alaska, 18 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-chinese-director-of-the-office-of-the-central-commission-for-foreign-affairs-yang-jiechi-and-chinese-state-councilor-wang-yi-at-th>.

¹⁰ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi Expounds China's Five-Point Position on the Current Ukraine Issue*, 26 February 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202202/t20220226_10645855.html.

¹¹ David C. Kang, “Hierarchy and Hegemony in International Politics”, in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis (eds), *International Politics. Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 13th ed., Boston, Pearson, 2017, p. 161-165. Quotation from p. 162.

¹² Most notably, David C. Kang, *China Rising. Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

between short pieces by renowned scholars: Stephen M. Walt (on balancing and bandwagoning), Hans J. Morgenthau (on diplomacy), Stanley Hoffmann (on international law) and Robert O. Keohane (on international institutions). The implication of this section's composition is that while in the West anarchy is mitigated by balancing, bandwagoning, diplomacy, international law and international institutions, in East Asia that task was achieved by the hierarchical tribute system centred on China.¹³

Going into more detail, Kang adds:

In fact, from 1368 to 1841—from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the Opium wars between Britain and China—there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan: China's invasion of Vietnam (1407–1428) and Japan's invasion of Korea (1592–1598).¹⁴

There are several errors of historical fact in this statement. The Qing invaded Korea in 1636 and Vietnam in 1788–89, for one thing, not to mention four invasions of Burma between 1765 and 1769. Most glaring, though, is Kang's total omission of the Qing's long-running geo-political struggle with the Zunghar state in which Tibetan Buddhist power was a swing-player.¹⁵ The challenge to Qing hegemony by Oirat Mongols (in a confederation known as Zunghar) and the Gelukpa (Yellow Church) authority in Tibet offer a fine example of balancing geopolitics, and the effort to prevent bandwagoning by Mongol groups and Tibetan Buddhists occupied the Qing militarily and diplomatically for over a century.

But Kang is only concerned with so-called "Sinicised" states, and thus misses the Zunghars because they were not Sinitic, and because, as a confederation of nomad groups, they do not look like a state to him. But the Zunghars preoccupied Qing foreign policy and strategic mobilisation against them built the Qing fiscal-military state. Most significantly, it was in the course of the Zunghar wars that the Qing invaded and seized control of Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet, creating an

¹³ Historians have been critiquing the tribute system model for decades. In chronological order: John E. Wills, Jr., "Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas About Mid-Qing Dynasty Foreign Relations", in *The American Neptune*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Fall 1988), p. 225-229, https://archive.org/details/sim_american-neptune_fall-1988_48_4; James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar. Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995; James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass. Economy, Ethnicity and Empire in Qing Xinjiang, 1759-1864*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998; Peter C. Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96 (2015), p. 1002-1014, DOI 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949; Suisheng Zhao, "Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96 (2015), p. 961-982, DOI 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030913; James L. Hevia, "Tributary Systems", in John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, Hoboken, John Wiley and Sons, 2016; James A. Millward, "Qing and Twentieth-Century Chinese Diversity Regimes", in Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit (eds), *Culture and Order in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 71-92.

¹⁴ David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Hegemony in International Politics", cit., p. 162.

¹⁵ James A. Millward et al. (eds), *New Qing Imperial History. The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde*, London/New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

empire twice the size of the Ming. (The Qing had conquered Taiwan with an earlier invasion, in 1683). Chinese nationalists in the 20th century continued to claim all this non-Sinitic Qing territory as “China”, even when those territories became formally or practically independent after the collapse of the Qing empire in 1912. The “tribute system” model, which John King Fairbank presented as a “preliminary framework” in 1968, continues to confuse us today; this history of Qing expansion, on the other hand, has nothing to do with the supposed tribute system, and everything to do with the identity and status of Mongolian, Tibetan, Xinjiang and Taiwan peoples.¹⁶

The tribute system and Sinicisation notions, then, combine to imbue historiography of China with a false sense of Confucian peace and, in particular, to obfuscate how the PRC got to include so much territory and so many non-Sinitic peoples. Such an approach is understandable in PRC official propaganda; but it is also prevalent in introductory, general and public-facing writing about China outside the PRC, and even in utterances by prominent members of the foreign policy community.

