

The Invention of China

By Bill Hayton. Yale University Press, hard cover, US\$26.13

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This a bombshell of a book. It will doubtless enrage not only officials in Beijing but a mainland populace brought up on narratives of China's past which have not been subjected to fact-checking. It will confuse foreign readers mostly used to milder versions of the same narrative. Many scholars of China will doubtless attack either specifics or the overall theme on the grounds that the author is a journalist and not a China scholar.

But that is the key to the strength of a book written by one with a record of accurate and interesting writing about other issues in Asia, including Vietnam and the South China Sea, and a grasp of varying perceptions of history drawn from a wide variety of sources.

The chapter headings set it forth in bold terms. These are some: The Invention of the Han Race; The Invention of Chinese History; The Invention of a National Territory; The Invention of the Chinese language.

But what follows the headings are deep and sometimes somewhat-dense accounts of events, discussion, and debates which led to the assumptions about China which now prevail on each of the topics. In particular, Hayton looks at how political events in the late Qing and early republican eras combined with the ascendancy of the white races and the impact of the theories of the (largely now discredited) geneticists of the day on the formation of concepts of the ingredients of a single China as though it had existed for millennia.

In this, the importance of Han lineage groups and the role of genes is set against the notion of the unity of the three – Han, Manchu, and Mongol – against the foreigners in a world of five races. Likewise, the European focus on the idea of the nation-state was seen by Chinese reformers as a source of power and hence to be emulated, whether writing or inventing a national narrative.

From the sometimes conflicting versions of who constituted the guo-min, the use and definitions of hua and han, the nature of the Qing as Manchu or Chinese is resolved by Communist Party historiography into a straightforward tale of a single country dating to the (mythical) Yellow Emperor, supposedly born on the third day of the third month of the year now defined as 2698 BCE and father of the centralized state and of scientific discovery.

This imaginary emperor is now cause for birthday celebrations organized by United Front operatives as a way of reminding all Chinese (not least those who have taken other nationalities) of the Communists Party's supposed inheritance of the emperor mantle.

In this now-standard history, other nationalities were included but the Han was the core and the fount from which the others learned. It is not a big step from there to taking aim, as now the case, to suppress Turkic, Mongol and Tibetan pretensions to have their own religions and cultural traditions. In the Communist version of history, the Manchus who conquered the Ming are deemed a “tribe from northeast China” rather than “barbarians” who ruled as a separate race.

Such a re-writing makes it easier to get around the fact that the Communists had inherited an empire and have been desperate not only to hold onto it but strengthen their grip on the non-Han regions in a way which the non-Han Manchus had not found necessary. The focus on Han identity, on genes and lineage, also explains why China acts as though entitled to assume that “overseas Chinese” whatever their nationality owe a degree of allegiance to the “motherland” whether they want to or not.

The party and state however remain insecure as they attempt to re-write history. Hayton recounts how in 2014 German Chancellor Merkel presented to President Xi an 18th-century German map of China based on a famous 1718 Qing “Overview of the Imperial realm.” It only showed “Sinae Propriae” (China Proper) not the other Qing territories, or Taiwan. State media reported the gift of a map but instead pictured an 1844 British map which included the whole Qing empire. Such have been the almost childish efforts of Beijing to change the record of history.

Hayton makes the point, borrowing from the Turkish historian Arif Dirlik, of noting the importance of changes in the meanings of words and concepts at a time of drastic and violent change. Thus the evolution of empires, Ottoman, Hapsburg, etc into modern nation-states was paralleled by the end of the Qing and the need for new concepts to replace the imprecise “great state” concepts of the past.

Doubtless, there is a lot to argue about in Hayton’s account, one based on a vast reading of English and translated works than on original research. But at a time when there is an outpouring of books about contemporary China and its place in the world, there is a crying need for one which looks a little deeper than usual in the recent past. No one can begin to understand today’s issues of Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, or even those of Islam and Christianity in China, without an appreciation of the gap between facts and the officially approved versions of history from the Yellow emperor to the end of the Qing.