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Claiming the South China Sea with a New National Mythology: Hainan Island and the South China Sea in China's History and Current Geopolitics

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Abstract:

This paper examines the shifting histories of the relationship between mainland Chinese regimes and their southern coast, Hainan Island, and the South China Sea. While Beijing today claims that Chinese regimes have administered the South China Sea in some form for 2,000 years, from the perspective of successive dynasties' centers of power, the far regions of the Sea were in fact culturally alien territory, and often far beyond their administrative control. When we examine the South China Sea from the perspective of the Hainanese people, not to mention that of China's neighbors around the Sea, the mainland myth of continuous administrative control and Chinese cultural presence quickly breaks down. It is important, in a scholarly context, to counter this mainland mythology of continuous Chinese dominance in the region, and also present a version of this history that reflects the region's reality, diversity, and complexity. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) current narrative of the South China Sea, embodied by the "nine-dash line" maritime boundary, is a retroactively imposed cultural lineage within the region, not a story of real political control through the imperial past. Past narratives, and the current one, embody a range of the regimes' anxieties and ambitions, and while they may be disingenuous, we can and must still learn much from them. Rather than confronting these claims' historical veracity directly in a political context, however, the United States should continue to articulate its firm support of a rules-based international order, particularly through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the legal claims of other regional players. Washington's failure to formally accede to this framework prevents the US from ensuring that it will have a hand in shaping a stable and peaceful future for the South China Sea, and an equitable and sustainable future for other regions, including the Arctic and Antarctic polar regions. Through ratification of UNCLOS and more robust support for the claims and interests of other regional players—such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, and others—Washington could more effectively, safely, and sustainably counter Beijing's unilateral and ahistorical claims to the South China Sea.¹

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- The United States should ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through a two-thirds US Senate vote for advice and consent. This is among the most common-sense and beneficial treaties in US history, and a great achievement of the legal team of US President Ronald Reagan, as led by John Norton Moore. Failure to ratify UNCLOS, in spite of numerous efforts, and after all reservations and real concerns and arguments against the treaty have already been completely addressed, is causing Washington and US businesses loss of revenue, security, and international credibility. At the time of writing, Washington remains outside of the framework, and is a signatory but not a ratified member. Several recent works, including one by Moore, enumerate the benefits of accession to the treaty, and the daily losses of remaining outside of it.²
- The United States should continue to support the claims of regional states to their sovereign maritime territory and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) according to UNCLOS, especially where those claims are violated by Beijing's refuted nine-dash line. While some in the United States may be wary of the optics of publicly challenging Beijing's "historical" claims, endorsement of the rules-based order, international law, and legal claims by regional states is a sustainable and necessary position.
- The United States should take a more active hand in shaping the region's media and scholarly narratives by consistently endorsing the legitimate claims of regional players such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, and others. This could include scholarly exchanges and funded research in the region, expanded academic ties, and public diplomacy. This starts with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the region's complex history and geopolitics, beyond the simplistic framework of US-China rivalry in the region.
- Through official and non-official channels, the US government and American citizens should be wary of implicitly or explicitly endorsing Beijing's narrative of the region when it violates international law and

the sovereignty claims of other regional players. These endorsements may come in the form of silence or ignorance in the face of false claims, or in pop culture products, scholarship, or public diplomacy that reproduce Beijing's false claims of historical continuity and the "nine-dash line."

- Americans should recognize and counter two related aspects of the PRC educational and media environments: Beijing's efforts to close off foreign influences on key issues, and its efforts to impose a constrained narrative of history within popular culture and academia. Americans should energetically nurture dialogues, institutional ties, and personal friendships in the PRC, and amplify the diverse voices that have always been expressed and heard there.