A 2019 textbook covering Chinese history from the Qing empire through the PRC, Klaus Mühlhahn’s *Making China Modern*, fails to mention the Zunghars once in over 600 pages. It states that Xinjiang, Mongolia and Tibet were “unified” by the Qing (*tongyi* 統一), using a euphemism preferred in the PRC. And it notes in a single sentence that the high Qing was simultaneously “a time of peace” and of “continued territorial expansion” – as if the expansion into Inner Asia was peaceful. Qing foreign affairs, moreover, consisted of “web of peaceful relations managed through the tribute system”.¹⁷ This is disappointing in a book published so recently, but it is by no means unique – it merely restates the tropes common in Chinese historiography writings for decades.

Diplomats and policy-makers, too, take the Confucian peace, Sinicisation and the tribute system as articles of faith. Sounding very much like Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi in the 2020s, US Ambassador to the PRC Gary Locke said in a television interview in 2012 that “if you look at their [China’s] histories, they’ve never really been a country that has tried to invade or go way outside their borders”.¹⁸

Indeed, none other than Henry Kissinger promoted the Sinicisation theory when he wrote in 2012 that “China’s imperial expansion has historically been achieved by osmosis rather than conquest, or by the conversion to Chinese culture of

¹⁶ John King Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework,” in John King Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order. Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 1-19. Fairbank reiterated both tribute system and sinicisation theories in his textbooks and general-readership books on China and US–China relations, which went into many editions.

¹⁷ Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern. From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge/London, Belknap Press, 2019, p. 25, 55-58, 80-81.

¹⁸ Ambassador Locke appeared on the Charlie Rose show that aired 16 January 2012, <https://charlierose.com/videos/14716>. Quote begins from 13:39.

conquerors who then added their own territories to the Chinese domain.”¹⁹

It is noteworthy that Kissinger used this argument in an article cautioning against exaggerating the China threat and thus making US–China conflict a self-fulfilling prophecy – a position with which I agree. But expansion by osmotic attraction is an exceptionalist myth every bit as mythological as manifest destiny in old histories of the United States.²⁰ And just like manifest destiny, it serves to hide a history of imperial expansion and colonial displacement.

2. “Chinese dynasties” and the myth of ancient political continuity

The above examples show how the inter-related tropes of Sinicisation and the tribute system suggest that “China never invaded” – namely that its territory grew through spontaneous voluntary assimilation of non-Chinese people and that no Chinese state ever fought “foreign” wars but maintained international order through the tribute system. But these ways of talking about the Chinese past conceal extensive imperial expansion and settler colonialism in China, such as that in Mongolia since the 19th century and in Xinjiang and on the Tibetan plateau since 1949.

The common narratives of Chinese history likewise collapse time, equating a vast variety of heterogenous states under diverse rulership occupying different parts of the East Asian mainland at different times – or sometimes simultaneously – into a monolithic entity known as “China”. PRC propaganda in the 21st century routinely points to episodes from the Han empire (206 BCE–220 CE) when justifying its

¹⁹ Henry A. Kissinger, “The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (March/April 2012), p. 44-55, <https://www.henryakissinger.com/?p=262>. Quote from p. 48. Kissinger repeats the myth of Sinicisation as a spontaneous, voluntary, one-way cultural assimilation, a myth that has been debunked by historians since the 1990s, most famously by the president of the Association for Asian Studies: Evelyn S. Rawski, “Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History”, in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (November 1996), p. 829-850, DOI 10.2307/2646525. Her abstract of this survey of the field states: “A notable outcome of the new scholarship is the rejection of the Sinicization thesis” (p. 827).

