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Han cybernationalism and state territorialization in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract: Han majority nationalism poses a significant yet under-theorized challenge to state sovereignty and territorial integrity in China, especially in the era of the Internet. By shifting our focus from minority secessionist movements on the ground in Xinjiang and Tibet to a group of Han nationalists active in cyberspace, this article probes the friction between three distinct yet interrelated processes of spatiality in contemporary China: the processes and practices of state territorialization; counter-narratives and geographies of Han cybernationalism; and the transnational flows of the Sinophone Internet. It argues that the Internet empowers yet ultimately blunts the threat of Han nationalism, rendering it largely impotent when faced with the hegemony of state territorialization.

Keywords: Internet, Han nationalism, state territorialization, cybernationalism, ethnicity, Han Chinese

Among the large agrarian empires of the 19th century, China alone survived the transition from empire to nation-state with its territory largely intact, resisting the spatial fracturing experienced by the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Prussian and Russian empires. It did this by successfully stretching, in the words of Benedict Anderson, 'the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire'.¹ This complex process depended on spatio-temporal ideologies and strategies of state- and nation-building, some with renewed relevance today.² In this article I probe a few of the symbolic and material tears in the processes and practices of state territorialization in modern China, highlighting, in particular, the way ethnicity (民族), serves to both reify and destabilize the boundedness of the state's ethnoscape. Throughout the 20th century, China faced a number of serious challenges to its territorial cohesion: foreign imperialism, warlord-led regionalism, and the Japanese invasion, among others. Less well appreciated, however, is the latent danger posed by Han ethnic nationalism.

Today, over a billion people, or 92 per cent of those living within the current boundaries of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are officially classified as 'Han Chinese' (汉族, 汉民族, of Han ethnicity or 汉人, Han people). The remaining 8 per cent, or over 120 million people, belong to one of 55 different ethnic minorities groups, and are collectively known as *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族). Together all 56 groups are legally equal citizens of the PRC. Yet, the party-state's national imaginary is premised on an odd sort of calculus, Thomas Mullaney argues,³ one that seeks to

balance a single super-majority with a small yet territorial significant minority population in an inherently unstable formula of $55 + 1 = 1$. At different times during the 20th century, all three parts of this equation have been questioned. To date most of our attention has focused on minority secessionist movements along the Inner Asian frontier, chiefly Tibet and Xinjiang. Yet, Han nationalism poses, in theory, an equally serious challenge to state territorialization, as the historical-geographic position of non-Han peoples and their territories is rendered equivocal in a $1 = 1$ aphorism, or what Ernest Gellner termed the congruence of culture and polity in the very logic of nationalism.⁴

In this article, I focus on the ways in which Han nationalists are employing the Internet and informational flows to construct an alternative spatio-temporal imaginary, one that reconstructs a narrative of Han victimization and redefines the Chinese nation-state as a pure Han state with an unsullied Han culture at its core. More specifically, I interrogate the online writings of two of the most prolific Han cybernationalists and their detailed reappraisals of contemporary Chinese historiography on the two most important conquest dynasties, the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Drawing on Western scholarship and a previous generation of Chinese scholarship, these two writers offer a spirited critique that is grounded in rational and empirical facts and also ethnocentric and reductionist assumptions.

Our empirical examples take us deep inside some of the small, dark corners of the Sinophone Internet: a sort of deterritorialized, transnational cyber-periphery, inhabited by a diverse yet committed group of Han nationalists who recycle and repackage online information in order to bifurcate Han from its Chinese synonym. Unlike those angry and increasingly confident ‘Chinese nationalists’, the so-called angry youth (愤青) that fill Western media accounts of China’s ‘peaceful rise’,⁵ Han nationalists seek to breathe new life and meaning into the ancient Han ethnonym, undermining the state’s efforts to construct an inclusive, multi-ethnic national imaginary, what Fei Xiaotong termed the unique form of the Chinese nation/race (中华民族): *e pluribus unum* or ‘out of many, one’ (多元一体).⁶ Their views are radical, to say the least, but also resonant with recent trends in Han public opinion, where violent episodes of Tibetan and Uyghur vengeance have led many Chinese to question the expediency of minority autonomy and preferential treatment.⁷

In short, I probe the theoretical implication of Han cybernationalism for state territorialization on a national scale, foregrounding how Han supremacism problematizes not only present civic-territorial boundaries but also the history of the bordering process. Here we confront the latent friction between three distinct yet interrelated processes of spatiality in contemporary China: (1) state territorialization and those practices that seek to define, demarcate and fix the historical-geographic boundaries and identities of ‘China’; (2) counter-narratives of ethnic nationalism (here Han majority nationalism) that rejects state-defined multiculturalism and proffers an alternative imaginary based on an ethnocentric spatio-temporal logic; and (3) transnational flows of cyberspace and the complex ways in which these abstract ‘space of flows’ simultaneously de-borders and re-borders the physical spaces and identities of the Chinese nation.⁸

State territorialization and its cyber discontents

In imperial China, like premodern empires elsewhere, space and identity were far more fluid. A distinct (albeit fuzzy) sense of ‘Chinese’, or Sinic identity as I prefer to

call it,⁹ existed for centuries; yet its boundaries were culturally dynamic and situationally contingent, determined by culture (Confucian civility versus incivility) and ecology (sedentary lifestyle versus pastoral nomadism) rather than any modern sense of ethnicity, nationality or territoriality, where boundaries are presumed fixed and unchanging. Similarly, the boundaries of Sinic membership altered between two extremes: an inclusive and largely descriptive identity based on cultural distance and an exclusive and ascriptive identity based on physical/ecological difference. Prior to its ossification, the Sinic community had a number of different ethnonyms and toponyms, perhaps the two most important being the ‘Han or Xia people’ (汉, 夏, 华, or 华夏) and the ‘Central or Effervescent States’ (中国 or 中华).