Introduction

For a week in February of 2023, an alleged spy balloon launched from China's Hainan Island captured the attention of the American public as it drifted over the United States. Beijing claimed that it was a weather balloon.³ It was finally shot down by an AIM-9X Sidewinder (air intercept missile), fired by a Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor.⁴ Comparisons abounded, in sensational headlines and punditry, to the 1957 Soviet Sputnik satellite launch, a reminder of technological and military rivalries and tensions. The brief flight of Sputnik became part of the impetus for more urgency in the funding of American science, technology, and higher education in general, culminating in the successful moon mission of 1969 and enduring American leadership in education and military prowess.⁵ The Chinese balloon incident, on the other hand, may remain a relatively trivial footnote, but the episode does reflect current tensions between Washington and Beijing. More importantly, its launch site—Hainan Island in the South China Sea—continues to be a flashpoint of geopolitics. Understanding Hainan's place within the People's Republic of China (PRC) is crucial to understanding PRC priorities, and their place within the longer sweep of Chinese history. Hainan, for centuries a marginal region in mainland Chinese history, is emerging not only as a hub of China's aerospace program, but also as a strategic watchtower on the South China Sea, as the provincial claimant to the "historical waters" of the Sea, as an island-wide free-trade zone, as a site of luxury consumption for China's wealthiest class, and more.

Hainan is the smallest province in terms of dry land, the largest island administered by the PRC, and a site of growing importance and regional tensions. It is an important hub of the China National Space Administration (CNSA), particularly the island's northeastern launch site of Wenchang.⁶ While Hainan Island is China's smallest province in terms of terra firma, it is also technically the administrative authority over the maritime claims that Beijing asserts in the region, namely the area within the "nine-dash line." In this respect, Hainan is paradoxically both the smallest (terra firma) and the largest (overall territory) Chinese province. According to the provincial government's website:

The administrative area of Hainan Province includes the islands and reefs of Hainan Island, Paracel Islands, Zhongsha Islands, and Nansha Islands and their sea areas. It is the largest province in the country. The

province's land (mainly including Hainan Island, Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha Islands) has a total area of 35,400 square kilometers and a sea area of about 2 million square kilometers.⁷

Hainan's and thus China's unilateral claim to nearly all of the South China Sea is based on a maritime claim by the Republic of China (RoC) government in the 1940s on several maps, prior to the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Beijing has carried over these maritime claims, asserting them as "historical" and claiming that they go back not only to the RoC claims, but indeed centuries and even millennia as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in a 2016 statement:

The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, and the first to have exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them continuously, peacefully and effectively, thus establishing territorial sovereignty and relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea.⁸

For its part, today the Republic of China (Taiwan) echoes the sweeping maritime sovereignty claims, but it also encourages adherence to UNCLOS, which would effectively honor several of the regional challenges to Beijing's nine-dash line claims.⁹ It seems likely that Taipei's articulation of this claim is part of the "strategic ambiguity" that marks so much of its policy, since any change to these "historical" claims could mean opening a larger cultural and historical can of worms with Beijing.

The United States and others have asserted that Beijing's current claims have been made in a manner that has been persistently vague and not substantiated in formal documents or international adjudication.¹⁰ Indeed, Beijing's claim has been refuted both by individual countries within the region as well as by distant powers like the United States, and perhaps most significantly, in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague, in a suit brought by the Philippines.¹¹ Within academic scholarship, Bill Hayton has done the most precise work to explore the origins of modern maps and claims in the South China Sea.¹²

Looking further back, this paper summarizes the historiography of Chinese mainland interests and control in Hainan and the South China Sea based on the most recent scholarship and political developments. Beijing's new narrative, or new mythology, reflects its priorities and aspirations in the region, and for its future more broadly. While the 2023 spy balloon incident may not seem as grave as Sputnik was in 1957, we are likewise in a moment of reckoning with a rival power whose ascent requires clear comprehension and priorities for the future. This is not only a question of quibbling over antique maps or cultural relics. The South China Sea is where these antiquarian claims intersect with current geopolitics, navigation rights, and access to natural resources.¹³ Understanding the histories and mythologies of the region will hopefully offer a clear framework for an equitable and rules-based future in the South China Sea. Going back to China's beginnings and moving briskly to the present day, this study aims to emphasize the importance of how we frame that history, even in the ancient past. The echoes of perceived past greatness and past humiliations surround us today.¹⁴

Myths of Imperial Control and Cultural Continuity

The written record from the Bronze and Iron Age dynasties of China extends back to about 1600 BCE, with mythology stretching back another thousand years or so, leading some to refer to five millennia of Chinese history. But even in terms of the written record that we do have, the Shang bronzes and oracle bones make China the longest continuous civilization or culture, though how we define that culture and its continuity may be contested.