²⁰ The idea that Chinese culture exercised a unique “assimilative power” was first written into Chinese historiography in the first decade of the 20th century by the activist writer Liang Qichao. See Julia C. Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity*, cit., Introduction and Chapter 1. The most influential statement of the Sinicisation thesis in the PRC was that of the sociologist and ethnographer Fei Xiaotong, in a 1989 essay that compared the formation of the Chinese (*Zhonghua*) nation to a rolling snowball, a process in which non-Sinitic peoples supposedly got stuck onto a core of Han people. Xi Jinping’s speech, which I cited at the top this paper, employs the famous formulation “many origins / one entity” (*duoyuan yiti* 多元一体) from Fei’s essay. Fei Xiaotong, “中华民族的多元一体格局” [The pattern of diversity in unity of the Chinese nation], in *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy & Social Sciences)*, No. 4/1989, p. 3-21. The Sinicisation thesis has been debunked by historians, most memorably in Pamela Kyle Crossley, “Thinking About Ethnicity in Early Modern China”, in *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (June 1990), p. 1-35, DOI 10.1353/late.1990.0003. Regarding whether the Qing empire had Sinicised in the sense of becoming entirely Chinese (it didn’t), the iconic revision is Evelyn S. Rawski, “Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing”, cit.

policies in Xinjiang.²¹ How is this different from Italy placing a claim on English territory based on Roman imperial precedent? Well, we might answer, these examples differ because the Roman empire fell and China is still China. But of course, the Han empire also fell, earlier than the Roman empire. Today's European Union is heir to Rome no less than the PRC. is heir to the Han.

Just as in Europe, there have been many states in geographical China over the past two millennia, comprised of different people and all of them called different things – for example, Xi Jinping's example of the Tabghach – and none of them called themselves "China". The term *Zhongguo*, which now translates "China", began to appear, together with "Great Qing empire" (*DaQing diguo*), in the Chinese text of international treaties only from the 19th century.²² Another word for China or the Chinese in current use is *Zhonghua*, a still more recent neologism: *Zhonghua* was coined in 1907 explicitly to translate the all-encompassing Western term "China".²³ Like in so many other places, modern Chinese nationalism is built upon an invented tradition. So why do we assume so automatically that China is still China, a continuous political entity linking the Qin unification at the end of the first millennium BCE, past the collapse of the Qing empire in 1912 and right up to the PRC today?

One big reason for this impression is the exceptionalist practice of using a list of "dynasties" to structure the historiography of states on the East Asian mainland. Consider this passage from the advertising copy for Timothy Brook's recent survey of Yuan through PRC history:

China is one of the oldest states in the world. It achieved its *approximate current borders* with the Ascendancy of the Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century, and despite the *passing* of one Imperial dynasty to the next, it *has maintained them for the eight centuries since*. [...] *China remained China* through the Ming, the Qing, the Republic, the Occupation, and Communism [Italics added].²⁴

²¹ For example, Chinese State Council, *Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang*, 15 November 2018, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/11/15/content_281476391524846.htm; and Chinese State Council, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, 21 July 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/21/content_WS5d33fed5c6d00d362f668a0a.html.

²² In earlier treaties, such as the treaty of Nerchinsk, concluded between the Qing and Russia in 1689, the Qing referred to itself in Manchu as Great Qing state (*Daicing gurun*), and also by the term *dulimbai gurun*, middle or central state. While this clearly glosses the Chinese term *Zhongguo* into Manchu, it is clear from everything else we know about the Qing – the fact that there was no Chinese text for the Nerchinsk treaty, for one thing – that while the Qing happily adopted the conceit of centrality in presenting itself to the world, the ideological core at that centre was not Sinitic, or not exclusively Sinitic. Past states in geographical China did not see themselves as ancestors of 20th century nationalist Chinese regimes.

²³ "*Zhonghua*" was coined in 1907 and later promoted by Zhang Taiyan as a generic term equivalent to "China" in western languages. The new term features in the Chinese names for Republic of China and the Peoples Republic of China. See Julia C. Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity*, cit., p. 154-159.

