



## ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

# Conclusion

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This roundtable explores the potential of decolonization as a framework for understanding and addressing the problems of traditional narratives of Chinese history. We came together with the contention that the hegemonic narrative of Chinese history, which emphasizes 5,000 years of civilizational unity, is both misleading and harmful. A decolonization framework, we posited, could help illuminate past injustices and give us the tools to create better and more just histories about China.

Calls for decolonization in the historical discipline generally focus on three targets. The first is epistemic – to decolonize history is to write histories that highlight the wide-reaching effects of global imperialism with particular emphasis on its harms. Epistemic decolonization can take many forms: it can mean understanding the structures of imperial power; it can mean critiquing categories that have been normalized through imperial power and exhuming their origins; and it can mean prioritizing the histories of peoples who have been oppressed, silenced, or dismissed by colonization.<sup>1</sup> The second focus is disciplinary – to decolonize history is to face and correct ways in which global imperialism has affected both what kinds of histories the academy rewards and which kinds of scholars are taken seriously. The third regards public policy. Here, decolonizing history means confronting the harm that powerful states and actors feel entitled to commit today because of how their past and present complicity in imperial violence has been erased or excused both by professional historians and by other members of the public.

Our primary focus has been epistemic, though most of our essays also implicate the academy or public policy. We each tackle the question of what it means to decolonize Chinese history from slightly different perspectives. James Millward's essay most directly addresses problems in Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Amanda Behm, Christienna Fryar, Emma Hunter, Elisabeth Leake, Su Lin Lewis, and Sarah Miller-Davenport, 'Decolonizing history: enquiry and practice', *History and Theory*, 59 (2020), pp. 403–12; Timothy Neale and Emma Kowal, "'Related' histories: on epistemic and reparative decolonization', *History and Theory*, 59 (2020), 403–12.

historiography, showing how our tendency to narrate Chinese history in dynastic cycles reifies the continuity of 'China' not just as an ideal but as an unbroken political entity. This, Millward argues, is a strategic manipulation that silences the histories of diverse peoples who shape the space that we call China, and, more importantly, erases the history of violent colonialism that created the People's Republic of China's (PRC) current borders and the ethnocratic hierarchy that defines Chinese governance today. Catherine Chou's essay turns to Taiwan, showing how China's civilizational history supports the 'one China' narrative central to the PRC's claim over Taiwan. That the PRC has managed to inject emotional potency into the definition of China and Chineseness that sits at the heart of the 'one China' narrative, Chou argues, allows the PRC to use that narrative to prevent the establishment of a fully sovereign Taiwanese state recognized by the rest of the world. My essay focuses on Hong Kong's messy relationship with Chinese identity. I examine how the traditional narrative of Chinese history and the national identity it sustains on the one hand has served as a salve against the cultural alienation created by British colonialism, and on the other hand, energizes the current government's erasure of Hong Kongers' autonomy and suppresses Hong Kongers' abilities to co-construct their own post-colonial future.

Essays by Taomo Zhou and James Gethyn Evans take our gaze global into the Sinophone diasporas. Taomo Zhou asks us to consider the limitations of a decolonization framework in Chinese history, arguing that 'the ubiquitous use of "decolonization" in contemporary American public discourse' has diluted the term's explanatory power. Instead, Zhou calls on us to 'take seriously the complexity of specific historical contexts', rather than presume that we can import decolonization frameworks wholesale. Evans contends that decolonization in China studies requires us to confront two hegemonic forces – the PRC state and the Western academy – each of which has created inequities in nuanced, complex, and overlapping ways. Evans offers the example of global Maoist history – or the history of those who engaged with Maoist thought without having a geographic or ethnocratic connection to what we think of as 'China' – as a way to disengage our discipline from the geographic, temporal, and ethnocratic hierarchies upon which *both* the PRC state and the Western academy rely to uphold their hegemony.

