

We need a new approach to teaching modern Chinese history: we have lazily repeated false narratives for too long.



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A review of Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping*. Harvard University Press, 736 pp, £31.95, January 2019, ISBN 9780674737358.

Note: I was commissioned to write this review for a well-known book review publication, who then spiked it (after paying me a kill fee). I don't know why they didn't even want to try to edit the review (I did take a long time and run long in reviewing the 600+ page book). In any case, after mulling it over, I decided it would be worth making my review essay available. I treat Dr. Mühlhahn's textbook somewhat harshly — it's not easy writing textbooks — but mainly because I see it reiterating a problematic general approach that the field endlessly reiterates in textbooks and survey classes, still, though

we have long known better. My general recommendations for the field start in section V below.

I.

Over the past 60 years, a handful of scholarly doorstops—massive, one-volume survey texts — have profoundly shaped how we think about China. John King Fairbank (1907–1991), considered the father of modern Chinese historical studies in the West in the post-war period, produced *East Asia: The Great Tradition* in 1958 with his Harvard colleagues Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig. This textbook (which also covered the histories of Japan, Korea and Vietnam) organized the history of the East Asian mainland as a continuous series of Chinese “dynasties” (rather than distinct empires or kingdoms) and promulgated the idea that foreign affairs in traditional East Asia was conducted through the Sinocentric “tribute system.” As red guards during the Cultural Revolution wreaked havoc on that great tradition, the new edition of the textbook came out under the expanded title *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (1973–1989), thereby helping entrench a dialectical approach to tradition and modernity into the study of China’s recent past. Fairbank maintained his general paradigm while incorporating more recent research in his *China: A New History* (1992), issued in new editions until 2006 — Merle Goldman adding post-Mao era material after Fairbanks’ death. **[1]** While specialists in Chinese history have mostly moved on, for baby-boomers and many millennials who took a China survey class in university — a group including many of today’s senior

policy-makers, journalists and political scientists — Fairbank's imprint runs deep.

Since it is unwieldy to squeeze all of the Chinese past, let alone all of East Asia's, between two covers, the one-volume history of "modern China" emerged. Of course, locating the advent of "modern" (a concept usually derived from European experience) in China is problematic. Japanese sinologists of the Kyoto School believed the Asian modern started in the early Song Dynasty (960–1279); for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), modern China begins with the Opium War (1839–42), with the arrival of Western imperialist gunboats. Fairbank himself adopted a similar periodization in his 1986 survey, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985*. Many "modern China" history courses followed suit, although to periodize from the nineteenth century stacks the deck: it prioritizes European contacts over indigenous developments and opens the story at the nadir of the Qing Empire's fortunes — ignoring its economic floruit and its vast expansion during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It has now become common to cover the all or most of the Qing empire as part of the story of "modern China," and to treat the Qing as a last imperial "Chinese" dynasty. For Immanuel Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (1970–1999) began with the Qing; Jonathan Spence started his *Search for Modern China* (1990) just a bit earlier in the late Ming (1368–1644), on the eve of the Qing. Klaus Mühlhahn's new entry into the scholarly doorstop category, similarly entitled *Making China Modern*, similarly begins with the

Qing conquest of Beijing (1644, eight years after the empire's founding in 1636). Mühlhahn then takes us up to the 2010s.

All these textbooks employ an implicit definition of “modern” that entails post-Westphalian concepts of the state, nationalism, industrialization and globalization, accompanied by upwelling challenges to old socio-cultural hierarchies. Besides the Eurocentrism of many of these markers, scholars speaking the language of cultural theory might easily call out the very concept of “modern.” Nevertheless, for the quotidian purposes of a survey history, few readers will be bothered by the appearance of “modern” in the title of a book of this sort. Mühlhahn doesn't explain precisely why the China of Xi Jinping has been made modern while that of Great Qing was not so, but few readers will care.