²⁴ Jacket copy on <https://profilebooks.com/work/great-state>. The contents themselves of Brook's book are more nuanced. Timothy Brook, *Great State. China and the World*, London, Profile Books, 2019.

In fact, no state in “China” maintained its “approximate current borders” for eight centuries. The Qing (1636–1912) after the mid-18th century occupied an area twice that of the Ming empire (1368–1644). But even before that, during the course of the Ming, Han colonists with state support penetrated deeply southwest and northwest into non-Sinitic territory. Given these profound territorial and ethnographic disjunctures, how could “China remain China” (referred to with the singular pronoun “it”) while comprising six distinct and intensely adversarial polities (Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republic, Occupation, Communism)? Passages like this are written and endorsed by excellent historians like Brook because the dynasties periodisation scheme treats “China” almost as a reincarnating metaphysical spirit, one “dynasty” simply “passing” to the next. Mongol, Chinese, Manchu, even Japanese and Communist states are just new infusions of wine into the old bottle known as “China”.

We can acknowledge and even celebrate the longevity of Chinese civilisation without suggesting that China has been a continuous *political* entity occupying the current territory of the PRC (or Qing) since antiquity. This false narrative of political continuity and primordial, constant, homogeneous Chinese identity and territoriality is reasserted, moreover, every time someone says that China expanded by osmosis, never invaded anywhere, or “remained China” through centuries of massive territorial expansion into previously non-Sinitic territory.

A full excavation of the epistemological archaeology of “Chinese dynasties” and its relationship to *chaodai* 朝代 in Chinese language and historiography requires more space than I have here. Briefly, however, the notion that the Chinese past is made up of a succession of dynasties, rather than lots of diverse and competing monarchies, derives from an organising template established in one of the first systematic works of Chinese history, the brilliant *Shiji* written by Sima Qian in the first century BCE. This template was later standardised in official dynastic histories. In keeping with the religious principle that Heaven mandated only one legitimate ruler at a time, these official histories were written tendentiously by new states to justify the demise of their predecessors and their own rise to power.

Read in retrospect, these histories form an ideologically and often racially curated list, legitimating some states and peoples and labelling others illegitimate. It is the states on the legitimated or orthodox (*zhengtong*) list that are usually considered to comprise “Chinese” history. Non-Sinitic peoples and states have tended to be excluded from the list, even though their histories likewise played out in geographical China as well as Inner Asia – within the footprint of the PRC today. As I will discuss below, there were periods when contradictions arose and concerns of contemporary politics trumped historiographic principles. In the 18th century, a French author drawing on Jesuit reports from the Qing court imprecisely translated the Chinese terms for these successive reigns, *chao* and *chaodai*, with the word “*dynastie*”. This translation added a new connotation, that of “ruling family”, not in the original Chinese term, whose meaning is closer to “court”, “reign”, “power” or

even “state”.²⁵

Charts and timelines of the “Chinese dynasties” vary quite a bit, especially in how they handle periods when multiple states reigned at the same time in different places, or when non-Sinitic states ruled in parts of geographical China. Some lists, for example, skip the politically complex 350-year period after the collapse of the Han empire entirely to jump to Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907). Sometimes a single period name is created to lump together multiple states, for example Six Dynasties (220–589), Three Kingdoms (220–280), Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439), Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589), or Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–979). These clumsy terms attempt to impose unitary legibility on politically pluralistic and ethnically diverse periods in Chinese history.

The centuries when Northern Song (960–1127), Southern Song (1127–1279), Liao (916–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Xixia (1038–1227) and Dali (937–1253) kingdoms simultaneously occupied parts of the territory now roughly known as “China proper” (*Zhongguo benbu* 中国本部, *neidi* 内地) is another awkward period, and indeed the question of whether to include the Liao (whose rulers were non-Sinitic Khitans) and Jin (non-Sinitic Jurchens) on the list of legitimate dynasties was highly contested. After decades of delay, Chinese scholars in the non-Sinitic Yuan were ordered by their Mongol rulers to write separate official histories for Liao and Jin states, as well as for the coeval Song, thus affording legitimacy to multiple contemporaneous states in violation of the long-held norm, and including non-Sinitic states in the Chinese lineage. That did not settle the question, however; the ethnic issue continued to rankle, and subsequent scholars in the Sinitic Ming empire wrote revisionist histories that removed the non-Sinitic Khitan and Jurchen states from the list. But then the non-Sinitic Qing, whose ruling elites were Manchu and Mongol, re-legitimised the Liao and Jin, putting them back on the list when compiling the Qing Imperial Catalogue in the late 18th century.²⁶