The modern nation-state system, in contrast, is premised on a new geographic logic, one that seeks to delineate clear boundaries between peoples and their places. Modernity is marked by spatio-temporal fixation: the bordering and filling-in of maps, and the delineating and reordering of national history. The historian Charles Maier argues that the 20th century can best be understood as ‘an epoch of territoriality’, the ‘saturation’ of space through both its ‘enclosure’, that is defining internal and external state boundaries in line with Westphalian notions of sovereignty, and its ‘energizing’ through new technologies of state formation, such as rail, electricity, and bureaucracies which brought ‘decision space’ in line with ‘identity space’.¹⁰

There is also a temporal dimension to the processes of state territorialization. Once far-flung ‘barbarians’ are reordered as ‘backward minorities’ and placed at a culturally remote position to the ‘progress’ and ‘civility’ of the state/ethnic core. In the modern nation-state, spatial distance is reconfigured as temporal distance from civilization – with minority populations rendered as ‘living fossils’ (活化石) in an evolutionary spatiality.¹¹ Meanwhile state authenticators (historians, ethnologists, archaeologists, and others) propel the now *nationalized* minorities back through time, nationalizing history and its historical actors, and rendering the ‘nation’ as a bounded, immutable and ancient place. Space (geography) and time (history) serve as the two primordial axes for ordering modern human variation. Along one axis, individuals are placed in finite, and in theory homogenous, nation-space according to their blood/race, language/ethnicity, or tradition/culture. The other axis measures linear progress, or the path and current location of a given people along the continuum from savagery to civilization. Together the nexus of national space and time renders China and other nation-states as rooted and eternal *places* rather than dynamic and political *processes*.

Today, the Chinese state remains obsessed with upholding its territorial sovereignty, despite the ways in which its current ‘reform and opening up’ agenda have undermined aspects of its jurisdictional and economic sovereignty.¹² Throughout the Republican period (1912–1949), when the Chinese government lacked the cohesion and military might to fully delineate and defend its physical borders, it steadfastly defended its legal sovereignty in the voluminous paperwork of international diplomacy and treaties. The PRC has fought border wars with most of its neighbours while forcefully calling for the return of ‘lost territories’ such as Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and now barren islands in the East and South China seas, while simultaneously sparing no effort to crush ‘separatists’ movements along its Inner Asian frontiers.¹³

In the reform era, the party-state’s legitimacy rests on promoting ‘Chinese interests’ against both new and old foreign enemies. Redrawing the moral and temporal boundaries recasts all those inside the collective national/spatial Self as part

of a single, unified yet multi-ethnic Chinese nation/race. This not only creates new room for former class enemies and Han traitors (汉奸) such as Zuo Zongtang and Zeng Guofan, but also fundamentally alters the way in which the non-Han are discussed in Chinese history. As Nimrod Baranovitch has recently demonstrated, the entire discourse of ethnicity has undergone a thorough and systematic reform in post-Mao history textbooks. During the Republican and early PRC periods, non-Han peoples were routinely referred to as ‘foreign people’ (异族 or 外族) and their incursions into Chinese space and history were rendered as cruel, blood-soaked invasions that left a trail of graphic destruction among the Han. Gradually, beginning during the late 1950s, but not completed until the 1990s, this Han-centric narrative of ‘inter-ethnic struggle’ (民族间的斗争) and ‘invasion of foreign people’ (外族的侵入) was replaced with a more inclusive historiography, one that centres on the natural and harmonious ‘ethnic fusion’ (民族融合) of the various nationalities of China, with the conquest dynasties now rendered as examples of ‘national unification’ (统一国家) or the ‘peaceful unification into a single family’ (和同为一家人).¹⁴ Baranovitch argues that this new historiography is a ‘powerful one’, which ultimately helps to shore up China’s political-territorial unity in an era of rising ethnic nationalism.¹⁵

This view however fails to anticipate the ways the Internet – and the diverse, filtered information it unleashes – creates powerful, new tools for ethnic nationalists to not only resist this historicized multiculturalism, but also fashion their own alternative historiographies and geographies. The revolution in communication technologies greatly complicates the ‘official nationalism’ of empires-cum-nation-states, as once discussed by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*.¹⁶ The Internet and other technologies such as smart phones and microblogs render community building more efficient and potentially effective, with ‘ridiculously easy group formation’ one of the defining attributes of these new communication tools.¹⁷ These devices enable spontaneous, bottom-up forms of nationalism, which when channelled in the right direction can shore up state legitimacy, such as the way Chinese youth rallied around their nation’s flag in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics.¹⁸

Yet, at the same time, these platforms and their geographies can also empower a variety of actors and identity positions, some which have the potential to challenge state orthodoxy, and its cultural and political boundaries. The 21st century has witnessed both the revival of Circassian irredentist nationalism in the Caucasus and radical forms of deterritorialized, global Islam.¹⁹ The Internet not only allows displaced nations to communicate and mobilize in new ways across spatio-temporal boundaries, it also enables new avenues for contesting national history. As Evgeny Morozov notes, once marginalized ethnic minorities can now draw on disparate and obscure historical materials to challenge orthodox narratives of national becoming once they become digitalized and searchable online.²⁰ There are numerous examples of the Uyghur and Tibetan exile communities, not to mention smaller minorities such as the Mongols and the Manchus, using new communication technologies to challenge historic geographical norms.²¹

