

# China's battle for the narrative on Qing history: A matter of national rejuvenation

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Despite several attempts to compile Qing History (《清史》), efforts by Chinese historians continue to see setbacks, with China's ideological security on the line. Lianhe Zaobao's China Desk takes a look at the controversy surrounding this mammoth task.

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Performers take part in a reenactment of a royal ceremony from the Qing dynasty, on the first day of the Lunar New Year at the Temple of Earth in Beijing, China, on 29 January 2025. (Florence Lo/Reuters)

In 2002, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated the epic historical compilation *Qing History* (《清史》), hailed as China's "twenty-fifth history" (第二十五史). After 16 years of compilation, the manuscript was submitted for review, but progress has stalled since. In recent years, the manuscript is said to have been severely criticised by the CCP, with the project deemed a "failed endeavour". This has raised concerns that Beijing is tightening its control of historical narrative to advance its territorial, ethnic, religious and diplomatic objectives.

### **Renewed and elevated focus on Qing history**

While the review of *Qing History* remains at a standstill, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) established the Qing History Research Centre in Beijing on 21 March 2025. This is seen as part of China's efforts to confront the intensifying geopolitical competition.

According to an announcement on the official CASS website, the inception of the centre was attended by 35 experts and scholars from China, including Qing history expert Gao Xiang, president of CASS and director of the Chinese Academy of History.

The centre aims to form a national research team of top Qing historians in China, which the CCP can trust to deepen and accomplish China's Qing historical research. It will also innovate research methodologies to gain a firm control of the global narrative in Qing historical research, so as to communicate the correct historical perspective and effectively convey the history of the Qing dynasty. The centre looks to build China's independent knowledge system for Qing historical research and establish a Chinese historiography of Qing historical studies, which will take a clear stand against historical nihilism and guide Qing historical research in the correct direction.

**It is envisaged that the important responsibility of the compilation of Qing History will be transferred from RUC's Institute of Qing History to the CASS's Qing History Research Centre.**



Prior to this, the most authoritative research institution of Qing history in China is the Institute of Qing History at the Renmin University of China (RUC), which has existed for 47 years. Among its renowned historians are Dai Yi, Li Wenhai and Wang Sizhi, who shouldered the heavy responsibility of compiling *Qing History*.

According to an analysis published on Sing Tao Daily on 26 March 2025, the CASS had a Qing History Research Unit under its Institute of History. The new Qing History Research Centre is not only an upgrade of the research unit but also signifies the intention to lead China's Qing historical research. It will serve China's high-level goals, including modernisation with Chinese characteristics and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is envisaged that the important responsibility of the compilation of *Qing History* will be transferred from RUC's Institute of Qing History to the CASS's Qing History Research Centre.

## CCP's three attempts to compile Qing History

Traditionally, each dynasty or era in China compiles its predecessor's official history. So far, China has produced 24 historical documentations, collectively known as *The Twenty-Four Histories*, beginning with the legendary Yellow Emperor and ending with Ming dynasty's Emperor Chongzhen.

After Ming Emperor Chongzhen's reign, the Qing dynasty was the last feudal dynasty that ruled the central plains in Chinese history. Founded by the Manchus in 1644 when they arrived via the Shanhai Pass, the Qing dynasty expanded China's territories and doubled its land area to 13.8 million square kilometres (9.6 million square kilometres today), formally incorporating Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. The Qing dynasty lasted 268 years before falling in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution.

**After the demise of the Qing dynasty over a century ago, Qing History remains unpublished.**



Porcelain objects are displayed at Lhasa Liana Zhibao Porcelain Workshop Museum, during a government-organised tour of the Tibet Autonomous Region, China, on 27 March 2025. (Go Nakamura/Reuters)

After the demise of the Qing dynasty over a century ago, *Qing History* remains unpublished. Since its rise to power in 1949, the CCP's efforts to compile *Qing History* have met with repeated setbacks, resulting in three unrealised attempts.

In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), one of the CCP's founders Dong Biwu had proposed compiling *Qing History*, supported by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. However, the project was dropped due to the Great Famine from 1959 to 1961.

The *Qing History* compilation project made it to the PRC's agenda in the autumn of 1965. At Premier Zhou Enlai's behest, Vice Minister of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department Zhou Yang convened a meeting and established the Institute of Qing History at the RUC. Seven scholars, including Dai Yi, who was regarded as the leading authority in Qing history, were appointed as members of the editorial committee. However, the plan was abandoned due to the Cultural Revolution.