Still, the game of “are they or aren’t they Chinese?” was not over yet. In 2019, the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC published *A Brief Chronology of Chinese History* as an appendix to its white paper, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*. The English version of the white paper took the Liao and the Jin halfway off the list again: in its historical dynasties chart, the Liao and the Jin are pointedly not labelled “dynasty” (despite having official histories) in contrast to the Tang dynasty, Song dynasty, Ming dynasty and other states which are so labelled on the list.

²⁵ I offer more detail in my in-progress book, *Decolonizing History in China*. As with so many foundational ideas in Chinese historiography as written in the West, we have the Jesuits to thank for translating *chaodai* as “dynasty”. This usage, and the dynasties list, first appeared in French in 1735. “Dynasty” itself was then a neologism in modern European languages, having been borrowed from ancient Greek.

²⁶ Hok-lam Chan, “Chinese Official Historiography at the Yuan Court: The Composition of the Liao, Chin, and Sung Histories”, in John D. Langlois (ed.), *China under Mongol Rule*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 56-106; reprinted in Hok-lam Chan, *China and the Mongols. History and Legend under the Yuan and Ming*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999.

In the same chart, moreover, the State Council included the Xixia as a period of Chinese history along with Jin and Liao, even though there was never an official history written for this Tangut state and it is generally *not* treated as Chinese or included on other versions of the dynasties list. Evidently, given the current CCP's interest in including Xinjiang as part of China since ancient times, it chose to re-edit the dynasties list to include the non-Sinitic Xixia state because it was located in the northwest, adjacent to what is now Xinjiang. By stealthily designating Xixia as Chinese, the CCP can bolster its narrative that Xinjiang has always been Chinese. But whoever compiled this chart seemingly did not think the Xixia was quite Chinese enough: Xixia makes the list, but like non-Sinitic Liao and Jin is denied the "dynasty" designation. This fine parsing of historical ethno-political identity shows that, as always, what was, and what was not, "Chinese" and a "dynasty" is a fungible decision made for political reasons after the fact, and those reasons often have to do with ethnic identity.²⁷

Besides being strategically manipulated, the first order divisions and most simplified versions of the dynasties list inject systematic biases into our structure of Chinese history. The classic list is often reduced to Shang (1600–1046 BCE), Zhou (1046–256 BCE), Qin (221–206 BCE), Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan (1279–1358), Ming, Qing, Republic, PRC, skating over the complex post-Han political terrain and many non-Sinitic states. Whether these many smaller polities are lumped together under catch-all terms or skipped entirely, this treatment downplays periods noted for the influx of northern non-Sinitic ruling houses and Central Asian and Indian culture. The question of whether to include or exclude Khitan and Jurchen, re-opened as recently as 2019, was clearly sparked by ethno-nationalistic anxiety over the non-Sinitic identity of their rulers, but there were many such states ruling at many times in various parts of what is now the territory of the PRC. The dynasties list usually leaves them out of the story.

