



ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

How ‘Chinese Dynasties’ Periodization Works with the ‘Tribute System’ and ‘Sinicization’ to Erase Diversity and Euphemize Colonialism in Historiography of China

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The thirteenth edition of Robert Art and Robert Jervis’s *International politics: enduring concepts and contemporary issues* (2017), a textbook used in the core International Relations class for MA students in the Georgetown Masters in Foreign Service and many other such courses, asserts the following: ‘By the fourteenth century, these Sinicized states [China, Japan, and Korea] had evolved a set of international rules and institutions known as the “tribute system”, with China clearly the hegemon and operating under the presumption of inequality, which resulted in a clear hierarchy and lasting peace.’ This appears in a short article by David Kang, summarizing arguments from his books.¹ It appears in a section titled ‘The mitigation of anarchy’, sandwiched between short pieces by Stephen M. Walt (‘Balancing and bandwagoning’), Hans Morgenthau (‘Diplomacy’), Stanley Hoffman (‘International law’), and Robert Keohane (‘International institutions’). This positioning suggests that while international relations in the West involves balancing, bandwagoning, law, and institutions, East Asia runs on the ‘tribute system’.

Despite many refutations by historians for over three decades,² the ‘tribute system’ is still being taught to future diplomats, security analysts, generals,

¹ David Kang, ‘Hierarchy and hegemony in international politics’, in Robert Art and Robert Jervis, eds., *International politics: enduring concepts and contemporary issues* (13th edn, Boston, MA, 2017), pp. 161–5. Both quotations from p. 162.

² Published critiques of the tribute system thesis, in chronological order: John E. Wills, Jr, ‘Tribute, defensiveness, and dependency: uses and limits of some basic ideas about Mid-Qing dynasty foreign relations’, *American Neptune*, 48 (1988), pp. 225–9; James L. Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar: Qing quest ritual and the Macartney embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, 1995); James A. Millward, *Beyond the pass: economy, ethnicity and empire in Qing Xinjiang, 1759–1864* (Stanford, CA, 1998); Peter Perdue, ‘The tenacious tributary system’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24 (2015), pp. 1002–14; Suisheng Zhao, ‘Rethinking the Chinese world order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China’, *Journal of*

bankers, world leaders, and political scientists as a basic principle of East Asian international relations which prevented war, in contrast to bellicose Europe. Going into more detail, Kang writes, ‘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 (1407–28) and Japan’s invasion of Korea (1592–8).’³ There are several empirical problems with this statement: the Qing Empire (1636–1911) invaded Korea in 1636 and Vietnam in 1788–9, for one thing, not to mention four Qing invasions of Burma between 1765 and 1769. Most glaring, though, is Kang’s total omission of the Qing’s long-running geopolitical struggle with the Oirat Mongol state, a confederation known as Zunghar, in which the Geluk Tibetan Buddhist power was a swing-player.⁴ The challenge to Qing hegemony posed by the Zunghars and the Geluk authority in Tibet, in fact, offers a classic 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 – despite Kang’s suggestion that international relations in East Asia worked differently.⁵

How did Kang miss the longest running and most significant competition and conflict of the Qing era? Kang’s narration of East Asian foreign policy is only concerned with so-called Confucian, ‘Sinicized’ states, and thus he presumably wears two sets of blinders regarding the Zunghars: as a confederation of nomad groups, the Zunghar empire doesn’t look like a state to him, and they certainly were neither Confucian nor Sinicized (i.e. they had not turned Chinese). We thus see how his ‘tribute system’ model, which he believes maintained a Confucian peace in East Asia, is linked to another debunked myth about Chinese history: the theory of Sinicization, which purports that peoples in the periphery of Sinitic states spontaneously acculturated and adhered politically to China, and that alien conquerors of China, including the Qing, were likewise converted to Chineseness after the conquest.