Take for example, the individuals behind the ‘Manchukuo Temporary Government’ (满洲国临时政府) and its website.²² Established in Hong Kong in 2004, the group claims hundreds of active supporters with branch offices in Japan, Taiwan, America, Brazil, Italy, and Taiwan. Through its web portal, members promote Manchu identity and culture while advocating the resurrection of Manchukuo independence and the de-territorialization of the PRC via the political independence of Taiwan, Tibet and East Turkistan. Here individuals from across the

globe can read potted versions of Manchu history in five different languages (Chinese, Japanese, English, Portuguese and Italian), donate money through PayPal, sign an online petition for UN membership, and apply for free citizenship (which includes a 16-page passport for an additional US\$7). Seeking to re-territorialize this now cyber-toponym, the group offers a highly selective account of Manchurian history – one short on Japanese hegemony and thick on anti-communist vitriol – with one of its US-based ‘cabinet members’ even suggesting that ‘the Manchu people are part of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel’, which ‘means that the Manchus have an assurance from God that their future will be a bright and glorious one. That assurance has more power than China or any nation can ever muster.’²³

But majority and minority communities alike can employ online activism. Over the last decade, several thousand netizens have employed the Sinophone Internet to call for a revival of Han culture, identity and power. The movement began with online discussion about Chinese material culture following the 2001 APEC Leaders’ Summit in Shanghai, where world leaders donned colourful button-up tunics. Despite official claims that these outfits were Tang-style clothing, a group of netizens argued they were remnants of Manchu clothing that did not reflect genuine Han clothing.²⁴ This movement gained momentum in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, when over 100 scholars from Beijing University and other leading academic institutions signed an unsuccessful petition for the adoption of Han clothing for all Han athletes during the opening and closing ceremonies.²⁵ The movement, however, remains a ‘broad church’, with some supporters using the category of Han to explicitly question the CCP’s multi-ethnic mosaic while others are more interested in cosplay and the revival of traditional Han culture. These activists are as diverse spatially as they are professionally: ranging from middle-aged entrepreneurs and former state officials in PRC cities such as Shanghai and Zhengzhou to international students in countries as far apart as Canada and Australia. The Internet allows them to gather online to discuss, debate and promote Han identity. But they are actually embedded in specific places and social contexts, and the diversity of this ‘space of places’ has led to intensive factionalism and infighting.

Rescuing Han from the nation’s past

For several decades now, Western and Chinese historians have questioned the linearity and boundedness of China’s past. Following Prasenjit Duara in ‘rescuing history from the nation’, they work to recover lost narratives on all spatial scales which belie the tidiness of national, evolutionary history.²⁶ Han cybernationalists are involved in a similar project, albeit one set on replacing one hegemonic narrative with an equally repressive, exclusionary and biased account. In seeking to rescue ‘hidden transcripts’ of Han victimhood and bifurcate Han identity and history from a more inclusive narrative of Chinese national becoming, two amateur historians, Dasong Yimin (大宋遗民, ‘Descendent of the Mighty Song’, hereafter Dasong) and Yidao Shandian (一道闪电, ‘Bolt of Lightning’, hereafter Yidao) have created a virtual bully-pulpit for, in their eyes, exposing truth from lies. In their online writings, they aim to demonstrate how ‘mainstream professional historians’ on the Chinese mainland are consciously distorting and concealing the tragic history of Mongol and Manchu violence against the Han masses while plastering over the unprecedented harm these two alien and barbaric empires have done to the Han nation. As evidence for this cover-up, they mobilize a wide variety of Chinese and foreign language sources (both primary and secondary), making full use of the Internet’s ability to

archive, locate and disseminate historical information. The gradual, ad hoc shift to a more inclusive, multi-ethnic historiography has left numerous inconsistencies in the historical record – gaps that these authors effectively exploit by compiling a series of selective and uncontextualized quotes that would have been impossible without Internet search engines such as Baidu and Google.

Writing under the cover of online pseudonyms, the real identities and locations of these two individuals remain hidden. Based on my reading of their online postings,²⁷ they both appear to be males in their 30s or early 40s who either currently reside outside the Chinese mainland, or have access to, and/or extensive knowledge of English- and European-language scholarship on Chinese history. They both write predominately in simplified Chinese, and have a basic command of English and familiarity with Western literature. Over the last decade, they have compiled a prolific collection of online writing that ranges across a variety of topics. Dasong, who also goes by the name Zhao Fengnian, describes himself as a Christian and one of the founders of the Han revivalist movement. He has penned nearly 130 online essays since early 2004 (in addition to innumerable Bulletin Board System postings), which have been posted and reposted across the Chinese-language web, as evidenced by the over 100,000 Google hits that result when his name is combined with the characters 汉族 (Han ethnicity), and more than 8500 with 蒙元 (Mongol Yuan). Guided by Marxist historical materialism and the principle of seeking truth from facts, Yidao claims to be applying the ‘Three Represents’ (三个代表) to the discipline of history – firmly resisting historical pragmatism, elite-centric historiography and those historical views that oppose heroism. He has made it his personal mission to expose the ‘absurd theories of Qing scholars and those that deny any conflict between the Ming and the Qing and the Han and the Manchus,’ and has authored over 70 widely circulated essays that return over 169,000 Google hits and 6240 hits specifically related to Manchu Qing (满清).