The Xia (mythological), Shang (c. 1600–1045 BCE), and Zhou (1045–256 BCE) dynasties were based in northern China in the Yellow River Valley, the site of the first two millennia of what we call Chinese civilization. Defining Chinese culture or civilization is not simply an intellectual exercise since it constitutes some of Beijing's territorial claims today. In defining Chinese culture, we might start with a shared written language, a rich philosophical tradition featuring Confucian and Daoist texts, sericulture (silk making) and distinctive foodways, traditions of governance by a Confucian-educated elite, or some combination of these components. The degree to which we can call this "China" or "Chinese" is a rich question best left for another forum.¹⁵ But

for the purposes of this section, we can consider the territories, culture, and administrative limits of these early kingdoms, and the empires that followed them, with an eye to the extent of incorporation of what we call the South China Sea and the southern coast and islands.

In brief, the South China Sea (called simply the South Sea or *Nanhai* in Chinese; called the East Sea in Vietnamese; and with portions called the West Philippine Sea in the Philippines) was not administered in any way whatsoever by the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. These three kingdoms were focused in the Yellow River Valley in the north of what is today the PRC. The people of the south, like the nomads to the north, were considered alien to the emerging culture of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. Proto-Confucian cultural values of filial piety in the Zhou world dictated that reverence for elders and ancestors should entail ritual burials and shrines at which sacrifice could be made, both by individual families and by the virtual family of the state. This early identifiable trend and marker of civilization in the Yellow River Valley cultures made both the horseback northern nomads and the boat-dwelling southern fishers clearly barbarians, and in a world apart. What we today consider Chinese civilization was defined in contrast to, and conflict with, these surrounding peoples and regions, some of which are inside today's borders of the PRC.¹⁶

And so, with no evidence in the Xia, Shang, or Zhou of governance of southern China, let alone the South China Sea, we can jump to the establishment of the brief first unified imperial dynasty of the Qin (221–206 BCE), from which some scholars assert we derive our word, “China.”¹⁷ The Qin carried on the northern focus of previous rulers of the Yellow River Valley, extending its territory to the south where it encountered the foreign Yue people. The northern emphasis is evident in the major cities and impressive garrisons that became the foundation for the realm of the following Han Dynasty, which would reign for over four centuries (202 BCE through 220 CE).¹⁸

Under the Qin and then the Han, portions of the southlands were incorporated through alliance and conquest, but this history was a complex and varied one. Southern “Yue” territories, broadly defined, extended into what is today Southeast Asia, and Yue culture was diverse and certainly distinct from the invading Qin and Han armies. Han expansion eventually overcame resistance efforts including those of the legendary Trưng Sisters of the first century

CE, who have gone on to become national heroes in modern Vietnam.¹⁹

What followed in some of the Han-conquered regions has sometimes been termed “Sinicization” or “Sinification” (“becoming Chinese” or *Hanhua*) by some historians, entailing the enforcement of Han bureaucratic rule and adoption of Han customs and language. The question of Sinicization is a flashpoint of contentious debate throughout Chinese history, including this early period as well as the governance of later “conquest” dynasties like the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing.²⁰ The question of Sinicization is an emotional one not only for conquered peoples, but also for Chinese students and scholars, as historian Xin Fan has noted.²¹ Sporadic resistance to Han rule continued, and not all of the distinctive Yue customs disappeared, which had included a separate language, short hairstyles, facial and body tattooing, and great ability in boat-building and sailing. Indeed, the Yue distinguished themselves from the Han people in their abilities and interests in seafaring.²²

Their short hair is remarkable in contrast to the Chinese tradition of men growing their hair long as a sign of respect to their parents—cutting the hair was considered a mutilation of the body, which was inherited from one’s parents.²³ These examples are intended to illustrate how essentially foreign the southern Yue were from the perspective of the early culture of the people we today call the Han. The grounding in Confucian virtues, especially filial piety, meant that long hair for men, often top-knotted or capped, was the norm, and shorn hair was the ultimate marker of barbarity or a lack of filial virtue.