I

The concepts of ‘tribute system’ and ‘Sinicization’ do not only afflict political scientists. They have been drummed into generations of students in China history survey courses, and are arguably as central to narratives taught outside of China as they are to the ‘Yao-to-Mao’ narrative, or what Gina Tam’s later essay in this roundtable calls the ‘singular hegemonic historical narrative – a “History with a capital H”’, carefully policed by the Chinese Communist

Contemporary China, 24 (2015), pp. 961–82; James L. Hevia, ‘Tributary systems’, in John M. MacKenzie, ed., *The encyclopedia of empire* (1st edn, Hoboken, 2016); James A. Millward, ‘The Qing and twentieth-century Chinese diversity regimes’, in Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, eds., *Culture and order in world politics* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 71–92.

³ Kang, ‘Hierarchy and hegemony’, both quotations from p. 162.

⁴ James A. Millward, Ruth W. Dunnell, Mark C. Elliott, and Philippe Forêt, eds., *New Qing imperial history: the making of Inner Asian empire at Qing Chengde* (London and New York, NY, 2004).

⁵ Peter Perdue, *China marches West: the Qing conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), tells the story; see also Millward, Dunnell, Elliott, and Forêt, eds., *New Qing imperial history*.

Party (CCP). When these concepts appear in Western language texts, they derive, primarily, from John King Fairbank's introduction to his edited volume, *The Chinese world order*, which laid out the tribute system model in 1968 as a 'preliminary framework'.⁶ Fifty years later, new textbooks still repeat these tropes, continuing to obscure Qing expansion and colonialism – though now our understanding of Qing imperialism is much fuller than in Fairbank's day. The knock-on effects of such academic writings shape popular histories, TV documentaries, journalistic accounts, and the utterances of prominent members of the US foreign policy community.

A 2019 textbook covering Qing through the People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949–), published by Harvard University Press, fails to mention the Zunghars once in over 600 pages, stating that Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet were 'unified' (*tongyi* 統一) by the Qing, thus simply translating the CCP's favoured euphemism for conquest. In a single self-contradictory sentence, the textbook notes that the Qing at its height from the late seventeenth through the end of the eighteenth century was simultaneously 'a time of peace' and also one of 'continued territorial expansion'. Qing foreign affairs consisted of a 'web of peaceful relations managed through the tribute system'.⁷

Even policy-makers take this as an article of faith. Former US ambassador to the PRC, Gary Locke, said 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'.⁸ Locke is talking about the PRC, but PRC borders are massively more extensive than those of the Republic of China, or for that matter any previous state on the East Asian mainland, except the Qing empire. Locke's comment erases the fact that Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan were all modern conquests by Chinese states, not part of some primordial 'China'. By invoking the 'Confucian peace' trope, Locke reiterated the highly nationalistic, Sinocentric narrative favoured by both Guomindang, the Nationalist Party (KMT), and CCP party-states, one that defined 'China' as the maximum extent of the Qing empire.

Just as the tribute system idea suggests that states in China never engaged in wars of expansion, the Sinicization theory glosses over settler colonialism and displacement of indigenous peoples: Henry Kissinger 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 conquerors who then added their own territories to the Chinese domain'.⁹ Dr Kissinger here

⁶ John King Fairbank, 'A preliminary framework', in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese world order: traditional China's foreign relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 1–19. Fairbank reiterated both tribute system and Sinicization theories in his textbooks and general-readership books on China and US–China relations, which went into many editions.

⁷ Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China modern: from the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), pp. 55–8, 80–1.

⁸ Ambassador Locke appeared on the Charlie Rose show that aired 16 Jan. 2012 accessed at <https://charlierose.com/videos/14716>. Quote begins from 13:39.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, 'The future of US–China relations: conflict is a choice, not a necessity', *Foreign Affairs*, 91 (2012), pp. 44–55, quote from p. 48. Kissinger repeats the myth of Sinicization as a spontaneous, voluntary, one-way cultural assimilation that has been debunked by historians since the 1990s, most famously by the president of the Association for Asian Studies: Evelyn S. Rawski,

neatly summarizes the Sinicization thesis. A moment's thought makes clear the ahistorical premises of this idea: it assumes that some unchanging essentialized Chinese culture has always existed; and that non-Chinese peoples coming in contact with it happily changed their ways to become Chinese politically and culturally, without fundamentally affecting the character of that Chineseness, even when, like the Mongols or the Manchus, they conquered it wholesale. Despite its *prima facie* implausibility, however, the Sinicization theory remains part of Western academic discourse about China, even while in the PRC it is used to justify Xi Jinping's violently assimilative policies against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Mongols, and Tibetans. (If Kissinger were right, the Uyghurs and Tibetans, who have both been adjacent to and interacting with Chinese states since the Tang era (618–907), should have Sinicized long ago, and Xi would not need to intern them in camps to accelerate the process.)