A descendent of the mighty Song hits back at the Mongol Yuan dynasty

In sharp contrast to the depiction of the Yuan dynasty as an unprecedented episode of ethnic melding and territorial expansion in Chinese history textbooks, and Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan as ‘national heroes’, the Mongols, in Dasong’s eyes, are pure evil – uncultured savages and destructors. He views China’s past through a Hobbesian prism – a wild, primordial struggle between civilization and barbarism, with the Han state and its Confucian morality standing firmly on the side of peace, stability and progress. For Dasong, the Song dynasty stands at the apex of Han civilization, with its advanced productive forces and Confucian ethic of compassion preserving social harmony and minimizing conflict while fostering commerce and industry. It was here that science and technology first took root in the world, only to be prematurely severed through the blood-soaked invasion of the Mongol nomads in 1271. Dismissing the classic Weberian argument that Confucianism derailed the development of Chinese capitalism,²⁸ Dasong claims the Mongol invasion rendered Chinese civilization a near mortal blow, massacring up to 64 million people, while looting and pillaging Han society’s productive forces.²⁹

As evidence, Dasong cites veteran CCP historian Shang Yue, whose 1954 *Outline History of China* (中国历史纲要) was widely read and cited during the early PRC and today can be easily downloaded on free file-sharing sites.³⁰ Like Dasong, Shang Yue viewed the Mongol and Manchu conquests as the darkest chapters in Chinese history before being purged for his unorthodox historical views during the

Anti-Rightist Campaign. His *Outline Chinese History* provides graphic details of the Mongol conquest of China and underpins much of the Han nationalist view of history. Take, for example, his description of Mongol Yuan rule as ‘brutal racial oppression, economic destruction and pillaging which intensified the racial and class struggle of the Chinese people’s core Han nationality against this oppression and pillaging’.³¹ In particular, Dasong makes a great deal of population figures presented by Shang Yue in a single footnote: a 90 per cent decline in the number of households following the Mongol conquest of the northern Jin dynasty and a 30 per cent decline following the collapse of the Southern Song. Ignoring Shang Yue’s cautionary note that the Jin dynasty figures ‘cannot be trusted’, Dasong cites these figures in concluding: ‘by the most conservative estimates, at least 64 million people were butchered on China’s Jin and Song dynasties’ territory’.³² Yet, he continues, ‘I have noticed that since the 1960s, similar descriptions have disappeared from popular historical materials on the Chinese mainland, and have been replaced with the myth that the Mongol Yuan dynasty advanced historical progress. After the 1980s these falsehoods grew in intensity, with dissenting voices being attacked as “Han chauvinists” or “remnants of the Gang of Four”’.³³ This so-called whitewashing of history is often compared by Dasong and other Han nationalists to Jewish holocaust deniers,³⁴ but even more egregious given that ‘the racial genocide of the Mongol empire on Chinese soil was unprecedented and unrepeated in human history, with its number of victims recorded as a world record in the *Guinness Book of World Records* (or at least its 1985 edition).’³⁵

In order to substantiate these claims, Dasong spent over three years researching, writing and documenting a 26,000-character essay entitled ‘Informal discussion of how China’s mainstream experts on Mongol Yuan history are skilfully distorting history and its grave dangers’ (漫谈中国主流蒙元史专家如何巧妙的扭曲历史, 及其严重危害).³⁶ In this widely circulated 2007 essay, Dasong provides a spirited critique of the claim by a leading Yuan dynasty historian Han Rulin and other contemporary mainland historians that the Mongol Yuan dynasty was ‘a golden era of unprecedented prosperity’, with Mongol rulers greatly expanding ‘Chinese’ territory while fusing different ‘Chinese’ nationalities. According to Han Rulin, the Mongols not only advanced science and technological productivity but also fostered the unprecedented flow of ideas and goods between East and West.³⁷ ‘However, outside the mainland,’ Dasong responds, ‘when books describe the Mongol invasion of other countries, they always speak of the utter destitution of the Mongolian people and the barbaric cruelty that they left in their wake – butchering ordinary people, pillaging and raping.’³⁸ In support, he cites J. A. Boyle’s English translation of the 13th-century Persian scholar-cum-Mongol official Ata-Malik Juvaini, offering up his personal account of the Mongol empire and its history of conquest.³⁹ Now available online,⁴⁰ Juvaini’s narrative does chronicle the path of destruction left by the Mongols, stating of the Jin dynasty conquest, for example, ‘they plundered and pillaged exceedingly, and wrought incalculable slaughter, and took immeasurable booty’.⁴¹ But Juvaini’s text focused more on the Mongol invasion of Europe, in particular the Middle East, and has little to say about Kublai Khan’s southern campaigns and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty.

Among the 40 footnotes in Dasong’s essay, we find reference to a 1998 Chinese translation of French sinologist René Grousset’s 1938 *L’empire des steppes*, Edward Browne’s 1908 *A Literary History of Persia*, and J. J. Saunders’s 1971 *History of the Mongol Conquest* (each available in either translation or online through file-sharing sites). Yet, Dasong is highly selective in his use of these sources, cherry-

picking quotes with the aim of providing ‘authoritative evidence’ of Mongol pillage. Take for example, Saunders’s now classic history of the Mongol conquests. Dasong quotes Saunders as writing: ‘As exponents of genocide, the Mongols were the most notorious since the ancient Assyrians, who exterminated or deported whole nations, and their loathsome record in killing was even unsurpassed by the Nazis.’⁴² While this quote does appear on p. 177 of Saunders’s book, Dasong misquotes the last section of this sentence which, in the original reads: ‘their loathsome record in killing was unsurpassed *till* the Nazi massacres of our own day’.⁴³ Moreover, Saunders continues in the same paragraph to stress: ‘Our emotions are so deeply stirred by the recital of these butcheries that their effect can be exaggerated, nor should we forget that they were restricted in time and locality.’⁴⁴ Saunders goes on to argue that the worst violence occurred during the initial phases of the conquest of Europe and a ‘humaner [sic] policy prevailed’ under Kublai and his conquest of the Song dynasty, which ‘was conducted with no greater violence against civilians than was common in the warfare of that age’.⁴⁵ Finally, there is no mention of Saunders’s overarching argument in his book, which is reminiscent of Han Rulin in emphasizing the flow of ideas and goods between East and West and its resulting progress.⁴⁶