The cultural delineations struck in this early period endured for centuries. Zhou Qufei, the twelfth-century Song Dynasty scholar wrote of the southern Dan (Tanka) people that they “use boats as homes, treat water as if it were land, make a living off the sea.”²⁴ These characteristics, were almost as foreign as could be imagined for northern Chinese people. The seventeenth-century scholar, Qu Dajun, wrote, also of the Dan/Tanka people:

All Dan women are known to eat raw fish and swim under water. In the past, they were seen as belonging to the family of dragons. It was because they dived into water with tattooed bodies in order to look like the offspring of dragons. They could move in the water for thirty, forty *li* without difficulty... The women are seen as sea otters and the men as dragons. They are really nonhuman.²⁵

There is perhaps no more extreme alienation of a fellow human than to make beasts of them. Qu's final line above is a clear indication that the inhabitants of the southern coasts and southern seas were not only uncivilized, they were considered to be utterly foreign and indeed subhuman. These examples serve to show, from earliest times, that the people of what is today southern China were long considered beyond the pale of Chinese civilization.

In his classic analysis of Hainan's relationship with early mainland regimes, Edward Schafer wrote that Hainan had always been a realm of contradictions, and he referred to the hyperbolic dynamics of the place in early mainlanders' encounters with the south:

The fierce and brilliant world of Hainan, surrounded by blank, primordial waters, provided little that the Chinese imagination could grasp. Mirroring no familiar conception, [Hainan] could paralyze the minds even of cultivated [mainland] men. Or if some comprehensible content could be discerned, it was likely to be a loathsome and deadly vision—a scene as unlike the good homelands far to the north as possible.²⁶

Schafer emphasized the foreignness of Hainan through the first thousand years in which mainland regimes were aware of it from the Han through the Song Dynasties. In his examination of poetry and official documents produced by mainland officials sent to Hainan either as representatives of the emperor, or as exiles, Schafer finds a land of potentially Edenic splendors, but more often of terrors almost beyond the reaches of imagining.

Today, Beijing's refers to the Han Dynasty in its claims of the South China Sea. It was indeed during the Han that Hainan Island was incorporated into a mainland regime for the first time, with the establishment of a garrison on Hainan, across the treacherous ten nautical miles of the Qiongzhou Strait. But today, Beijing's official statements go on to date claims to the entire South China Sea to this same period. Here is one 2020 example from the Chinese ambassador to Canada, echoing verbatim elements of the 2016 Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement above:

Chinese activities in the South China Sea date back over 2,000 years. As early as the second century B.C., Chinese sailors explored the South

China Sea and discovered what they called Nanhai Zhudao (aka the South China Sea islands). Well documented by both Chinese and foreign historical materials and archaeological digs, there is evidence of ancient crops, wells, houses, temples, tombs, and inscriptions left by Chinese fishermen on some of the islands and reefs of the South China Sea islands. Many foreign documents illustrate clearly that for a lengthy historical duration, only Chinese people lived and worked on these South China Sea islands. Throughout this long process of exploring and developing the South China Sea islands, the Chinese people have gradually increased and improved China's side rights in the South China Sea. These include historic claims, which have in turn been upheld by successive Chinese governments.²⁷

The activities, artifacts, and records referred to here are not those of official Han embassies, since those did not extend beyond the coast of Hainan Island. It is more likely that these are artifacts of locals, and as noted above, it is contestable that these southern barbarians could be considered culturally "Chinese" in the continuous sense that is suggested here. The foundation of the claim rests on the contention that Chinese cultural or civilizational continuity through this period is sufficient for contemporary geopolitical claims. Some archaeological finds suggest trade in Chinese goods through the region, but this does not mean the area was governed by a mainland regime.²⁸ One rather recent claim to continuity of Chinese presence in the region has come in the form of "route books" (*genglubu*), used by fishers especially from Hainan to navigate the sometimes-dangerous shoals. Johannes L. Kurz recounts the contrast between the careful scholarship by historians compiling these texts, like Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling, and the more bombastic and totalizing claims made in the popular press and by officials about the "route books." Ultimately, Kurz finds that no evidence of the books' claims of a 600-year legacy is offered in any of these accounts.²⁹ Authenticating the "route books" would not serve to establish administration of the South China Sea, but rather maritime knowledge on the part of Hainanese fishers, far from the northern centers of imperial culture.