In the remainder of this conclusion, I will briefly spell out overlaps between and among our essays, highlighting areas of agreement, disagreement, or divergent emphases. The first and most important question is the extent to which decolonization is a useful framework for addressing the problems of traditional histories of China. Here, our disciplinary backgrounds inspire distinct answers. Those of us who study areas that have been subject to occupation by a Chinese state, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and, to some extent Hong Kong, recognize that decolonization is truly not a metaphor. Our work makes clear the ways in which hegemonic narratives of Chinese history have supported, justified, and normalized ongoing occupation, threats of occupation, and violent oppression of minoritized indigenous populations. Yet, for those of us who study spaces that have not been subject to outright occupation, the framework becomes less applicable. As Taomo Zhou reminds us,

decolonization is not the only way to criticize ‘Yao-to-Mao’ histories. To presume that the essentialist discourse that emanates from the PRC can only be understood as colonization is to ‘overgeneralize’ history and ignore the complex ways in which power and hierarchy can function, a point Evans makes as well.

A second area of convergence among the essays in this roundtable is the ways that decolonization in a Chinese context must differ from that of white settler countries, most notably regarding topics surrounding race. As many global scholars of empire note, white supremacy and Western colonialism feed and reinforce one another. Decolonization thus makes for a useful framework for critically analysing how structural white supremacy has served as the foundation for ethnoracial hierarchies around the world. Yet, in the case of China, Han supremacy is significantly more contingent. On the one hand, as Millward argues, Han supremacy is inextricable from China’s civilizational history because that history presents Han-ness as ahistorical and naturally mapping onto the PRC’s current borders. Similarly, Chou thoughtfully shows how Han supremacy ‘whitewashes’ the Republic of China’s colonialism of Taiwan, neutralizes the ability of Taiwanese citizens to guard against PRC military threats, and subsumes indigenous Taiwanese histories and identities. Yet, on the other hand, Zhou, Evans, and myself show that China’s civilizational history is often deployed by victims of Western colonialism to counteract colonialism’s epistemic violence, both among people with ethnocultural connections to China, broadly defined, and among those with no such claims. While we may disagree on the extent to which Chinese History can offer liberatory potential, or the extent to which Chinese History can truly be separated from Han supremacy, we all agree that we cannot work to address Han supremacy without considering its relationship with Western imperialism.

Finally, our essays offer distinct prescriptions for thinking about how the problems of hegemonic Chinese history narratives affect the academy and public policy. Both Chou and Millward are concerned with how policy-makers or scholars who garner their attention frequently repeat Chinese historical myths, including the ‘one China’ myth, or the contention that China has always been a ‘peaceful’ civilization that never engaged in violent conquest. Here, they place responsibility on the PRC for centring these myths in domestic and foreign policy, but also on powerful Western countries who accept them wholesale – a point I also make in my essay regarding Hong Kong. Evans, Zhou, and to some extent also myself, on the other hand, focus on how Western hegemony within the academy has precluded the participation of important stakeholders in the process of decolonization. Evans implores us to look beyond both Western and Chinese hegemonic narratives, arguing that we need instead to consider how both institutions’ assumptions about what ‘counts’ as China studies – assumptions that often centre geography, race, or an essentialized culture – hinder honest conversations about what decolonization means and how existing power structures facilitate certain scholarly outcomes and privilege certain voices. And I ask us to consider taking the marginalized groups we study – be they Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, or Sinophone diasporas – as ‘method’, centring their experiences and categories over other groups.

As a concluding note, there is the question of the positionality of scholars engaged in this work. In this roundtable, three of us are white scholars from white majority countries – there are, and need to be, real limitations in our role. Moreover, any continuation of this conversation must have broad buy-in. This, of course, must include scholars from groups most affected by PRC colonialist violence. But it also, as Zhou reminds us, must include PRC scholars, without whom any efforts at deimperialization or decolonization will be uneven and incomplete. For these reasons and more, this roundtable must serve as the beginning, rather than the end of the conversation.