THE INVENTION OF CHINA

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements viii

Introduction 1
1 The Invention of China 7
2 The Invention of Sovereignty 35
3 The Invention of the Han Race 75
4 The Invention of Chinese History 101
5 The Invention of the Chinese Nation 128
6 The Invention of the Chinese Language 154
7 The Invention of a National Territory 184
8 The Invention of a Maritime Claim 214
Conclusion 240

Dramatis Personae 250
Notes 252
References 269
A Guide to Further Reading 270

INTRODUCTION

What kind of country is China going to become? We know it will be huge in population and, if present trends continue, economically strong and militarily powerful. But how will this superpower behave? How will it treat its own people, its neighbours and the rest of the world? China is one of two countries with populations greater than a billion, massive armed forces, nuclear weapons and volatile border disputes. But whereas few see India as a threat to international stability, China dominates the thoughts of policy-makers, analysts and commentators. There is something different about China. While plenty regard its rise as an opportunity – for trade, investment, profit and development – few do so without reservations. What kind of country is China? What kind of world will it make?

There is a lazy answer to this question, one that has become catechism for the Communist Party of China and many commentators. It is to simply invoke the 'century of national humiliation'. On 18 October 2017, Xi Jinping stood before a giant hammer and sickle at the Nineteenth Congress of the Communist Party of China and summarised this catechism in a paragraph. 'With a history of more than 5,000 years, our nation created a splendid civilisation, made remarkable contributions to mankind, and became one of the world's great nations,' he told his audience.

> But with the Opium War of 1840, China was plunged into the darkness of domestic turmoil and foreign aggression; its people, ravaged by war, saw their homeland torn apart and lived in poverty and despair. With tenacity and heroism, countless dedicated patriots fought, pressed ahead against the odds, and tried every possible means to seek the nation's salvation. But

> despite their efforts, they were powerless to change the nature of society in old China and the plight of the Chinese people.[1]

This is a curious vision of the past. It is founded upon the idea that, for a century, 'the Chinese people' were hapless victims of foreign aggression, and played little part in their own destiny. It is easy to see why an authoritarian political party would find it useful. By robbing 'the Chinese people' of their agency, it avoids having to ask or answer difficult questions about how change came about. As a result, Xi's version of history is the one taught in Chinese schools, and also one that many people outside China have come to accept. Yet almost every aspect of it has been challenged by recent research. Unfortunately, the insights unlocked by this research are not part of the mainstream conversation about China: they languish in libraries and specialist academic seminars. In this book I will try to bring them out into the open. I will show how Xi Jinping's view of China is not some timeless expression of 'Chineseness' dating back to 'ancient times' but a modern invention. Modern China's ethnic identity, its boundaries and even the idea of a 'nation-state' are all innovations from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In this book I will try to show how China came to think of itself as 'China'. I will look at the ways that the Chinese elite adopted unfamiliar ideas, starting with the concept of 'China' itself, before going on to examine how Western notions about sovereignty, race, nation, history and territory became part of Chinese collective thinking. I will show how key concepts were adopted from abroad by Chinese intellectuals, and adapted to create and bolster a myth of a 5,000-year-old unified country and people. This is not merely an academic exercise. We cannot understand the present-day problems of the South China Sea, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and ultimately China itself, without understanding how this modernising vision came to be adopted by the country's elite and how future problems were embedded within it. China today behaves the way that it does largely because of choices made a century ago by intellectuals and activists and because the ideas they adopted and propagated were sufficiently well received by enough of the population to change an entire country. The ways that these ideas were argued over between rival political interests and the ways they were resolved still live with us today.

China is far from unique in this. Every modern 'nation-state' – Germany, Turkey, Italy and Britain, to name just a few – has gone through this process. For the historian Arif Dirlik, a Turkish-born Marxist, the issue was familiar. The process through which the old Qing Empire evolved into modern China was paralleled only few years later by the Ottoman Empire's transition into Turkey. An ostensibly simple process – a violent change of government – actually required fundamental changes in society's understanding of the world, of the relationships between rulers and the ruled and in the meanings of the words that described what was going on. It was an article of Dirlik's, on the name of China, that inspired me to begin this book by writing about that subject. His article demonstrated that the change from old empire to modern nation-state really ran in the opposite direction. Change began with words. As intellectuals struggled to explain and address the problems created by rapid modernisation, they created new words – or modified the meanings of old ones – to describe the new situation. Those new words crystallised new ways of looking at society and changed the relationships between rulers and ruled. The result was government overthrow.

I met Dirlik only once: he died just as I was starting to write this book. Some found Dirlik difficult but I liked him and he opened my eyes to this issue. Dirlik believed the emergence of the ideas that underpin modern China was not an obscure historical story but a live issue that continues to animate the actions of an emerging superpower. When we look at China now we see, in effect, the victory of a small group of people who, around a century ago, created new ideas about the nature of society and politics and persuaded the rest of the country – and the wider world – to believe them. These ideas were a chaotic fusion of modern, Western conceptions of states, nations, territories and boundaries and ostensibly traditional notions about history, geography and the rightful order of societies.

While this book is about 'the invention of China', I am not trying to single out China for special criticism. All modern states have gone through this process of 'invention': selectively remembering and forgetting aspects of their pasts in order to present an ostensibly coherent and unifying vision for the future. I write this in a United Kingdom consumed by arguments over Brexit. Every day we see politicians and commentators selectively remembering or forgetting aspects of Britain's relationship with continental Europe or with the island of Ireland, or of

England's union with Scotland in order to create 'authentic' foundations for their political programme. Long-suppressed questions of sovereignty, identity and unity have burst into the open and become new sources of emotion and confrontation. Thousands of miles away, Hong Kong is in flames and at least a million Turkic Muslims are incarcerated in 're-education camps'. The contexts and consequences are vastly different but they share similar roots: the contradictions between sovereignty, identity and unity that are generated by the nation-state.