In 1978, the RUC was re-established and the Institute of Qing History was officially started, with Dai Yi appointed as its director. However, as the PRC had to focus on post-Cultural Revolution reconstruction, *Qing History* was not prioritised on the nation's agenda. During this time, Dai Yi spent seven years on the general historical overview of the Qing dynasty and compiled *Jianming Qingshi* (《简明清史》, *Concise Qing History*), the first complete, systematic study of the history of the Qing dynasty since the PRC's founding.

**These new perspectives started to challenge the concepts of the “great unification”, “China’s identity” and “sinicisation”, and resulted in Qing history becoming politically sensitive within China.**

### **The West’s ‘new Qing History’**

During China's reform and opening up in the 1990s, a wave of historiography in “new Qing History” research emerged in Sinology studies in the US, with Western scholars focusing on archival material in non-Chinese language sources. They emphasised the Qing dynasty's distinct Manchu identity and its differences from the previous dynasties that ruled the central plains. Instead of recognising the Qing dynasty as another dynasty in China, they argued that it is not China and that China was only a part of the Qing empire.



A performer dressed as an emperor sits in a sedan chair during a reenactment of a royal ceremony from the Qing dynasty, on the first day of the Lunar New Year at the Temple of Earth in Beijing, China, on 29 January 2025. (Florence Lo/Reuters)

These new perspectives started to challenge the concepts of the “great unification”, “China’s identity” and “sinicisation”, and resulted in Qing history becoming politically sensitive within China.

When the CCP once again prioritised the battle for the narrative on Qing history at the start of the 21st century, the largest national cultural project since the PRC’s founding was finally set in motion.

At the March 2001 Two Sessions (comprising the National People’s Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)), NPC deputy and professor at the Institute of Qing History of the RUC, Li Wenhai, as well as CPPCC National Committee member and history professor at Peking University, Wang Xiaoqiu, submitted a motion and a proposal respectively, advocating to commence the *Qing History* compilation project.

In August 2002, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council decided that the National Qing History Compilation Committee, headed by Dai Yi, the honorary director of the Institute

of Qing History at the RUC, would commence the *Qing History* compilation project. More than 2,000 Qing history scholars in China participated in the effort.

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In September 2018, the *Qing History* manuscript was submitted to the Central Committee, which was then sent to the newly established Chinese Academy of History under the CASS for review in the following year. In June 2023, state media CCTV reported that the review of the *Qing History* manuscript with 106 volumes of 32 million Chinese characters — four times the length of *Draft History of Qing* (《清史稿》) compiled during the era of the ROC — had been preliminarily completed after nearly two years.

**The book was described as giving a strong riposte to the relevant erroneous remarks from *New Qing History* and highlighting the indisputability of Qing's status as a dynasty in China.**



A man checks his mobile phone as he walks past a photo studio featuring pictures of late Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong (C), China's former Premier Zhou Enlai (L) and China's former President Liu Shaoqi at the Wangfujing shopping street in Beijing on 11 March 2025. (Adek Berry/AFP)

However, in November 2023, Yale Law School Chinese-American Professor Zhang Taisu cited a reliable source and wrote on social media, that “the *Qing History* project... has now been put on ice because higher authorities deemed the draft... to be politically unacceptable... Specifically, the project ‘was overly influenced by the *New Qing History*’. This is quite the shocking claim, as most of the project leaders have spent their entire careers vehemently attacking the *New Qing History*... now it’s all gone to waste due to political incorrectness.”

Indeed, during the review of *Qing History*, China’s authorities heightened their vigilance against *New Qing History*, indicating that Zhang Taisu’s claim was not unfounded. As early as 2019, state media People’s Daily published a lengthy signed article that emphasised the Qing historical research’s link to ideological security. It also criticised *New Qing History* for “bringing foreign historical nihilism as a theoretical variant into Qing historical research in China”.

During a meeting on cultural inheritance and development in Beijing in June 2023, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasised that “Chinese civilisation is distinguished by its unity” and “has seen its various ethnic cultures coming together to create a cohesive whole and remaining tightly knit even in the face of serious setbacks. It shapes a common belief that China’s territorial integrity must always be preserved, the country must never be allowed to descend into turmoil, our nation must always remain united, and our civilisation must never be interrupted. It firmly underscores the notion that national unity always remains at the core of national interests...”.

