

Book 'The Invention of China' - Bill Hayton

Is 'China', and its five millennia of unified history, a national myth, created barely a century ago to advance a political agenda? In 'The Invention of China' (Yale University Press, 2020), author and former BBC-journalist Bill Hayton recounts a highly readable and thought-provoking account of the 'invention' or 'construction' of the nation-state called 'China'.

Although China's leadership lay claim to five millennia of unified history, the country/nation/state we today call 'China', according to Hayton, was created barely a century ago by reformers and revolutionaries, adopting and adapting Western notions of sovereignty, race, nation and territory, in a process of nation-building that occurred in a reaction to Western imperialism. As Hayton puts it in the first chapter: "In reality, there was no place called 'China' during this [Qing rule, FD] period." From 1644 until 1912, 'China' was, in effect, a colony of an Inner-Asian empire: the Qing Great State. (..) The previous Ming state (..) had not used the name China, either."

Hayton typically prefers to use the name 'Qing Great-State' for the Qing Empire, to avoid projecting European Westphalian notions of statehood onto East-Asia.

In his 2014 book 'The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia', Hayton explored and explained the South China Sea disputes for a general audience. Hayton delved into the very origins of China's South China Sea claims, laying bare the dubious nature of China's 'historic' maritime-territorial claims as a product of misunderstandings, mistranslations and mobilization of nationalism in the early 20th century. In his new book, Hayton takes this one step further, analysing the origins and construction process of 'China' as a nation-state, of a 'Han-race' with a mythical 5000 year old unified history, but also of the construction of a national language, of the defining of a national territory, of the concept of sovereignty and, of course, of a maritime claim.

When the Qing Empire/Qing Great State collapsed, the challenge that nationalist reformers and revolutionaries like journalist Liang Qichao and activist Zhang Binglin faced, was to transform a Manchu-dominated multi-ethnic empire into a modern Han-dominated nation-state. In this process, modern-day conflicts over Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and the South China Sea were already created, the author shows: "(..) 'China' was a conquered province of a Manchu Empire. (..) The transition of 1912 turned this empire inside out. Chinese nationalist [and their successors, FD] assumed the right to rule the entirety of what was largely a non-Chinese empire."

Hayton indicates that China is "far from unique" in this process of nation-building, referring to similar processes in and Britain, Germany, Italy and Turkey. China is, however, unique in the hypersensitive way it handles matters of sovereignty, which Hayton refers to as 'sovereignty fundamentalism': "China is far from the only country with sensitivities about borders. What is striking is the extent to which anxiety about these borders has become a national neurosis."

This sensitivity is explained by the fact that after 1912, the national elite had to define a national territory for the first time in history, "a process that had to take place on the ground, but also in the national imagination." Before 1912, citizens identified not so much with the state that they lived in (with fixed borders) but rather as subjects of a ruling dynasty, without fixed borders. The Qing emperor fictitiously claimed to be the ruler of 'Tianxia', i.e. 'All under Heaven'. As Hayton puts it: "When the Qing Empire collapsed in 1911, most of its borders were more imaginary than real. Except in a few places, (..) they had never been formally defined."

Hayton describes how after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the ensuing legitimacy-crisis, the Chinese Communist Party in 1991 (re)turns to nationalism “to re-adhere Chinese society to its leadership” and how under Xi Jinping, China is doubling down on this nationalist narrative, culminating in the mass incarceration of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang since 2019.

Posing rhetorically the question where all this inventing is taking us, Hayton’s answers that today’s China is an ethnocracy, a racially defined state, ever more stringent in imposing national unity, even referring to ‘national-socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Interestingly, earlier in the book we learned that China’s post-1912 nationalist reformers and revolutionaries were often inspired during a period of exile, often in interbellum Germany, Japan or Japan-ruled Taiwan.

An interesting observation is also made when Hayton points out ‘the ironies of the contemporary situation’. Contrary to often perceived Western feelings of ‘otherness’ in relation to China, he argues: “The China that presents itself to us in the twenty-first century is more like the West than it, or the West, generally acknowledge. Rather than being a standard bearer of ‘Asian values’, it is in fact a state in a Western mould (..) It is, in essence, a foreign construction.”

Looking ahead, Bill Hayton warns that, in the name of ‘national rejuvenation’, Xi Jinping’s China seems to be adopting the very behaviour of the imperial powers whose legacy he is supposed to erase: “China’s (..) neighbours will not trust a country that seems intent on changing the territorial status quo. (..) It increasingly feels like a dream from the 1930s. A recipe for destructive nostalgia.”

Bill Hayton is an [Associate Fellow](#) with the Asia-Pacific Programme at Chatham House, a former journalist with BBC News in London and a regular writer on Asian issues. His latest book, [‘The Invention of China’](#) has just been published by Yale University Press. He previously authored ‘The South China Sea: the struggle for power in Asia’ (Yale, 2014) and ‘Vietnam: rising dragon’ (Yale, 2010, second edition 2020). In 2006/7 he was the BBC’s reporter in Vietnam and in 2013/14 he was seconded to the Myanmar state broadcaster to work on media reform.

Friso Dubbelboer