To sum up the paradigmatic popular view: 'China' never invaded anywhere. Instead, it expanded by 'cultural osmosis', that is, by Sinicizing adjacent people, including non-Chinese who conquered China. And peace reigned across East Asia, imagined as a Sinicized zone where other Confucian states fell into orbit around China as acknowledged hegemon.

When put that way, it is clear how the myth of Confucian peace due to the 'tribute system' and peaceful expansion through Sinicization are inter-related, mutually supporting, and still with us despite repeated debunking by historians over several decades. Together, they help to obscure interstate conflicts as well as wars of expansion and colonialism on the East Asian mainland. The Qing empire at its height was twice the size of the Ming empire (1368–1644), including the Manchu homeland and new lands it conquered in Inner Asia, as well as Taiwan. This half of Qing territory was initially non-Sinitic ethnographically. Around half of the PRC today, then, consists of territory added *de novo* by the Qing in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries; much of that now lies in so-called autonomous regions nominally governed by non-Han peoples.¹⁰ As Catherine Chou argues in this roundtable, that 'China' consists of this full extent of the Qing empire is a point of doctrine central to PRC claims over Taiwan today.

The same doctrine undergirds CCP claims on Xinjiang and Tibet,¹¹ which, after driving the KMT off the mainland in 1949, the PRC went on to annex

'Presidential address: reenvisioning the Qing: the significance of the Qing period in Chinese history', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55 (1996), pp. 829–50. The abstract of her survey of the field states, 'A notable outcome of the new scholarship is the rejection of the Sinicization thesis.'

¹⁰ 'Han', originally the name of an empire on the East Asian mainland (202 BCE – 9 CE, 25–220 CE), is the term now used in the PRC to refer to the most numerous officially designated ethnographic group (*minzu*) in the PRC; it more or less corresponds to foreign sense of 'Chinese', except that politically there are over one hundred million Chinese citizens designated as belonging to other *minzus* who are nonetheless citizens of the PRC – and thus also 'Chinese' passport holders – when the PRC state allows them to hold passports (far from a sure thing, especially for Uyghurs and Tibetans).

¹¹ Contradictorily, official PRC propaganda fails to mention that what is now the Republic of Mongolia was also Qing territory, just like Taiwan. This is omitted because Outer Mongolia achieved independence thanks to Soviet, not Japanese, involvement.

by force and threat of force. Over a third of what the PRC and the world now calls 'China' was thus first conquered in the eighteenth century by the Qing and then annexed by the PRC.

II

Even with the help of the 'tribute system' and 'Sinicization', to make so much military expansion disappear from the narrative requires yet another magic trick. That trick involves conjuring with the word 'China' itself, through the use of 'Chinese dynasties' as a periodization and organizing principle that affords a sense of unitary political continuity to a plethora of diverse states on the East Asian mainland over more than two millennia. Consider this passage from the book-jacket and web advertising copy for Timothy Brook's recent survey of Yuan (1279–1368) through the PRC:

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*, has maintained them for the eight centuries since. *China remained China* through the Ming, the Qing, the Republic, the Occupation, and Communism [emphasis added].¹²

Actually, 'China' did not maintain its 'approximate current borders' for eight centuries. Far from it. As just mentioned, the Qing controlled twice the area as had the Ming. Joseph Fletcher pointed out in the *Cambridge history of China* in 1978 that the Qing addition of Inner Asia to geographical China should stand together with the doubling (in fact, tripling) of Han population and the arrival of Westerners as the most significant changes of the Qing period.¹³ The Ming itself had earlier expanded south-west and north-west into non-Sinitic territory previously conquered by the Mongol state of Yuan (1279–1368), but not previously part of the Song (960–1279). Given these profound territorial and ethnographic disjunctures over hundreds of years, how could 'China' even seem to remain 'China' (referred to with the singular pronoun 'it') while comprising six distinct and intensely adversarial polities – the Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republic (1912–49), the Japanese occupation (1937–49), and the PRC? Only because our exceptionalist periodization scheme treats 'China' as a metaphysical spirit endlessly reincarnating as 'dynasties' that simply 'pass' from one to the next. Mongol, Chinese, Manchu, even Japanese and