More troublingly, however, these “modern China” textbooks — like most China histories aimed at general readerships — also embed an unexamined yet problematic conception of “China” itself. The political history of continental East Asia involves a multiplicity of kingdoms, some but not all now considered part of “Chinese” history. Their rulers were of various ethnicities and spoke different languages. Their states occupied many different areas of what is now the People's Republic of China (PRC), often concurrently and inimically with other states. This drama is not so different from that of the past 2500 years of monarchies and empires in Europe, yet because in the twentieth century the Chinese Communist Party managed to assemble a territory of

imperial scale, while Europe consists presently of distinct polities, we now discuss “China” as if it were a single continuous political entity with “five thousand years of history,” and see “modern China” as immanent in the parade of “Chinese” dynasties: an imperial chrysalis from which the People’s Republic of China, the CCP party-state, unfolded like a butterfly after milleniums of moltings.

Mühlhahn does not deviate from this implicit understanding of modern China as reiteration and culmination of previous avatars, and again, it might be too much to ask that a survey challenge the conventional nationalistic narrative. There is much to admire in this book. Though hefty, it reads briskly. Mühlhahn lingers in chapter summaries and conclusions to stress his unifying arguments, but otherwise marches us at pace through the Qing, the revolutionary era, the Maoist period, and “reform and opening” since the late 1970s. The coverage stops just before Xi Jinping’s drastic recentralization and personalization of power in 2018. Near the end, Mühlhahn states that Deng Xiaoping through “formal rules and informal norms” had institutionalized term limits for China’s highest leaders (pp. 501–502), and that “‘strongman’ politics were brought to a close” (p. 611) with the death of Deng. Most China scholars would have said the same. Of course, all were proven wrong when Xi declared himself president for life in 2018. It is unfortunate but understandable that the book ends just shy of that drastic return to authoritarian one-man rule.

Mühlhahn chooses “institutions” as his recurring theme. The choice, while not original, suits his purpose, allowing him to link past China-based states and the PRC as, for example, when he compares today’s *gaokao* nation-wide college entrance exam to the civil service exams that staffed the upper echelons of the imperial bureaucracy. (A cynic might note another continuity: just as past elites subverted the traditional exam system by purchasing official ranks, the rich in China today opt out of the *gaokao* altogether by sending their children to private schools and foreign colleges.) The institutional focus also helps tie together the self-strengthening efforts of the 19th century to the New Policies at the end of the Qing, to the Guomindang (Nationalist, GMD) developmental state, and to the more revolutionary PRC transformation of state and society into one, long continuum. Mühlhahn thus transcends the political boundaries of the revolutions 1912 and 1949, which have too often been treated as absolute fault-lines. He argues powerfully that under both Leninist parties, the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), ruling institutions and national identity have become increasingly militarized, an insight I recalled as I observed the PRC party-state’s fetishistic display of weapons of mass destruction during the military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of its founding in October 2019. Mühlhahn also highlights such PRC institutions as the *hukou* (household registration, controlling internal migration) and *danwei* (workplace, residence, and lowest administrative unit in PRC cities). These administrative devices are easily neglected in a general survey of this kind, but have profoundly shaped

individual lives and the Chinese economy.

The book has other noteworthy strengths. Mühlhahn is a professor at the Free University of Berlin, and he pays welcome attention to German activity in 19th century China — a topic neglected in Anglophone China histories, which stress British imperialism. He accounts for environment more than previous surveys have, both in regard to past interactions of man and nature and in noting China's looming crisis of sustainability. Mühlhahn's reading of recent specialist research, especially on the 20th and 21st centuries, informs his clear-eyed denunciations of Maoist atrocities during the land reform, anti-rightist movement of the 1950s, the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) — events which Western accounts once shrouded in revolutionary romanticism.

[1] Paul Cohen, in *Discovering History in China* (Columbia University Press, 1984), influentially critiqued this tradition / modernity binary, with the result that recent generations of China historians use those terms more carefully.