To be fair to Dasong, he is more interested in why and how contemporary Chinese historians have come to sanitize the Mongol conquest, and here he provides ample evidence of them ‘ignoring the bad while emphasizing the good’ when it comes to the Mongols.⁴⁷ This project is also personal, with Dasong arguing that professional mainland historians not only refuse to engage in serious academic debate but also use the current political system to intimidate and persecute those who put forward alternative viewpoints, labelling them ‘Han chauvinists’, ‘imperialist running dogs’, or even ‘racists’, and thus manage to muzzle them, force them out of the academy, or even into prison. According to Dasong, this cover-up holds grave consequences for Chinese civilization, functioning like ‘a cancer weakening [our people’s] cohesiveness’. This sort of history undermines the Han people’s traditional sense of morality and industriousness, rendering them apathetic towards past martyrdom and suffering while encouraging the gluttony and laziness common among those that profit off the toil of others. At the same time, this distortion of history has led Chinese minorities to despise the Han core of the Chinese nation, causing them to develop a superiority complex when it comes to their ancestors’ past pillaging. As evidence of this moral decline, Dasong provides a series of wild and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about how minority elites are teaming up with foreign forces to split China and undermine its national interest.⁴⁸

A bolt of lightning strikes the Manchu Qing dynasty

As already discussed the PRC’s current multi-ethnic imaginary rests on a particular spatio-temporal construct of national becoming. Scholars have noted that sovereignty was more fluid during the age of empires, with boundaries shifting quickly based on the waxing and waning of imperial power;⁴⁹ in contrast, the modern nation-state is premised on the reification of national borders. This spatial expansion also contains a temporal dimension, with the nation, its people and boundaries pushed backwards in time – historicizing the current borders and peoples as part of a single, organic geobody. In our case, the flowing, overlapping folds of Qing sovereignty are ironed flat: stretching, straitening and smoothing individual threads into seamless parts of the Chinese national fabric.

During the Republican era, historians sought to construct inclusive narratives of ethnic belonging that bound together the diverse ethnicities of the Chinese Republic into a single story of national becoming. This effort continued following the Communist revolution, with Fan Wenlan declaring in 1950 that ‘the historical territory of China includes both the dynasties of the Central Plains and the states that minorities established independently’.⁵⁰ Today, party-sanctioned histories, like Bai Shouyi’s 1989 *General History of China* (中国通史) or elementary school textbooks,⁵¹ historicize the territory of the PRC, rendering all actors and activities (even Palaeolithic and Neolithic fossils) found inside contemporary PRC borders as intrinsically ‘Chinese’. The scholarship of Tan Qixiang, the founder of modern historical geography in China, typifies this historical-geographic logic. With the party-state’s current jurisdictional reach over the territorial state deemed a product of history: ‘Regardless of whether it has been hundreds or even thousands of years, as long as an ethnic group has been active within our boundaries, we consider them all ethnic groups within Chinese history; we also consider all regimes established within these boundaries as the regimes of China.’⁵² In short, all those trapped inside PRC borders today, like the Mongols and the Manchus, are inalienable parts of China’s past and thus should be labelled ‘Chinese’.

This sort of anachronism deeply troubles Yidao. He labels it ‘territorial-centralism’ (领土中心主义) and sets about in his online writings to debunk this ‘spatial theory of China’ (版图中国论). For him, contemporary Chinese historians possess a flawed and ahistorical view of premodern Chinese/Han identity. Pointing to Tan in particular, Yidao writes:

We should not confuse ‘historical China’ with ‘contemporary China’. Historically, China and other civilized states were defined based on culture, while contemporary China is defined by its constitution, which lays out its territory, ethnicity, and culture. When we analyse China historically, we should not mechanically apply a contemporary standard, using the value system of modern nation-states as the standard for ancient China.⁵³

‘Chinese history,’ he writes in another essay, ‘did not possess 56 innate ethnicities from ancient times to the present; rather there were those ethnic groups that joined China, and those that left China, and this situation repeated itself again and again. We cannot conclude that because one’s son takes on American nationality, that his ancestors were also American.’⁵⁴

In contrast, Yidao argues that premodern states were defined along cultural and racial lines rather than spatial ones, as the borders of ancient states were constantly altering. If territory were the defining marker, Yidao queries, would Mongolia not be the largest state in the world today due to Genghis Khan’s conquests, or all of Europe part of Germany because of Hitler’s Nazi invasions?⁵⁵ Unlike fluid premodern borders, ethnic identity is fixed and formed the basis for organizing premodern states. Because the legal concept of sovereignty did not exist in the past, after regimes established themselves over a patch of territory, they tended to view those peoples with a different culture and ethnicity as foreign states (外国). China for Yidao, was Han space, with its premodern boundaries waxing and waning with Han territorial jurisdiction and power.⁵⁶