Soon afterwards, the Chinese Academy of History under CASS, which was responsible for reviewing the *Qing History* manuscript, produced a publication of 1.1 million Chinese characters entitled *History of National Unification in Qing Dynasty* (《清代国家统一史》). The book was described as giving a strong riposte to the relevant erroneous remarks from *New Qing History* and highlighting the indisputability of Qing’s status as a dynasty in China.

## **Sweeping criticisms of the Qing History manuscript**

After Dai Yi, who led the compilation of *Qing History*, passed away at the age of 97 in January 2024, The Wall Street Journal published an article in March 2024, citing informed sources, that many CCP veters, including a top historian backed by Xi, issued sweeping criticisms of the *Qing History* manuscript in 2023, saying it strayed too far from official views and requesting changes to better align the past with Xi’s vision for the future.

**The role of the Qing dynasty in this narrative is crucial to the CCP, which claims to have saved China from its “century of humiliation” inflicted by foreign powers, from the Qing government’s defeat in the First Opium War in 1839 to the founding of the PRC in 1949.**



People take photo in front of a large portrait of Chinese President Xi Jinping, during a government-organised tour, at Potala Palace Square in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China, on 28 March 2025. (Go Nakamura/Reuters)

The role of the Qing dynasty in this narrative is crucial to the CCP, which claims to have saved China from its “century of humiliation” inflicted by foreign powers, from the Qing government’s defeat in the First Opium War in 1839 to the founding of the PRC in 1949. The legitimacy of China’s current borders, largely inherited from the Qing dynasty, is also closely intertwined with territorial claims from that period.

According to informed sources cited by The Wall Street Journal, the veters believe that the *Qing History* manuscript should emphasise that the Qing dynasty ruled over a unified multi-ethnic nation. This narrative would justify the legitimacy of the CCP’s current rule over vast territories inhabited by the Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs and other non-Han ethnicities.

Other veters have reportedly hoped that *Qing History* would downplay Western influences on political reforms in the Qing era while highlighting the negative impacts of Western imperialism on China’s society.

Pamela Crossley, a specialist on the Qing empire at Dartmouth College, stated that the top CCP leadership opposes portraying the Qing dynasty as “an empire of conquest”, as this could incite separatist sentiments in frontier regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as strengthen calls for “Taiwan independence”. She added that according to the CCP leadership, there have been no conquests in Chinese history, and only happy unifications and people aspiring to be Chinese.

**China’s unity must be emphasised by unwaveringly upholding the common belief that China’s territorial integrity must be preserved, that China must never be allowed to descend into turmoil, that China must always remain united, and that the Chinese civilisation must never be interrupted. — Pan Yue, Director, National Ethnic Affairs Commission**

## **Forging a strong Chinese consciousness**

The concept of forging a strong consciousness in the Chinese ethnic communities is currently the central theme of the CCP’s work on ethnicities. Pan Yue, the second Han Chinese director of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission in nearly 70 years, wrote an article in the Central Committee’s Qiushi Journal on 16 March 2025. He emphasised that forging a strong consciousness in the Chinese ethnic communities, an important component of Xi’s cultural ideology, is of great significance. He stressed that it is crucial to advocate that all ethnic communities establish the correct perspective of the nation, history, ethnicity, culture and religion.



A woman dressed in Chinese traditional costume poses for pictures outside the Forbidden City in Beijing, China, on 21 February 2025. (Tingshu Wang/Reuters)

Pan Yue added that ideological struggles in ethnic communities remain acute and complex. To effectively oppose infiltration and subversion by extremist and separatist ideologies, as well as address the potential ethnic-related risks and challenges in the nation's great rejuvenation, China must forge a strong consciousness in the Chinese ethnic communities and build a secure ideological fortress to safeguard China's unity and ethnic cohesion.

He highlighted that this has to be rooted in Chinese civilisation. China's unity must be emphasised by unwaveringly upholding the common belief that China's territorial integrity must be preserved, that China must never be allowed to descend into turmoil, that China must always remain united, and that the Chinese civilisation must never be interrupted.

As China continues to face pressures from the West, the *New Qing History* label may become increasingly over-generalised as another point of contention between China and the West. However, *Qing History* must serve Beijing's ethnic and territorial policies. Amid these challenges, even after 23 years of endeavour in compilation, the "twenty-fifth history" remains a distant prospect.

This article was first published in Lianhe Zaobao as “[中国升级《清史》话语权争夺战？](#)”.

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