II.

There are, however, mistakes and omissions here. These are not so much failings of this book per se, but ultimately arise from how the field as a whole approaches Chinese history, especially as reflected in trade books aimed at general readership.

First, perhaps it is Mühlhahn's institutional focus, or perhaps because he is following the template of earlier doorstep surveys, but one must ask: were no women involved in *Making China Modern*? Issues impacting women show up occasionally in Mühlhahn's coverage of PRC era (for example, marriage reform and the one-child policy) but except for a brief mention in the context of the late Qing New Policies, not before then. Qiu Jin (1875–1907), the revolutionary “woman knight” never rides onstage here. Between the Dowager empress Cixi launching the New Policies in 1901 (p. 201) and Jiang Qing launching the Cultural Revolution in 1965 (p. 460), few if any women appear. The prominent intellectual Ding Ling merits a mention for her 1928 romantic story, “The Diary of Miss Sophie” (p. 255), not for her feminist denunciation of patriarchal norms perpetuated by the Chinese Communists in their Yan'an base area. By publishing her “Thoughts on March 8” in the *Liberation Daily* in 1942, Ding Ling earned “rectification” from Mao Zedong, and despite her effusive expressions of loyalty thereafter, she was punished for the rest of her life for the mistake of thinking the Party would tolerate constructive criticism.

Women in China were not simply the stuff of social history; they figured in the political and economic developments that are central to Mühlhahn's narrative. Gender and women's history has comprised one of the most prolific research areas within the China field since the 1980s, and work by Tani Barlow, Dorothy Ko, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Hu Ying, Joan Judge, Susan Mann and others has shown us how women perpetuated Chinese

scholarly and commercial elites and sustained domestic, agrarian and proto-industrial economies; their labor disproportionately drove China's industrialization and debates over "modernity" and the health of the "Chinese nation" revolved around the image of Woman.

III.

Another issue is Mühlhahn's relative neglect of the Qing as an imperial and the PRC as post-imperial state. I myself have worked mainly on the Qing period, which makes me predictably if perhaps unfairly picky about Mühlhahn's coverage of that Manchu-centered empire. Nevertheless, I critique Mühlhahn's treatment of the Qing empire and its legacy here, precisely because he is not alone in his interpretation, but reflexively repeats conventions in the field going back to Fairbank and nationalistic Chinese narratives before him.

Consider this sentence about the eighteenth century: "The High Qing period was a time of peace and social order, material splendor, cultural refinement, technological progress, and continued territorial expansion" (pp. 55–58). Most of the items in this list are true, and encapsulate the more positive view of the Qing which has emerged since its archives were first opened to researchers in the 1980s. But note the glaring contradiction: How could the High Qing be both a "time of peace" and one of "continued territorial expansion"? That a scholar could write such a thing displays something else: an apologetics for or simply

neglect of Qing and PRC imperialism that infects, or has infected, most China scholars inside and outside of China (myself included).

Many China historians writing in English employ a euphemistic vocabulary that obscures the fact that the Qing empire and PRC state after it were built by military force or the threat thereof. In territories newly acquired by the Qing, Han settler colonialism followed wherever farming was environmentally feasible (and sometimes where it was not), a pattern repeated under the PRC. Referring to these territories, historians often use the word “unification” (54) instead of “conquest,” and speak of “reunification” of places that were never previously part of the state wanting to “reunify” it (539). Mühlhahn even slips and refers to the “recapture of Taiwan in 1683” (87), though no China-based state — not even an imperial dynasty — had ever ruled the island before. I am guilty of similar euphemism: in 1996 I suggested the field adopt “frontier studies” as a rubric to study newly-conquered Qing imperial territories around the periphery of Ming China. In suggesting “frontiers” and avoiding such terms as “colony,” I was adopting the outlook and the vocabulary of a research center in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences with which I had collaborated.[1].