Much of Yidao’s online musings seeks to ‘prove’ that the Manchus and their Qing dynasty were never part of China. Unconcerned by the decline of Han power or the preservation of China in pockets of Han resistance, Yidao’s target is the Manchu

court, and claims that they held themselves aloft and discriminated against the Han people. In search of evidence, he surfs the Internet to compile a laundry list of primary and secondary source quotes, which on face value seem to suggest that everyone from Karl Marx to Jiang Zemin viewed the Han and Manchus as separate peoples and separate states.⁵⁷ For example, Yidao quotes Lord George Macartney's *Chronicles*, which were compiled by Helen Robbins in 1908 and are now freely available online:

From hence also has arisen a vulgar mistake that the Tartars had indiscriminately and sincerely adopted all the maxims, principles, and customs of the Chinese, and that the two nations were now perfectly amalgamated and incorporated together.... Most of our books confound them together, and talk of them as if they made only one nation under the general name China; but whatever might be concluded from outward appearances, the real distinction is never forgotten by the Sovereign, who, though he pretends to be perfectly impartial, conducts himself at bottom by a systematic nationality, and never for a moment loses sight of the cradle of his power.⁵⁸

This heretofore lost evidence, Yidao insists, proves the Manchu and Han were never part of the same China, not only in the eyes of this eminent foreign emissary but others as well. This verification is followed by a string of other uncontextualized quotes: 'the Manchus as "an alien race that invaded China"' (Lu Xun); '260 years of Manchu rule as "a racial tragedy"' (Guo Moruo); 'the efforts of Yue Fei and Shi Kefa to protect their motherland as "surpassing their narrow class interest and benefiting the race and the state"' (Jian Bozan); and 'a comparison of the Japanese invasion with "the Mongol conquest of the Song dynasty and the Manchu conquest of the Ming dynasty"' (Mao Zedong). Yidao even quotes Jiang Zemin in praise of Shi Kefa's defence of his native Yangzhou against the Manchu invaders in Robert Kuhn's 2005 biography of Jiang.⁵⁹

Like Dasong, Yidao uses online information to recover Republican and early PRC scholarship on Qing rule, seeking to demonstrate how the Manchu sought to preserve their distinct identity rather than meld together with the majority Han people, and its subsequent cover-up by PRC historians. Citing Qian Mu and his 1952 *Success and Failures of Chinese Dynasty Rule* (中国历代政治得失) and Fan Wenlan's *General History of China* (中国通史) which was first published in 1949,⁶⁰ Yidao marshals evidence of the colonial nature of Manchu rule and its segregated territoriality. He argues that their rule was based on a series of special political, economic and legal privileges that ensured that the Han and Manchu people remained separate and unequal. By banning intermarriage and prohibiting Han migration to the frontier, the Manchu created a system of 'racial apartheid' (种族隔离制度).

Yidao follows Dasong in offering a forceful critique of contemporary Qing scholarship on the Chinese mainland. In reviewing the works of Li Zhiting, Guo Chengkang, Dai Yi, and Yan Chongnian, Yidao argues that, like their Yuan counterparts, these historians consciously distorted the past by garnishing lavish praise on the Manchu Qing rulers while allowing their value judgements to cloud historical facts.⁶¹ In the final analysis, the historiography of this 'small clique [of Qing historians] with dynastic loyalists at their core' is deeply flawed:

One finds contradictions in their logic, double standards in their historical analysis; rash and selective use of historical materials; distorted and subjective viewpoints; a politicized historical view that despises traditional historiographic ethics and creates its own logic; the replacement of reason with emotion, prejudice with impartiality;

blind faith as opposed to concrete evidence; fabrication replaces truth in advancing their biased arguments; and pragmatism replaces Marxism in their ideological perspective.⁶²

Yet, in the end, Yidao seems unaware of his biases and reductive reasoning, allowing emotions to drive his analysis and critique of others.

In criticizing mainland scholarship on the Qing, Yidao is not without allies in the academy. Over the last couple of decades, ‘new Qing history’ has sought to ‘de-centre’ the Qing through the inclusion of non-Han language sources and perspectives. Yidao draws on the authority of foreign sinologists such as Mark Elliott and Pamela Kyle Crossley, and those Chinese scholars who were either trained abroad or work among foreign language sources, for example Ma Rong, Wang Ke and Ge Zhaoguang.⁶³ Again, from each he draws selectively, taking elements that support his agenda while ignoring those elements of contrast. In adopting a selective approach similar to Dasong, Yidao is no different from the mainland scholars he also seeks to criticize. Take for example, the way in which he mobilizes the research of Evelyn Rawski. Yidao points his readers to a 2005 Chinese-language summary of her landmark 1996 Presidential Address before the American-based Association of Asian Studies.⁶⁴ In ‘re-envisioning the Qing’, Rawski discusses how new Qing history is challenging previous assumptions about the Sinicization of the Qing rulers. Rawski demonstrates how these new Qing historians are uncovering specific ethnic features of Manchu rulership, or in the words of Yidao, ‘international authorities on the nature of Manchu Qing rule have exposed its non-Confucian, non-Chinese and colonial essence’.⁶⁵ Yet, new Qing history, as Rawski stressed in her essay, also highlights the unique successes of the Qing in creating the multi-ethnic imprimatur for the PRC, while also pioneering a whole range of ‘early modern’ practices that Yidao chooses to ignore.