Besides obscuring non-Sinitic components of the Chinese past, there is a second problem with the dynasty periodisation. Just as Xi did in his *minzu* history speech, the dynasties list stresses larger, imperial polities and eras over times when multiple states occupied geographical China. Ordering history according to the dynasties list thus also reinforces questionable nationalistic arguments that China has been both mainly unified and large over time – and that this is the ideal state of affairs. Though today's nationalists may prefer to recall large imperial eras, venerable streams of Chinese political thought have argued that de-centralised local governance such as supposedly characterized the Zhou golden age (*fengjian*) before the Qin empire, is preferable to imperial autocracy.²⁸

²⁷ Chinese State Council, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, cit. In the Chinese version of the chart, the names of all states appear in the column on their own as is customary in Chinese, without a designation of *chao* "dynasty". Liao, Jin and Xixia are thus not distinguished from other periods in the Chinese chart, but only in the English version for global distribution. The Chinese version of the white paper is 新疆的若干历史问题, 21 July 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/21/content_5412300.htm.

²⁸ Some neo-Confucian scholars in the Song through Ming periods embraced the ideal of

3. Erasing diversity, obscuring expansion and colonialism

Periodising Chinese history according to the dynasties list thus reinforces unity- and size-bias. With some exceptions, it excludes non-Sinitic peoples from Chinese history (and those exceptions are explained away as Sinicised, thanks to Sinicisation theory). This concept of recursive dynasties works together with osmotic Sinicisation and the tribute system to tell a nationalistic fable about the past, one which falsely implies antique political continuity, massive imperial unity, and homogenous Sinitic identity of “China” over the long *durée*, while airbrushing away the smaller, the local, the varied and non-Sinitic polities and people.

This cluster of concepts also elides a history of military expansion and settler-colonial displacement of non-Sinitic peoples by suggesting that their homelands, including Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia and Taiwan have always been part of something that has always been China, or that they have assimilated into Chineseness (Han, *Zhonghua*) thanks to an imaginary ineluctable attractive force of Chinese culture.²⁹ Non-Sinitic people are told that their history, indistinguishable from that of the Han, is in a Chinese nation-state controlled by the Chinese Communist Party in which those non-Sinitic people have little representation or power.³⁰ (As concrete policy, PRC authorities of this mindset have burned books about non-Sinitic culture as “separatist”).³¹ The Qing empire had no “minorities”. Rather, “minority nationalities” were made by PRC definitions and policy decisions.

decentralised or regional hereditary rule (*fengjian*) as superior to more centralised imperial governance. This tradition of political philosophy continued in various forms through the Qing and beyond. Late Qing reformers including Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao drew upon the tradition in advocating for local self-government. Justin Tiwald, “Song-Ming Confucianism”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/song-ming-confucianism>. Theresa Man Ling Lee, “Local Self-Government in Late Qing: Political Discourse and Moral Reform”, in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 1998), p. 31-54, DOI 10.1017/S0034670500043928.

²⁹ A number of recent specialised monographs focus on expansion into and settlement of non-Sinitic areas as colonialism. For example Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism. Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2022; Yingcong Dai, *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet. Imperial Strategy in the Early Qing*, Seattle/London, University of Washington Press, 2009; John E. Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist. China’s Colonization of Guizhou, 1200-1700*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007; Gregory Rohlf, *Building New China, Colonizing Kokonor. Resettlement to Qinghai in the 1950s*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016; Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers. The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2020; Yi Wang, *Transforming Inner Mongolia. Commerce, Migration, and Colonization on the Qing Frontier*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021; Jodi L. Weinstein, *Empire and Identity in Guizhou. Local Resistance to Qing Expansion*, Seattle/London, University of Washington Press, 2014.

³⁰ Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has since 2020 for the first time has appointed Han directors of the Nationalities Affairs Council (*Minzu shiwu weiyuanhui*). Previously, since 1954 all the directors of this key agency which designs and implements policies concerning non-Han groups have themselves been non-Han.

³¹ “Chinese Authorities Burn Thousands of Uyghur Books”, in *Radio Free Asia*, 4 June 2002, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/85965-20020604.html>.

The concepts of Sinicisation, the tribute system, and recursive Chinese dynasties, although generally assumed to be traditional and inherent to China, are in fact 20th century constructs deployed in aid of a Sino-centric homogenising national project that mistakenly sees the PRC's diversity as a problem to be eliminated rather than a rich cultural resource.

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