With the brief Sui (581–618 CE) and longer Tang (618–907) dynasties, the southern regions of the current PRC map, including the coast and Hainan,

were more thoroughly incorporated into the northern-based empires. Still, the southern coast remained a distant place within the imperial worldview. It was considered to be fraught with dangers from diseases and hostile local people. This perception is evident in the use of southern regions, especially the island of Hainan, as a destination of banishment for ministers and scholar-officials. Historian, Zhou Quangen, in his study of Sui and Tang officialdom on Hainan, notes that the location of “banishment” on a list of punishments falls between torture and decapitation, which provides a clear sense of the island’s political and cultural place within the realm.³⁰ A series of high-ranking officials were banished to Hainan as a result of factional struggles in the court, or the act of “loyal remonstrance,” the dangerous Confucian act of publicly lecturing an emperor on his failings, and accepting the ensuing punishment for this patriotic opposition.³¹ Today in Haikou, the provincial capital of Hainan, the Temple of the Five Ministers honors those officials banished to the island. Some of the officials died in their southern exile, and others were summoned back by later emperors and a return to posts more suitable to their talents. In the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the exile to Hainan of one of the most illustrious scholar-officials of Chinese history, Su Shi (Su Dongpo), and the writings he produced, both confirmed mainland views of the island as uncivilized and dangerous, and also humanized the island’s inhabitants and depicted a bountiful world of natural wonders.³²

Maps of the Mongols, the Ming, and the Manchus

The Mongol conquest and the Mongol-ruled Yuan Dynasty that followed was in some ways the greatest cataclysm of Chinese history. To point to the later “Sinicization” of the Mongol rulers is only one part of a complex history that saw the utter devastation of the Song political world. The Song had first been forced to acknowledge that it was one among equals, in relation to its northern neighbors, and then, of course, the Mongol conquest confirmed Song inferiority at least on the battlefield. Advocates for the continuity of Chinese history would argue for the “Sinicization” of the Mongol rulers and/or the endurance of Chinese cultural traditions through this period. But, while there are many aspects of the Mongol Yuan that were cataclysmic, it was also the first empire to rule from what is today Beijing, and it was the first empire to establish a

map that began to take the shape of the current PRC, including what is today Xinjiang, Tibet, and northeastern China. In this way, quintessential aspects of “China,” including the shape of the map and the site of the capital, exist because of, not in spite of, the Mongol conquest. The Mongol-ruled Yuan lasted less than a century (1279–1368), and internal rebellions led to its overthrow and the establishment of the Ming Dynasty. The Ming was ruled by people we would today call Han Chinese, and under its rule, the map shrank to exclude the far reaches of the northwest and northeast, as well as the southwest. The Han-ruled Ming never reached the extent of the Mongol Yuan’s claims.

Administering the frontiers was a fraught affair in the aftermath of the Mongol Yuan rule, and it was only in the Ming that the Great Wall took on its recognizable shape, snaking along the north of “China proper,” or the culturally Han region, excluding large swathes of territory now claimed by the PRC. In the south, as Chinese scholars have shown, questions of administration have reflected the kinds of priorities a colonizing authority have long tried to negotiate: to what extent should funds and resources be dedicated to infrastructure, services, and other investments; and to what extent should funds and resources be dedicated to military garrisons and policing/pacification actions directed at the locals.³³

One crucial success of the Ming set it in contrast to the previous Mongol dynasty: whereas the Mongols failed in their maritime adventures, including attempts to conquer the Japanese archipelago, the Ming “treasure voyages” of the early 1400s displayed the wealth and splendor of the new dynasty to neighbors to the south and as far west as the Swahili coast. The voyages, led by the Muslim eunuch Admiral Zheng He, demonstrated a brief but glorious and massive investment in the projection of sea power.³⁴ Today, the voyages can be used to fit into a longer narrative of maritime greatness, and scholars continue to scrutinize and verify historical records to show the scale of the splendid ships.³⁵

The Ming crumbled first in the face of devastating internal rebellions and then foreign invasion. From what is today northeastern China, but was then beyond the reach of Ming administration, the Manchus (formerly the Jurchens) were ushered across the northern border by bewildered and desperate Ming officers who considered the invading foreigners to be more palatable than the rebels that had seized the capital and sacked much of the realm.