In contrast to many Han nationalists who stress the racial purity of the Han, Yidao and Dasong adopt a distinctly ‘culturalist’ view of identity, with Han defined by cultural and moral practices rather than any fixed racial, ethnic or jurisdictional boundary. ‘The Han,’ Yidao writes, ‘are an integrated ethnic entity, which cannot be divided based on bloodline or race, and in this way it is similar to American identity.’⁶⁶ Yidao not only cites Joseph Levenson, who coined the term ‘Chinese culturalism’,⁶⁷ but also the scholarship of Ma Rong, Ge Jiaxiong and other contemporary Chinese scholars who tacitly or explicitly reject either an ethnic- or spatially based definition of China, and instead call for a return to a more dynamic and fluid concept of Chinese civilization. Yet, unlike these scholars, Han nationalists specifically exclude the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing from their definition of China, and, by extension, those modern minorities who refuse to adopt Han culture. Culturalism rests on the moral distinction between *hua* (Han people) and *yi* (foreign people) – that is, the difference between civilization and barbarism and, in the words of Yidao, ‘the entry of the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing were both barbaric destructions of civilization which naturally aroused the civilized country’s masses in fierce resistance’.⁶⁸

In short, the party-state’s effort to paste over these cultural distinctions and foster a territorial-civic form of national identity is one of the cornerstones on which the Hanist critique rests. Putting their views of contemporary non-Han minorities to one side, Han supremacists like Yidao reject the suggestion that if one is Chinese today, one’s ancestors must have always been Chinese and past cultural/moral deeds are irrelevant: ‘This is like saying that if a robber enters your house and kills your

family, and becomes the head of the household, then that robber is a great person.’⁶⁹ For Han nationalists, in contrast, only those who actively defend and fight for Han cultural integrity can be considered great, and it is these patriotic ‘martyrs’ that they seek to immortalize on the fluid technoscapes of the Internet.

Locating Han in cyberspace: Digital flows, gates and circuits

Vinton Cerf, one of the founders of the Internet, once declared: ‘The Internet was designed without any contemplation of national boundaries. The actual traffic in the Net is totally unbound with respect to geography.’⁷⁰ This is the borderless world of cyberspace and placeless realm of virtual reality where space and place disappear in the digital miasma of flowing packets and electrical bytes. The United States Supreme Court, in its 1997 decision that the Communications Decency Act violated the First Amendment, declared the Internet a ‘unique medium’ and ‘vast democratic fora’ which was ‘located in no particular geographical location but available to anyone, anywhere in the world’.⁷¹ Yet, as anyone who has surfed the Net in China knows, there remain plenty of walls which route, reroute, and sometimes block entirely these currents of information. In fact, the spread and uptake of new communication technologies across the globe have created, in the words of geographer Matthew Zook, ‘complex new geographies of interaction and connection between people and places both near and distant that blend virtual spaces and physical places’.⁷²

We can identify at least four distinct walls that territorialize and differentiate cyberspace: language, culture, regulation and architecture. When we explore each of these ‘cyber-gates’ in the context of Han nationalism, we find that the geographies of the Internet both enable and ultimately dilute the challenge they pose to state territorialization in the PRC. Without the Internet, ethnic nationalism would be a far less potent and scattered force; yet at the same time, the embedded spatiality of the Internet also ensures that Han cybernationalism remains peripheral, and one could argue largely impotent, in the face of state territorialization. In spite of all the cyber-optimism, with its untested assumptions about the way the Internet alters the ‘rules of the game’ in China and elsewhere,⁷³ the fact remains that the geographies of cyberspace divide communities as much as they connect them.

Arguably, the most important cultural geography of the Internet is language. Only 26 per cent of Internet users surf in English, with Chinese now the second most popular Internet language, growing at a rate of over 2000 per cent since 2000 and likely to surpass English as the dominant Internet language within the next couple of years.⁷⁴ Han cybernationalism is a largely Sinophone phenomenon, and despite a few English-language blog postings,⁷⁵ the more than 210,000 threads and 2.7 million posts on its leading portal Hanwang (汉网) are written solely in Chinese.⁷⁶ But the transnational nature of the movement means that both the simplified Chinese characters used in the mainland and the traditional characters preferred by Sinophone communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diaspora find their way into Hanist posts. Furthermore, bloggers such as Yidao and Dasong continue to draw on English-language sources to counter the official discourse on the Chinese mainland, suggesting that English-language scholarship somehow carries more authority, or perhaps less bias, than those published in Chinese. Without the Internet’s global flows, and the power of search engines such as Google and Baidu, the task of challenging CCP orthodoxy would be far more arduous, and the process of reform and opening up has helped to create new opportunities for Sinophone speakers to both

mobilize and communicate across territorial and jurisdictional borders at a global scale.

With its low barriers to entry, the Internet has led to a proliferation of voices within cyberspace, especially with the rise of user-generated social media. Yet, the sheer size of this cyber-cacophony necessitates filtering. Search engines help us to connect and find what we are looking for, but the end result is often the balkanization of cyberspace through the creation of millions of interest-based ‘cultures’ that transcend national boundaries but also create walls of ‘cognitive consonance’ between themselves and other online and offline communities.⁷⁷ On the one hand, interest-based communities can help to broaden the scope of sociopolitical discourse and policy in China, as has been the case with online environmental activism.⁷⁸ Yet, on the other hand, they also have the potential to create digital echo chambers where unsubstantiated rumours fly wild and opinion polarizes and becomes more extreme. In addition to more banal chatter about Han clothing, Hanist websites such as Hanwang are filling with anti-nomadic vitriol, and in the wake of the 2008 Lhasa and 2009 Ürümqi riots, hate speech filled these websites, with calls for the extermination or forced assimilation of the Tibetans and Uyghurs.⁷⁹ And unlike daily incidents of ethnic discrimination, ‘cybercascades’ can spread enmity and falsehoods across China with amazing speed, as evident by the way a rumour in a Guangdong toy factory helped ignite the deadly riots in Ürümqi.⁸⁰

