上り口説 Nubui Kuduchi

A Song of Travel – Musings on the arts of Japan and beyond

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The New Qing History

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I finish my series on Chinese history books (finally) not with a summary of a single book, but with an overview of a trend, or movement, in the field.

Things move amazingly slowly in scholarship, and what still seems quite new can often turn out to be as much as twenty or even thirty years old. I think this is due in large part to a combination of a few factors:

(1) Scholarship takes a long time to do, and a long time to publish. I heard at one point that it takes roughly ten years to research, write, and get published a scholarly monograph, and given how long my dissertation is taking already, how long my younger professors are working on getting their first books published, and how few books some of my more senior professors have published, I believe it.

(2) Scholarship takes an amazingly long time to trickle down into high school & college textbooks, and since no teacher is read up on the latest scholarship on all things, they are bound to teach you older understandings.

(3) Relatedly, our own knowledge is based on classes and readings often quite out of date, and so what is actually old can often seem quite new. To put it another way, there are so many books out there that I haven't read yet, so no matter how old the book may be, when I read it, it may seem quite new to me. Further, even as a member of the youngest current generation of scholars – those who haven't even finished grad school yet – even so, my foundational knowledge of Japan comes from college classes from over ten years ago, taught by professors whose knowledge of the subject comes, foundationally, from decades earlier. Not to mention my fundamental understandings of American and European history, learned in high school and earlier, way back in the distant 20th century.

Qing imperial portraits on display at the Sackler Gallery of Art, at the Smithsonian Institution, in summer 2011.

So, when I say that "The New Qing History" is still, in some very real, meaningful senses, still "New," I'm not being ironic or facetious. **For decades and decades,** ever since the origins of the modern scholarly field of Chinese Studies in the West, **the dominant narrative was a China-centered one.** Buying into China's own (Confucian-informed) rhetoric about itself as the center and source of all civilization, scholars writing in English built their accounts of Chinese history around notions of Sinicization as the key process through which non-Chinese dynasties – such as the Mongol Yuan, Jurchen Jin, Khitan Liao, and Manchu Qing – attained stability and power. All of these dynasties, so the story goes, gained **power and stability only because they adopted Chinese modes of governance, Confucian political culture, and other aspects of Chinese "civilization,"** and collapsed in large part because of the infiltration of elements of their original "barbarian" or steppe nomad culture. The Qing are no different. I am not an expert on this, and do not know the historiography fully thoroughly, but basically, my understanding is that the traditional narrative has it that the Qing's rise in the 1640s to 1790s, and its peak of greatness under the Qianlong Emperor in the 1790s, was due chiefly to the Manchus' adoption of Chinese Confucian "civilization," and that it was Qianlong's efforts to re-introduce, revive, emphasize, or retain Manchu culture which sowed the seeds for China's decline – the century of embarrassment which began with China's defeat by the "barbarian" British in the 1840s, and went straight on through the various embarrassments of the Taiping & Boxer Rebellions (in which the British and French sacked & looted), defeat by the "barbarian" Japanese in 1895, and invasion, colonization, etc. in the 1930s-40s.

A scene from "The Last Emperor," shown in "China Through the Looking Glass" at the Metropolitan Museum.

It was only in the 1990s, perhaps influenced by trends in post-colonial scholarship, that this story was fundamentally revised. The so-called **"New Qing History"** emerged at that time, calling attention like never before to the ways in which the Qing, in particular, was not so much a Chinese dynasty, but rather a Manchu one. The new story, advanced in particular I believe by Pamela Crossley and Evelyn Rawski, is that **China was but one part of the Manchu Empire** – that Tibet, Taiwan, Manchuria, and Xinjiang (East Turkestan) were never part of "China," but rather were part of the Manchu Qing Empire, alongside China – much as China was only ever one part of the massive Mongol Empire, rather than us thinking of anything of the western half of the Mongol Empire as having been part of "China." This is pretty revolutionary. Personally, I found it just a little mind-blowing. In accordance

with the vein of postcolonial studies and cultural relativism percolating throughout the Humanities, one of the other major themes of the New Qing History, advanced by Crossley and others, is the radical idea (*gasp*) that Manchu culture is valid, meaningful, effective, powerful – not something to be dismissed or disparaged, and not something which necessarily inherently brings corruption or decline.