¹² Jacket copy on www.harpercollins.com/products/great-state-timothy-brook?variant=32123707686946. The contents themselves of Brook's book are more nuanced. Timothy Brook, *Great state: China and the world* (New York, NY, 2019).

¹³ Joseph Fletcher, 'Ch'ing Inner Asia c. 1800', in Denis Twitchet and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge history of China, X: Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, Part 1 (Cambridge, 1978). The Yuan state in China controlled neither Outer Mongolia nor Xinjiang, which were disputed by other Mongol khanates, and it did not occupy Tibet. Putting Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang together with China proper under imperial administration, and establishing robust protectorates over Korea and Tibet was an accomplishment of the Qing empire.

Communist states, despite their distinct territorial footprints and culturally diverse rulers, are just new infusions of wine into the old bottle known as ‘China’.

When used this way, the word ‘China’ functions as a trans-historical floating signifier, kept afloat by the idea of dynasties. But we can acknowledge and even celebrate the longevity of Chinese civilization in geographical China without treating China as a continuous *political* entity occupying the current territory of the PRC (or Qing) since antiquity. This false narrative of anachronistic territoriality, political continuity, and homogeneous Chinese identity is reasserted every time someone says that ‘China’ expanded by osmosis, never invaded anywhere, or ‘remained China’ through eight centuries despite a massive territorial expansion into previously non-Sinitic territory.

As with so many foundational ideas in Chinese historiography written in the West, we have the Jesuits to thank for translating the Chinese term *chaodai* 朝代 as ‘dynasty’. Their usage, as conveyed in their ‘edifying letters’ dispatched to Europe, was first codified in French in 1735 along with the Chinese dynasties list by Jean Baptiste Du Halde, in his influential general history of China, translated and published in English the following year.¹⁴ The word ‘dynasty’ itself was then a neologism, freshly borrowed from ancient Greek into modern European languages. A full excavation of the epistemological archaeology of ‘Chinese dynasties’ and its historiographical relationship to the Chinese words it ostensibly translates (*chao* 朝 and *chaodai* 朝代) would require more space than I have here. I can, however, summarize the contradictions and colonizing effects of this terminology.

The idea of organizing the history of states on the East Asian mainland into ‘Chinese dynasties’ derives initially from a historiographical template laid down by Sima Qian (c. 145 – c. 86 BCE) in the *Records of the grand historian* (*Shiji* 史記) and Ban Gu (32–92 CE) in the official history of the Han empire (*Hanshu* 漢書). They were very different as historians: Sima Qian courageously critiqued Han imperial policy vis-à-vis the Xiongnu, a nomadic confederation recently displaced from lands around the Yellow River oxbow by the Qin empire (221–206 BCE). Ban Gu, by contrast, dutifully compiled sanctioned official history. But both enshrined the idea of a legitimate and exclusive succession of rulers, and hence of *chaodai*, through the structure of their works themselves. In particular, they wrote the chronological stories of rulers, reign by reign, in ‘Basic Annals’ sections (*benji* 本紀), and put material on political competitors, non-Sinitic peoples, and other states in ‘Biographies’ (*liezhuan* 列傳) and other sections of their works. Non-Sinitic peoples have been treated as ancillary to the mainstream story for so long that it seems natural to do so, but they include many peers and strategic rivals of Sinitic states – such as the Han empire’s nemesis itself, the Xiongnu confederation.

¹⁴ Jean Baptiste Du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, enrichie des cartes générales et particulières de ces pays, de la carte générale et des cartes particulières du Thibet, & de la Corée; & ornée d’un grand nombre de figures & de vignettes gravées en taille-douce* (4 vols. Paris, 1735). Text available at www.chineancienne.fr/17e-18e-du-halde-description-de-la-chine/.