Besides adopting PRC terminology, the field sanitizes Qing imperial expansion in other ways. In a manner reminiscent of how historians once depicted European expansion into the American west, Mühlhahn writes of Chinese “homesteaders” and

“settlers” who cleared and farmed “regions along the borders” of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Taiwan, Manchuria, Tibet and Central Asia (33). What we might call settler colonists in another context, here are engaged in “internal migration” to “open borderlands.” First of all, how are these places “internal” if they were not yet or only recently under control of the state? Implicit in this slippage is the normalization of the CCP party-state’s ahistorical claim that all territory currently under its control has always been “China.” Second, these places were not “open,” nor were they “wilderness” (49) any more than the pre-Colombian Americas were. There were already people there before Qing conquest and Chinese settlement, obviously so in the cities of Tibet and southern Xinjiang, but also in the valleys and mountains of Sichuan, Taiwan, Yunnan and Guizhou and plains of Mongolia, northern Xinjiang, Tibet and Manchuria. In many cases, Han settlers displaced non-Chinese then clear-cut forests and plowed pastures to plant crops. This early modern expansion of Chinese settlers backed by Qing military force was similar to the expansion of Europeans across the Americas or that of Russians across Siberia. This displacement should not be glossed over. Indeed, that Chinese, like Europeans, participated in mass continental migration, with similar impacts on ecosystems and indigenous cultures, should be a key insight of early modern world history.

After its formation in 1636 (not 1644, as Mühlhahn writes), the Qing embarked upon over a century of imperial expansion through both military and diplomatic means. Qing armies comprised of Manchus, Mongols and other Inner Asian cavalry,

along with growing numbers of Chinese progressively took over north China, south China, Taiwan, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. Their main adversaries to the south were rump elements of the Ming, whom Qing dispatched from China and Taiwan in under forty years. To the west, Qing struggled for twice as long with the Junghar Mongol confederation, vying for supremacy in Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. The Qing rivalry with the Junghars was an epic, eight-decade hot and cold war, a geo-political competition for the legacy of Genghis Khan and role as patron of Tibetan Buddhism, a faith both Mongols and Tibetans followed. It was in the course of these Junghar wars that the Qing fiscal-military state matured, while conquering territory that now comprises a full third of the PRC. This is the primary reason twentieth-century Chinese republics have claimed sovereignty over Tibet, Xinjiang and outer as well as inner Mongolia. Yet the name “Junghar” does not appear once in Mühlhahn’s book, and he alludes only indirectly to Qing expansion in Inner Asia.

[1]James A. Millward, “New Perspectives on the Qing Frontier,” in Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Jonathan N. Lipman and Randall Stross, eds. *Remapping China*. Stanford University Press, 1996.

IV.

Instead, Mühlhahn rehashes the myth of Confucian peace. “In the eighteenth century,” he writes, “large regions of East Asia, with China at its center, experienced a long epoch of peace and prosperity, on the foundations of a tributary-trade order, at a time

when Europe was more or less continuously engulfed by war and turmoil” (p. 80, see also p. 25). In the 1960s, when John King Fairbank first proposed his model of “traditional Chinese foreign relations” based on the “tributary system,” he did not have a large body of archive-sourced secondary literature on Qing empire in Inner Asia to draw on. Today, however, there is no reason to trot out the thoroughly debunked notion of a “tribute system.”[1]. “Tributary” status was generally a fiction; it did not require a “tributary” status to trade with the Qing; it was not Sinocentric “China” but the culturally pluralist Manchu ruling elite that occupied the empire’s ideological center. And most important, the eighteenth century was a time of war, not of peace, in East Asia: besides the Inner Asian conquests, the Qianlong emperor (unsuccessfully) invaded Vietnam and Burma, repressed a major rebellion in Taiwan, and fought two wars to repel Nepali invasions of Tibet — and those are just a few of the “Ten Great Campaigns” the emperor boasted about.