But, also, that **Manchu identity is something invented around the year 1600; that "the Manchus" as a people didn't exist until then.** Now, I don't know what the standard story was in scholarship up until then; surely we knew from the documents and so forth that there were no Manchus prior to that time, only Jurchens. But, even so, Crossley's *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (U California Press, 1999) forms the core of a constellation of new works in the 1990s-2000s which place real focus on issues of Late Imperial conceptions of identity, ethnicity, and so forth, and on the relationship between these and official (Imperial/court) ideology and policy. In *A Translucent Mirror*, Crossley details the evolution of Manchu identity, and of Han Chinese identity along with it, over the course of the 17th to early 20th centuries. There are some interesting and important elements I'm going to skip over, regarding specific policy attitudes of particular reigns towards intentionally shaping (officially redefining) identity categories, but, in a nutshell: Manchu identity began originally as an identity of affiliation, not of lineage, descent, or phenotype (physical appearance). Those Jurchens, Mongols, Chinese, and even a few Koreans, who gathered under Nurhachi's banners in the very early stages came to be known as "Manchus," while those Chinese and Koreans who lived north of the Great Wall and came under Nurhachi's authority a bit later came to be known as the "martial Chinese" (*Hàn jūn* 漢軍).

As the Qing Dynasty was formed (shortly before taking Beijing), they established a number of "banners," categorizing society into Manchu Banners, Mongol Banners, Martial Chinese Banners, and everyone else. Each of these banners contained within them people we might today – whether by descent, lineage, or genetics, or by ancestral homeland, cultural practices, or certain other metrics – consider to have been Jurchens, Mongols, Chinese, Korean, or even of other backgrounds. To be sure, these banners were very much divided apart from the rest of society. They lived in their own separate walled-in sections of the cities, and worked to maintain particular brands of nomad & martial culture. In a sense, they remind me of the samurai of the Tokugawa period, working to perform the martial warrior identity despite being essentially domesticated bureaucrats; and the samurai, too, lived for the most part in walled compounds separated from the commoners. Yet, while the Qing does have the additional element of Manchu/Mongol vs. Chinese multiethnic origins, unlike the samurai vs. commoners in Japan who were all, after all, Japanese, still, at this stage, these banners remained largely identities of affiliation, not of "race" or "ethnicity." This is particularly true of the Martial Chinese; though most were from the north, and most of the non-bannered everyone else were from the south, and thus had very different customs, lineage, ancestral homelands, and even language, and that's definitely something to consider, still, today, we consider both groups to have been "ethnically" "Chinese," regardless of whether they were in the banners or not. Being in the banners was a matter of status, societal role, societal categories, not something strictly divided between Chinese and non-Chinese.

But, skip forward a couple hundred years – like I said, go check out the book, or reviews or summaries of it for the more nuanced, complex story – and these identities have become so entrenched that they really do get transformed into ethnic identities. **As ethnic nationalism rises in China towards the end of the 19th century,** and especially in the first years of the 20th, **the bannermen come to be seen as colonizers, occupiers, barbarians, and most of all, as non-Chinese.** The Han Chinese identity, which I suppose existed in one form or another before that, was now

solidified into a “Chinese people,” or a “Chinese nation,” who were the good, rightful, moral, upright, indigenous (though I don’t think they would have used that last term) people of China, whose country had been stolen and ruined – run into the ground – by these barbarian nomads, and who demanded their country back. Suddenly, it was all about race and ethnicity, and suddenly those descended from the banners, regardless of Chinese phenotype (racial appearance) or genotype (genetics), regardless of whether they were in fact from China proper (and not Manchuria) going back centuries and centuries, or whether their ancestors were loyal subjects of the Ming, or whathaveyou. Bannermen – even Martial Chinese – became “Manchus.” Adam Bohnet’s work, which I’ve already discussed a few posts back, continues along a similar thread to Crossley’s, examining how the Korean court (in Bohnet’s case) officially defined and redefined identity categories for its own political purposes, as the successive Qing reigns did as well.