Most visitors to the Forbidden City in Beijing enter through the gates once used by tributaries, envoys and junior officials. Passing through the giant red walls, they encounter layer after layer of real and symbolic defences. The first comes in the form of a moat laid out in the shape of a recurve bow, facing southwards as a warning to the emperor's enemies. Beyond the moat lies the huge courtyard that once hosted imperial ceremonies; then the Hall of Supreme Harmony, where emperors were enthroned; and after that, the Hall of Preserving Harmony, where the emperor dined with the heads of tributary missions. Continuing north along the city's central axis takes the visitor into progressively more intimate areas: the Palace of Heavenly Purity, which housed the emperor's chambers, the Hall of Union where the solstices and New Year were celebrated, and then, finally, the Palace of Earthly Tranquillity. This building was originally constructed to house the empress's chambers but in 1645, after their capture of Beijing, the Qing Dynasty gave it a new purpose.

The Qing were Manchu: invaders from the northeast. They spoke their own language, which had its own script, and followed their own religion: a form of shamanism. These would remain the official language and religion of the court right up until the fall of the dynasty in 1912. Just like the British in India or the Ottomans in Arabia, the imperial elite sought to preserve their sense of separateness. The inhabitants of the Forbidden City, in particular, maintained many of the rituals that their ancestors had observed in the mountains of the northeast. They practised archery with their recurve bows, they danced in Manchu style and, in the repurposed Palace of Earthly Tranquillity, they practised animal sacrifice.

Every day, after morning worship in the shamanic tradition, the imperial household would gather in the Palace's central hall while a pig was despatched. The animal was then butchered and its meat partially cooked. The greasy, semi-raw flesh was passed around the assembled members of the Manchu nobility who competed with one another to receive the best cuts. The Palace became filthy, its floor spattered with animal fat and its rafters infused with the odours of boiled pork.[2] This did not matter to the royal family. It was an intimate, sacred place closed to outsiders. It was so intimate that the building was also used as the emperor's honeymoon suite – presumably after it had been cleaned up. What happened in the Palace stayed in the Palace.

These traditions continued right up until the revolution of 1911/12, yet the modern guardians of the Forbidden City gloss over this side of imperial life. It does not fit with the conventional image of a Chinese emperor. The son of heaven is traditionally pictured sitting serene on a mighty throne, not squatting on a greasy floor. But by denying or minimising the Palace's Manchu history, these tourist guides are performing a vital role in defending the legitimacy of the People's Republic of China. The People's Republic regards itself as the latest ruler of a Chinese state with a continuous history stretching back millennia. This history, in its view, makes it the rightful authority across a vast territory stretching from the Pacific to central Asia: it underpins the PRC's right to rule Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, Manchuria and Taiwan. It also gives it the authority to define who is Chinese and how they should behave.

Yet, as the history of the Palace of Earthly Tranquillity demonstrates, for 268 years 'China' was a conquered province of a Manchu empire. It was the Manchus who extended the rule of their state as far as the Himalayas and the Xinjiang mountains. The transition of 1912 turned this empire inside out. Chinese nationalists assumed the right to rule the entirety of what was a largely non-Chinese empire. They also assumed the right to decide who was Chinese, how their Chinese-ness should be expressed, what language they should speak and so on. The current Chinese leadership are their successors. The Communist Party has a monolithic view of what it means to be China and to be Chinese and appears determined to impose it, whatever the consequences. Time and again, it justifies its actions by reference to a particular, politicised vision of the past. If we are to understand China's future actions we need to understand the origins of this vision. This book traces the answers back to the period around a century ago when the old imperial order collapsed and the modern 'nation-state' emerged from the wreckage.

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A few words about terminology. Some may object to the word ‘invention’ in my title. Professional historians would probably prefer that I use the word ‘construction’, but a book on the ‘construction of China’ runs the risk of being filed under civil engineering. My meaning is the same as that of the academics. I am not claiming that China was invented out of nothing but that the idea of China as a coherent territory with a seamless history was actively constructed/invented from a jumble of contradictory evidence by individuals acting in the particular circumstances of their times. The ideas, arguments and narratives that they borrowed, adapted and asserted were products of those times but they continue to guide the actions of the Chinese leadership to this day.

I have also tried to avoid using the term ‘China’ except where it is appropriate – generally limiting it to the period after the declaration of the Republic of China in 1912. To use the name ‘China’ before this date is to fall into the nationalist trap of projecting terms – and their meanings – back into a past where they don’t belong. This opens the question of exactly how we should refer to this piece of the earth’s surface through time. Dirlik used the term ‘East Asian Heartland’, which is useful but a little unwieldy. For the period between 1644 and 1912, I have generally used the term ‘Qing Great-State’, borrowing from Timothy Brook. Brook argues that ‘Great-State’, or *Da Guo*, was a uniquely Inner Asian form of rule and was the term that states, from the Mongols onwards, used to describe themselves. For this reason it is more appropriate than the western term ‘empire’.[3]

Finally, I need to clearly state that this is a work of synthesis. It rests on the pioneering research of a new generation of academics over the past couple of decades. The schools of ‘New Qing History’ and ‘Critical Han Studies’ and others have allowed us to look at old questions with new eyes. I have credited many of these scholars in the main text and more in the acknowledgements but for those who seek greater detail there is a full list in the references section. I am indebted to their expertise. This re-examination of the Chinese past has only been possible because of the academic freedom provided by universities in North America, Australia, Europe and Japan. These issues cannot be addressed with candour inside the People’s Republic of China itself: questions of sovereignty, identity and unity are still far too sensitive. This book tries to explain why.