The falsehoods of the “tribute system” model infiltrate the maps in *Making China Modern*, which appallingly label Kazakhstan, Nepal, Bhutan, all of mainland Southeast Asia and Korea as “Chinese vassals” (102–103). This is worse than DreamWorks promoting China’s false claims on Southeast Asian seas by sneaking an Asia map into its film *Abominable* that shows the PRC “nine-dash line” claiming most of the South China Sea.

Fairbank recognized that official Qing rhetoric denigrating its neighbors was self-aggrandizing propaganda to which those

involved in diplomatic exchanges simply paid lip-service. He noted that participants in the charade didn't actually believe in it. Sources in languages other than Chinese confirm that neighbors knew their "tributary" status was a fiction and Qing didn't actually dominate them. Since Fairbank wrote, however, popularizers have repeatedly mistaken his proposed Sino-centric *worldview* for a factual description of the late imperial *world order* — as does the map-maker here.

Equally telling is another cartographic curiosity: many of the maps in the later parts of Mühlhahn's book simply chop off the western half of the PRC (Xinjiang and Tibet) all together. It is admittedly hard to fit the breadth of China on a single page (the two page spread maps do include the west), but this convenience is not historically neutral. A text on the map "China under *Guomindang*, 1928–37" (266) mentions independence of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921, and the near Soviet take-over of Xinjiang, but nowhere in the text or maps does Mühlhahn mention that indigenous elites of both Mongolia and Tibet declared independence in 1912 upon the fall of the Qing empire. One might reasonably leave much of Xinjiang and Tibet out of the narrative of Chinese history for the first half of the 20th century, since no power based in China then controlled former Qing Inner Asia. But one should honestly represent the independent status of Tibet and Xinjiang, and not let anachronistic boundary lines run off the edge of the page as these maps do, implying sovereignty by Chinese warlords or the Republic of China where there was none. Nor does the text explain how the PRC ultimately did gain control

over Inner Asia: for Xinjiang, this involved a Soviet and Guomindang hand-over and death of the indigenous leadership of the 1945–1949 Eastern Turkestan Republic in a dubious plane crash; in the case of Tibet, it required a bloody military invasion in 1959. A later, similarly truncated, map (469) suggests that the Cultural Revolution’s depredations did not extend to Xinjiang or Tibet. But numbers of Red Guards found their way west to raze monasteries, pen pigs in mosques, and attack non-Chinese ethnic customs as “feudal,” and tens of thousands of “sent-down youth” from eastern Chinese cities accelerated Han migration of Xinjiang.

[1] Questioning of the “tributary system” model began in the 1990s. More recent critiques by historians and political scientists include Peter C. Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (96): 1002–1014; and Victoria Hui, “Cultural Order in Historical Asia: Confucian Peace or Liberal Peace?” in Christian Reus-Smit and Andrew Phillips, eds., *Diversity and its Discontents: Culture and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Zhao Suisheng, “Rethinking the Chinese World Order: the Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (96): 961–982.

V.

I am faulting Mühlhahn for failings that are not so much his own, but are rather paradigmatic to the China field — or at least to its public face. Specialized academic publications, especially those

examining gender history or the Qing empire and ethnicity, have been revising these old perspectives for decades. Yet these revisions have seldom percolated up to works written for a broader readership, and the old tropes, such as the tribute system, still infuse journalistic accounts of China. What, then, would a more accurate historical approach to “modern China” look like?

First, it would stop treating China as a politically continuous entity thousands of years old. Rather, bear in mind that PRC just had its seventieth birthday — that makes it 173 years younger than the United States, for example. The exceptionalist and nationalistic narrative of Chinese political continuity is not a new one: it derives from the foundational *Records of History* by Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE), who locked in a historiographic model that represents China as a linear succession of legitimate dynasties, each comprised of a succession of legitimate emperors, each state writing its predecessor (and enemy) into its own origin story. This is a powerful conceit, and the best proof that the historian’s brush can be mightier than the sword. But we should recognize it as rhetorical rather than empirical.