Sinocentric nationalistic historiography began early – a fact not to be condemned, necessarily, but at least recognized.

Later compilers of official histories (*zhengshi* 正史) produced by states in the East Asian mainland followed the same pattern: those subscribing to a Chinese cultural identity in this manner retrospectively constructed a linear, uninterrupted lineage of rulers and regimes. They legitimated membership in this exclusive line of emperors and empires in part through reference to the Zhou (1046–256 BCE) era notion of the Mandate of Heaven, through which Heaven, in theory, conferred legitimacy successively upon one ruler and one state at a time, and then on to the next, even bridging changes in regime and ruling family. The ‘Chinese dynasties’ that we structure our historiography around, therefore, comprise an intentionally and tendentiously curated list, with regimes included or excluded to conform with a religious belief system not unlike the idea of popes or holy Roman emperors in Europe or the succession of caliphs in the Islamic ecumene.

In the popular conception, states in China rose and fell, gaining and losing their Mandate, according to a pattern known in English as ‘the dynastic cycle’. Reminiscent of the theory of cyclical rise and fall of civilizations Ibn Khaldun outlined in his *Muqaddimah*, the Chinese idea of a dynastic cycle is inspired by the Daoist adage that things at their apex must decline and at their nadir must rise. It was most famously expressed by an epigram added to a seventeenth-century edition of Luo Guanzhong’s Ming-era novel, *Romance of the three kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi 三国演义): ‘the empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.’¹⁵

Today, many historians teach the ‘dynastic cycle’ as ideology rather than an iron law of history. The China studies field has rejected ‘the dynastic cycle’ as factual description, since to argue that such a pattern governed Chinese political history is tantamount to asserting that traditional China was unchanging, caught in a continuous recursive loop. The dynastic cycle idea belongs with the classic Orientalist conceit that denies the possibility of indigenous change in China (or the Orient, generally) before the advent of exogenous modernity conveyed to the East by Westerners. Yet, despite having abandoned the ‘dynastic cycle’ as fact, we persist in organizing the Chinese past according to ‘Chinese dynasties’. And, as the phrase ‘China remained China’ in the 2019 ad copy shows, we still treat the dynasties themselves as inherently recursive.

Charts and timelines of the ‘dynasties’ vary quite a bit, especially in how they handle periods when multiple ‘dynasties’ reigned at the same time in different places, or when non-Sinitic states ruled parts of geographical China. Sometimes, for example, the politically complex 350-year period after the collapse of the Han empire (202 BCE – 9 CE, 25–220 CE), is skipped entirely to jump to Sui (581–618) and Tang. Sometimes a single period name is created to lump together multiple states, for example Six Dynasties (220–589), Three Kingdoms (220–80), Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439), Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589), or Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–79). These

¹⁵ Robert E. Hegel, ‘Introduction’, in Kuan-chung Lo, *Romance of the three kingdoms*, trans. C. H. Brewitt-Taylor, I (North Clarendon, VT, 2002).

clumsy terms attempt to impose unitary legibility on politically pluralistic and ethnically diverse periods in Chinese history.

The centuries when Southern Song (1127–1279), Liao (916–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Xixia (1038–1227), and Dali (937–1253) kingdoms occupied parts of the territory now roughly known as ‘China proper’ (*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) as legitimate members of the dynasties list 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, along with 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. The ethnic issue continued to rankle, however, and subsequently scholars in the Sinitic Ming empire wrote revisionist histories that removed the non-Sinitic Khitan and Jurchen states from the list. And then the non-Sinitic Qing, whose ruling elites were Manchu and Mongol, re-legitimized the Liao and Jin by putting them back on the list when compiling their late eighteenth-century Qing Imperial Catalogue.¹⁶ But the game of ‘are they Chinese or aren’t they?’ wasn’t 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 their official histories) as is the Song, although they are included on what is otherwise a dynasties list. In the same chart, 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 treated as not Chinese. Evidently, given the current Chinese Communist Party’s interest in including Xinjiang within the ambit of ‘Chinese history’ since ancient times, it chose to re-edit the dynasties list to include the non-Sinitic Xixia state because it was located in the north-west, 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 still did not think the Xixia was quite Chinese enough: like Liao and Jin, Xixia makes the list, but is denied the ‘dynasty’ designation. This 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.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hok-lam Chan, ‘Chinese official historiography at the Yuan court: the composition of the Liao, Chin, and Sung histories’, originally published in John D. Langlois, ed., *China under Mongol rule* (Princeton, NJ, 1981); reprinted in Hok-lam Chan, *China and the Mongols: history and legend under the Yuan and Ming* (Brookfield, VT, 1999).