Right: The Qianlong Emperor on horseback, painted by Giuseppe Castiglione.
Collection of the Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Michael Chang’s 2007 book, *A Court on Horseback*, can also be considered to fall within the vein of The New Qing History, though it comes nearly twenty years after Crossley’s. A massive tome, I will gladly admit I did not read it all. But, its core argument shows very much the New Qing History approach. Chang’s volume examines **a series of “inspection tours” of the southern provinces performed by the Qianlong Emperor** in the 1750s-1780s, which were previously considered through the lens of Chinese (Sinicized) Confucian civil government; in other words, these were seen as being examples of the Qing adopting Chinese modes of surveying and governing the provinces. However, Chang argues quite the contrary, that **these were martial displays of a Manchu/Qing ruler to his conquered subjects.** These were, he argues, essentially military campaigns, performed within a Manchu steppe nomad cultural complex, in order to “inspire adherence and subordination through demonstration of military might.”[1] This might be compared to the way that *sankin kôtai* missions

performed by Japanese *daimyô* can be considered military parades, or martial affairs otherwise, even though in both the Japanese and Qing cases there is no actual combat taking place – the land is already conquered and pacified. Chang describes his approach explicitly as **""Altaic" or "Qing-centered" Qing history"** (9), and argues – drawing upon Crossley, or extending her argument – that Qing rule was centered largely on reinforcing and ensuring rule by the Manchu people (ethnicity) and the Aisin Gioro lineage (dynasty) in particular, something Chang terms as "ethno-dynastic" rule (8). He writes,

Ethnicity, then, matters to the study of late imperial China, but only in an ideological sense – that is, as a particular set of meanings, generated and mobilized in order to construct some belief in group affinity … the basis for establishing and sustaining relations of patrimonial domination (17).

and articulates the Qing state as one organized, fundamentally, on a patrimonial basis, in which the empire is conceived of metaphorically as a massively extended family, with the Emperor as Father. All loyalty is to fathers / lords / masters, and not to a semi-independent civil apparatus which transcends the dynastic household, i.e. to an abstract notion of the State or the Government (12-14). While Chang does not employ the term "feudalism," or draw direct parallels to the Japanese case, this does certainly seem to describe the Tokugawa state, to my mind, and in any case it presents an informatively stark contrast to the Ming Dynasty, in which Ray Huang's *1587: A Year of No Significance* clearly shows the state – the rule of law, the systems of governance, the Confucian ideals – had more power than even the Emperor himself. Not the case in the Qing, at least ideally (ideologically), according to Chang.

Officials prostrating towards the Emperor, at the Forbidden City, in the film "The Last Emperor."

Joanna Waley-Cohen summarizes the whole "New Qing History" movement in a 2004 article in the *Radical History Review*.

One additional argument she discusses is the idea of a shift in the Qing period away from the Sinocentric idea of Confucian civilization as the only civilization, to a multi-faceted, multicultural one in which the Qing rulers took on different identities & ideologies of rule for each of several different constituencies. The Qianlong Emperor was not only the Confucian source of civilization & axis between heaven and earth; he was also simultaneously the Manchu Great Khan, the Tibetan Buddhist cakravartin ("wheel-turning king"), and even claimed to be a reincarnation of the bodhisattva Manjusri.

More than all the rest, I'd recommend reading this, which summarizes the movement, or trend, as a whole, listing and describing eight scholarly monographs from the New Qing History field. I quite enjoyed learning so much more about China, in the course of reading for these exams, and especially reading about this intriguing new perspective on Chinese history.

This brings our survey of books on Chinese history to an end. Next up, the long-awaited summaries of books on Japanese history.

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(1) Joanna Waley-Cohen. "The New Qing History." *Radical History Review* 88, no. 1 (2004), 201.