The Chinese Internet is perhaps the most regulated patch of cyberspace and Hanists sites have repeatedly run foul of regulators despite the party-state’s largely ambivalent attitude towards the movement. Hanwang and other Han nationalist sites were closed down within days of the outbreak of violence in Ürümqi on 5 July 2009. According to one anonymous and unconfirmed report, the Internet police contacted Hanwang’s Beijing-based legal licensee Li Minhui and ordered him to ‘reorganize’ the website and remove any content harmful to national security.⁸¹ Yet, within days of its closure, Hanwang set up a temporary website on the US-based blog server www.5d6d.com, and its original website was back up and running in less than two months, having raised over US\$4000 in donations for its re-establishment.⁸² A recent quantitative survey of 15 leading blog service providers found that levels of censorship varied substantially and that ‘a great deal of politically sensitive material survives in the Chinese blogosphere’.⁸³ Despite its sensitive content, the dispersed and relatively small-scale nature of Hanist websites means that their content often goes unnoticed by Internet censors who are far more concerned with mainstream online activism, especially if it has the potential to lead to collective action.⁸⁴ Finally, the location of Hanwang’s server in Hong Kong, and its domain name registration in the United States, provide another layer of protection from PRC territorial jurisdiction.⁸⁵

As early as 1999, Lawrence Lessig warned that along with its regulatory structure, the physical architecture of the Internet – the software and hardware that make it work – also functions as a powerful ‘code’ for controlling and reterritorializing Internet-based activities.⁸⁶ All computers within the Chinese mainland must connect to the global Internet via one of the state-owned backbone networks, making it impossible for China-based netizens to directly connect to the Internet free from state monitoring, guiding, filtering, blocking and other forms of online interference. The limited number of ‘gateway’ routers, narrow bandwidth, and actual network distance makes surfing overseas websites frustratingly slow, and encourages mainland users to consume locally produced content. During sensitive times, Chinese authorities often block Hanwang and other websites outside its jurisdiction, requiring mainland users to employ complicated proxy servers and

virtual private networks to ‘climb over the wall’ (翻墙). Following the forced closure of Hanwang, the website’s administrators debated whether or not to move their server to America or Europe, where many other Hanist websites are based. Ultimately, they decided to hedge their bets. The backbone server was to remain in China, with Hong Kong viewed as a relatively safe and open patch of cyberspace outside direct CCP control, while donations were to be sought for a new Dell server that could be used as an overseas mirror in case the Hong Kong machine was blocked or even worst confiscated: ‘We should urgently rent space abroad, but our server absolutely cannot leave the country. We are devoted to our motherland, and completely stand on the right side and do not fear rumours and slander. Hanwang’s server will always remain located within the People’s Republic of China.’⁸⁷

Conclusion

The complex geographies of the Internet both enable and hinder the spread of Han nationalism. Websites like Hanwang bring together scattered communities of like-minded individuals across territorial boundaries while the Internet’s ability to archive, locate and filter information allows for the construction of alternative ethnic and national imaginaries. Yet, the counter-spatiality of Han ethnic nationalism is ultimately held captive by the numerous gates and walls that comprise the physical spaces of the Internet, and the state’s ability to censor, shut down or even detain those who threaten its stability and territorial integrity.

The territorial imperative in the PRC casts the state and its ideologies deep into the lives of people under its jurisdiction. The party-state and its bureaucratic apparatuses regulate the spaces, lives and bodies of its citizens on all scales while patrolling its external and internal borders. Cyberspace – with its transnational, de-territorialized potential – is inherently peripheral to state territorial projects and thus poses a latent threat to its political, economic and social goals. In the case of Han nationalists like Dasong and Yidao, the Internet facilitates their attempt to subvert state territorialization, exposing gaps within its spatio-temporal logic while promoting an alternative ethnoscape limited to the Han people and its past. Hanist views reflect community opinion in the wake of recent episodes of ethnic violence, and both echo as well as propel calls for the scaling back of minority rights and autonomy. But while the functionality and geographies of the Internet stoke the flames of ethnocentrism, even to the extent of fuelling offline hate speech and violence, the state remains a potent force, capable of both regulating and controlling Han nationalism online while strengthening its surveillance and management of ethnic relations on the streets.

In the end, one finds a marked ambiguity among Han nationalists regarding the territorial implications of reviving Han culture, identity and power. Must the PRC cast out the non-Han like the barbarians of the past? Should the Great Wall be rebuilt and Chinese territory returned to the 18 provinces of the Ming dynasty? These questions are not only unanswered but largely unasked in Hanist chatrooms. There is plenty of criticism of CCP policies and vitriolic banter about Manchu ‘parasites’ and Mongol ‘trash’. But I have yet to encounter any unambiguous calls for the partitioning of PRC territory – be it Tibetan or Taiwanese independence, or some sort of federated state structure. The excising of barbarians from the Han past has seemingly no implications for the current spatiality of the nation. In fact, Hanwang members recently joined other Chinese nationalist websites in venomously defending Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and other disputed territories.⁸⁸ Assimilation (or perhaps genocide) is deemed the most effective method for reviving

Han power, not the territorial splintering of the nation. In fact, by suggesting that minority elites are colluding with foreign imperialists in order to destabilize or tear apart Chinese territory, Han nationalists share the state's belief in the inviolability of PRC territory. And this is perhaps the best evidence of the enduring power and internalizing habit of state territorialization on the Sinophone Internet.

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Notes

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