¹⁷ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Historical matters concerning Xinjiang’, 21 July 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/21/content_WS5d33fed5c6d00d362f668a0a.html, accessed 19 Nov. 2022. In the Chinese version of the chart, the names of 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, www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/21/content_5412300.htm.

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, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, 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 and goods (for example, the Tabghach Tuoba Wei (386–535) in north China, Buddhism, or Soghdian merchant and tax farming networks). The debate over whether to include or exclude Khitan and Jurchen, ongoing 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.

In addition to obscuring non-Sinitic components of the Chinese past, the dynasties list stresses larger, imperial polities in preference to eras when multiple states occupied geographical China. It is of course easier to learn, and depict on maps, a smaller number of larger states, but ordering history according to the dynasties list also reinforces questionable nationalistic arguments that China has mainly been both unified and large over time – and that this is the ideal state of affairs. In fact, venerable streams of Chinese political thought have to the contrary valued *de-centralized* local governance over imperial autocracy, but these do not fit easily with modern imperial nationalism, which demands ethnic uniformity and imperial grandeur.

Periodizing Chinese history according to the dynasties list thus excludes non-Sinitic peoples from Chinese history and reinforces unity- and size-bias. The tri-partite cluster of concepts – the tribute system, osmotic Sinicization, and recursive dynasties – work in concert to falsely imply political continuity, massive territorial unity within eighteenth-century Qing boundaries, and homogeneous Sinitic identity of ‘China’ as the norm over the long term. At the same time, they mask military and settler-colonial expansion and displacement of non-Sinitic peoples, especially for periods following the Qing conquest of Taiwan and Inner Asia, and following the PRC annexation of Xinjiang and Tibet – when millions of people became ‘minorities’ in their own homelands, overnight.

III

It was once considered proper to tell the history of the United States as the triumphant progress of white people of northern European ancestry across the American landscape, with Indigenous, Hispanic, and African-American peoples as obstacles or at best bit-players in a heroic drama of continental expansion cheered on by Providence. While right-wing political forces in the US still object to deviations from such apologetics, professional historians now work (and it is a work in progress) to include Navajo, Cherokee, Ojibwe, and other First Nations in the national history, to ensure that Black history

matters, and to recognize that many Hispanic people and cultures in the United States did not cross over the border, but, rather, the border crossed over them.

China scholars may cherish the unique keywords and concepts of our field – including the tribute system, Sinicization, and the Chinese dynasties. These distinguish Chinese history from other histories in other parts of the world, and may even seem a bulwark against Eurocentrism.¹⁸ But these concepts are not simply benign heuristics, not just quaint Chinoiserie. They actively inhibit frank recognition of colonialism in China and of the CCP's aggressive assimilation and displacement. Whether Manifest Destiny or Mandate of Heaven, such religiously inspired doctrines of superiority do pernicious work. If our job even in part involves the 'struggle for epistemological justice', as James Gethyn Evans writes in this roundtable, we must break out of the paradigmatic boxes and strive to write more inclusive and more accurate histories of China.

¹⁸ David Kang's laudable purpose in proposing the tributary model to explain East Asian international relations was to avoid reflexive application of models derived from European experience to the societies and politics of Asia.

Cite this article: Millward JA (2024). How 'Chinese Dynasties' Periodization Works with the 'Tribute System' and 'Sinicization' to Erase Diversity and Euphemize Colonialism in Historiography of China. *The Historical Journal* **67**, 151–160. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2300050X>