




ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

## Introduction: Why ‘Decolonizing Chinese History?’

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It is commonly stated that China has 5,000 years of continuous history. It is a claim repeated in textbooks, mini-dramas, and tourist sites across the People’s Republic of China (PRC, also commonly referred to as ‘China’). It formed the narrative foundation for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It is also a ubiquitous claim internationally, recited by global political leaders, in foreign media, and in children’s books. Ironically, it even serves as the tag line for the highly political and anti-communist global dance show ‘Shen Yun’, its posters promising a celebration of ‘5,000 years of civilization reborn’.<sup>1</sup> This millennia-long history, often short-handed as ‘Yao-to-Mao’ – the Yao referring to Emperor Yao, one of five founding Chinese rulers who is said to have lived in the third millennium BC, the Mao referring to Mao Zedong, the founder of the PRC – is a story of civilizational continuity in which a politically and culturally unified ‘China’ maintains its fundamental cohesion despite a range of challengers, invasions, and upheavals.<sup>2</sup>

The Yao-to-Mao narrative focus on singularity, unity, and continuity, we contend, harms how we understand China both within and outside the academy. Yao-to-Mao history presents the PRC’s current claimed borders – which include not only places like Tibet and Xinjiang, but also Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inner Mongolia, and large parts of the South China Sea – as an ahistorical fact, often reinforced by the claim that they have ‘always been’ part of China. Meanwhile, Yao-to-Mao narratives erase or refute histories of violent invasion and occupation of those spaces, reserving the word ‘colonialism’ for

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<sup>1</sup> Jia Tolentino, ‘Stepping into the uncanny unsettling world of Shen Yun’, *The New Yorker*, 19 Mar. 2019, [www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/stepping-into-the-uncanny-unsettling-world-of-shen-yun](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/stepping-into-the-uncanny-unsettling-world-of-shen-yun).

<sup>2</sup> For some critiques of Yao-to-Mao history, see Arif Dirlik, ‘Born in translation: “China” in the making of “Zhongguo”’, *boundary 2*, 46 (2019), pp. 121–52; James Millward, ‘We need a new approach to teaching modern Chinese history: we have lazily repeated false narratives for too long’, *Medium*, 8 Oct. 2020; Bill Hayton, *The invention of China* (New Haven, CT, 2020).

violations of Chinese sovereignty by Western powers. Yao-to-Mao history thus serves as a convenient tool for the PRC state and other powerful actors to normalize, downplay, or outright deny the ongoing oppressive policies happening in China's border regions. It also, more broadly, narrows the analytical space for a multivalent image of what China is by essentializing the histories and cultures of peoples who live and have lived there, and downplays the historical significance of cultural plurality, porous borders, and transnational migration on both Chinese and world histories.

Other geographic subfields within the historical discipline have responded to similar trends in their respective areas of study by calling for us to 'decolonize' history. But thus far, China studies remain strikingly absent from global decolonization conversations, while the narrative of China as a unified civilization that has only ever been the victim of violent imperialism rather than the perpetrator of it remains both assumed and dominant in popular discourse.<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, we organized this roundtable to discuss how we might draw upon the global scholarship of decolonization to address how the hegemony of Yao-to-Mao narratives have impeded our ability to understand China's history of imperial violence and to address how that history facilitates ongoing oppression of minoritized groups inside and outside of China today. We approach this topic as a diverse group of scholars: James Millward, a historian of Xinjiang; Catherine Chou, who has a background in Taiwanese history; Gina Anne Tam, who researches Hong Kong; Taomo Zhou, who studies Sinophone Southeast Asia, and James Gethyn Evans, a specialist on global Maoist history. Our philosophy is that by bringing into conversation different histories for which the question of decolonization has different meanings and stakes, we might recognize both the possibilities and limitations of a decolonization paradigm within a Chinese context.

We sought to do this in a way that appreciates the intellectual and moral weight of the task of decolonization. We take seriously Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's reminder that 'decolonization is not a metaphor';<sup>4</sup> it is, rather, a direct action. Moreover, as Taomo Zhou's essay cautions with the words of Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, we do not want to contribute to the transformation of

<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, some scholars who have been trying to reframe Chinese history as a history of expanding empire and settler colonialism. See Emma Teng, *Taiwan's imagined geography: Chinese colonial travel writing and pictures, 1683-1895* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Eric Schluessel, *Land of strangers: the civilizing project in Qing Central Asia* (New York, NY, 2020); Uradyn E. Bulag, *Collaborative nationalism: the politics of friendship on China's Mongolian frontier* (Lanham, MD, 2010); Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, minorities, and other subaltern subjects* (Chicago, IL, 2004); James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese nationalism: how the Qing frontier and its indigenes became Chinese*, 1 (New York, NY, 2007); Darren Byler, *Terror capitalism: Uyghur dispossession and masculinity in a Chinese city* (Durham, NC, 2021); James A. Millward, *Beyond the pass: economy, ethnicity, and empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864* (Stanford, CA, 1998); Dibyesh Anand, 'Colonization with Chinese characteristics: politics of (in)security in Xinjiang and Tibet', *Central Asian Survey*, 38 (2019), pp. 129-47; Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Introduction: ethnic politics, war, and the future of multinational states', *Inner Asia*, Special Issue: Special Sections: Keywords and Voices, 25 (1) (2023), pp. 1-6, as well as the entire special issue.

<sup>4</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1 (2012), pp. 1-40.

decolonization into a 'catch-all trope'.<sup>5</sup> While together we contend that Yao-to-Mao hegemony aggrandizes power inequities, colonialism and decolonization are not the only frameworks through which we can critique the unequal and oppressive power dynamics inherent in that history's construction.

The essays in this roundtable are based upon our robust discussion at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in 2022, enriched by thoughtful and engaged audience participation. We base our essays on several core questions. What does decolonization mean in a Chinese context and in what contexts is it illuminating? What is the relationship between hegemonic histories of China and ongoing colonial violence, and how might we mitigate the harm these historical narratives cause? How do we grapple with the reality of colonialist leveraging of the categories 'China' and 'Chineseness' against diverse groups of people, while recognizing the emotional and material potency these terms have for people who identify with them?

Our responses reflect a wide range of approaches. We do not necessarily all find the same utility or even validity of decolonization as a framework or goal, and we all see slightly different futures for a better kind of Chinese history. This roundtable is thus less a simple labelling of all Yao-to-Mao narratives as colonizing in all contexts and more a reflection on how and in which contexts a decolonization paradigm is useful for critiquing them. We invite readers to reflect with us on the utility of decolonization in their own teaching and research on China's history.

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<sup>5</sup> Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, *Against decolonisation: taking African agency seriously* (London, 2022), p. 14.