Of course, let’s not ignore the great *cultural* continuity of the Sinic sphere, rooted in classical Chinese written language and early Chinese literary, historical and philosophical texts. The Chinese classical tradition served as cultural foundation not just for China-based states, but for Chinese-character using societies in Vietnam, Korea and Japan and to lesser extent other places in Southeast,

Northeast and Inner Asia. The role of Chinese classical culture in East Asia is in fact strikingly reminiscent of the Greco-Roman linguistic and cultural tradition in the Mediterranean and Europe, and of the Arabic- and Persian-language Islamic tradition of much of Asia and north Africa. Thus, just as we discuss the commonalities of Christendom and the Islamicate, which linked cultures over space and time in the absence of continuous political unity, we might similarly talk about a Sinicate, or Chinese cultural ecumene, rather than an uninterrupted unitary “China.”

Second, a new paradigm for modern Chinese history would recognize that the PRC came to power by acquiring (not “inheriting”) the bulk of the ethnically diverse Qing empire. Qing included, but was not confined to, the peoples and territories formerly under Ming rule. Though Qing imperial discourse and institutions owed much to Chinese culture and the Ming, it was not limited to these but included Inner Asian elements as well. Writers should not use “Qing” and “China” interchangeably (as Mühlhahn and many others do) any more than we would use “Ottoman” as a synonym for “Turkey.” And if written at all, the term “Qing China” would mean not the whole empire, but rather the ethnographically Chinese former Ming territories that Qing incorporated, in distinction from Qing Inner Asia or Qing Taiwan.

Third, get rid of the ahistorical “tributary system” notion. Drop it from textbooks. Instead, historians should clearly define the varied institutions and arrangements employed by the Qing empire in domestic administration and foreign affairs. The Qing

administered former Ming territories and new Han settler colonies with the *junxian* system, whose county magistrates and yamen offices are familiar to readers of Chinese history. But besides this, in Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Taiwan the Qing put local non-Chinese elites in charge of indigenous non-Chinese administrative systems, under military governance by the Qing eight-banner system, its officials predominantly Manchu and Mongol, not Han. Chinese-style administration expanded later in tandem with Han settlement, but remembering that Qing in fact employed “one country, many systems” in successfully governing its empire, without endeavoring to Sinicize administration or culture of Inner Asia, provides useful perspective on the PRC struggles with Hong Kongers, Uyghurs, Tibetans and other peoples of its peripheries. Qing Korea and Qing Tibet were special cases: in both, the Qing stationed small garrisons of troops, but did not implement military rule as it did in Mongolia or Xinjiang. The Qing exerted sovereign claims in Tibet and Korea, tried to manage lama selection in Tibet and intervened militarily in both places upon occasion, but generally remained more aloof from local affairs than it did in territory it directly administered.

Nor was late imperial foreign policy conducted according to a one-size-fits-all “tributary system.” Asian international relations did not fit the Westphalian model, to be sure, but rather involved a variety of flexible, porous, overlapping and nested hierarchical relationships.[1]. “Tributary trade” was not the rule; it also took place in border enclaves or via transnational merchant networks. “Tribute” (a mis-translation of the Chinese word *gong*) should be

understood simply as diplomatic gift exchange. Asian inter-polity relations were not in fact so different from those early modern Europe, since the idealized Westphalian understanding of orderly international relations among a community of equal, independent states did not really emerge until after Napoleon, if ever. And there is certainly no historical precedent for a future East Asia caught up in a neo-tributary system centered on the Chinese Communist Party.

Fourth, a new paradigm would view the aftermath of the Qing fall (1912) more in line with how we treat the that of the Tsarist (1917), Hapsburg (1918), Ottoman (1922) empires, albeit with different ultimate results. As with the other contemporaneous imperial disintegrations, the Qing collapse occasioned multiple declarations of independence from its former imperial territories: the Ming lands, Tibet, Mongolia and, somewhat later, from two Eastern Turkestan Republics in southern and northern Xinjiang. Hong Kong and Taiwan had already been removed from the Qing ambit by other imperial powers. Japan had likewise effectively ended the Qing protectorate in Korea in 1895. For four decades after 1912, Chinese and Chinese-Muslim warlords, two militarized political parties (GMD and CCP), Japanese-sponsored Chinese regimes, and Japan itself vied for power in respective pieces of the former-Qing East Asian mainland. Ultimately, and, to many, surprisingly, the PRC party-state gained a military victory in the former Ming lands. The Soviet Union then relinquished to PRC the Eastern Turkestan Republic in northern Xinjiang (which Stalin had turned into a satellite), but not the Mongolian People's

Republic. The PRC took control of Tibet in two stages, the first (1951) mainly through diplomatic means, the second (1959) by main force. Britain handed the Hong Kong colony it had seized from the Qing empire over to the Chinese Communist Party in 1997. Taiwan, a Qing imperial territory, then a Japanese colony, then occupied militarily by the GMD in 1949, has never been governed by a Chinese republic based on the Chinese mainland. It threw off its Leninist single-party system in the 1990s and has now become a democratic republic in its own right.

Such an approach highlights the pluralism of the Qing empire, a diverse legacy that remains despite efforts by the current CCP regime to snuff out its non-Chinese aspects — through, internment of Xinjiang’s indigenous Central Asian peoples in concentration camps, forced proletarianization of Uyghurs and Tibetans, attacks on the native languages of Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Cantonese and Hong Kongers. Such a new approach to modern Chinese history would also challenge arguments that the CCP automatically inherited sovereignty over former Qing territories whose people remain, seventy years after the establishment of the PRC, stubbornly unwilling to accept CCP domination as pre-destined. It is patently not true that the entire territory of the PRC today has been politically “Chinese” since ancient times, since there has not been a politically continuous “China” since ancient times. By the CCP logic, if it points to Qing experience to claim that Tibet is “Chinese,” it should do the same with regard to Korea. Nor does it follow that Taiwan should be “reunited” to a China-based republic that never ruled the island, if

one does not extend the same dubious claim to the Republic of Mongolia. (The GMD-led Republic of China did in fact continue to claim until the 1990s that the territory of the Mongolian People's Republic was rightfully "Chinese," an argument that was at least consistent, if problematic and ultimately futile.) No country or international body in the world today challenges PRC claims to sovereignty over any of its contiguous territory, and the international community subscribes to various "one China" work-around phrasings to avoid precisely defining the relationship between Taiwan and the PRC. I don't suggest politicians should revise these practical political positions. They are not based on ancient historical sovereignty, however. So historians should write it as we see it.

Such a new paradigm might seem too political. It might well make authors and publishers nervous. It certainly fits the definition of "historical nihilism" by which the CCP's infamous "Document Number Nine" anathematizes non-Party-approved historiography.

But it is just as political to ignore the political and cultural diversity of today's China. By parroting for generations the euphemistic terminology, historiographic exceptionalism, and cartographic legerdemain that obscures its colonial past, we tacitly accept the PRC's assimilationism and expansive claims. Rather than talking about "making modern China" as fait accompli, we might recognize that it has been and is still being militarily and ideologically constructed, and that construction in

the hands of the CCP party-state entails cultural and physical violence to millions of non-Chinese as well as Chinese people.

[1] James Hevia outlined a non-Fairbankian understanding of Asian inter-domainal relations in his *Cherishing Men from Afar* (Duke University Press, 1995); Tibetan, Mongolian and Sinic legitimation systems are systematically analyzed in Timothy Brook, et al., *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan* (Chicago University Press, 2018), a book which should replace Fairbank's *The Chinese World Order* for those looking to understand East Asian historical international relations.

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