The conquering Manchus forced all Chinese males to shave their forelock and adopt the queue hairstyle, but they also returned their conquered realm to a period of wealth and splendor. The imperial map of the Ming had shrunk compared to the Yuan, to exclude all but the heartland or “China proper,” but under the Manchu Qing, the map again expanded to incorporate Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and of course “Manchuria” to the northeast. The non-Han Mongol and Manchu “conquest dynasties,” therefore gave us roughly what is today the map of the PRC, and yet they also bequeathed a challenge to the Chinese nationalist, or the Han chauvinist: how to manage this inheritance of conquest and subjugation and turn it into a narrative of Chinese cultural continuity and greatness. The answer has shifted over the decades. In 1967, David M. Farquhar noted that the Maoist option was to simply not look too closely, as the field of history was especially impoverished, even by the standards of the Cultural Revolution, when it came to the study of Mongol or Manchu history.³⁶

More recently, the Hong Kong-born author, Jeanette Ng reminds us that “The shrunken vision of the CCP is not the only way to see the Chinese past. There is no one true way of being Chinese.”³⁷ Recent scholarship on the maritime world of the “High Qing” (1644–1800) has embraced this complexity. It gives a much richer picture than the Sinicization narrative or the “Western Impact” model that, in much foreign scholarship on China, had implied a dormant and static Qing awaiting the magic touch of foreign commerce.

In the 2023 two-volume *Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean*, dozens of leading scholars help correct these modes of thinking about the region and make sense of an enormously complex history. In Chapter 30, Xing Hang writes of the “multi-polar trading environment” of both the Ming and the Qing eras. While he highlights the increase in Chinese mercantile activity through the Qing, he also notes that this was often not state-sanctioned activity, but indeed was a result of Ming loyalist activities that blended into what many would consider piracy during the Qing dynasty. Hang refers to “Ming loyalist creoles” who expanded a Chinese cultural footprint throughout the Pacific during the Qing, rather than seeing this as smooth imperial administration.³⁸ In the same volume, Ronald C. Po also highlights the complexity and hybridity of the history of the region:

Unlike the PRC government in the present century, no exact boundary such as the nine-dash line had been established for the maritime space the Qing court claimed. Instead, time and space, coupled with relationality, malleability, mutuality, and contrariety, were the foundations of the Qing's justifications for its sovereignty across the western end of the Pacific Ocean.³⁹

Also in this new collection, Daria Dahpon Ho writes about the colorful and complex maritime world of the High Qing, and how personal vendettas, shifting identities, and of course piracy shaped a diverse region. Ho vividly recounts attempts to secure trading ports (or pirate nests, depending on one's perspective), and explains episodes of violence and betrayal involving the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese, and then the Zheng regime (Koxinga) on Taiwan, followed by the English as "the world's first great drug dealers."⁴⁰

Following the "High Qing," imperial decline in the nineteenth century is a story well known to all Chinese school children. The devastation of internal rebellions and wars of foreign imperialism dragged the Qing and its subjects through a century of agony. This would become known as the "century of humiliation," and while it has become a shibboleth in Chinese nationalist history and memory, it represents a reality of inestimable devastation on the part of millions of Chinese people. Anti-Manchu revolutionaries, Nationalists, and then the Chinese Communist Party would strive to rescue, revive, or rejuvenate China after this period.⁴¹

From the End of the Qing to Today

A crucial decision was made after the fall of the Qing and in the halting first steps of the Republic of China, to preserve the map of the empire as essentially the same map of the new government. As Joseph Esherick points out, maintaining this map was by no means a foregone conclusion, and it met with resistance around the frontiers, where Tibetan and Mongolian leaders, for example, declared that their allegiance had been to the Great Qing, not necessarily to any who might claim the ruling authority in Beijing, or Nanjing for that matter.⁴² Conceptions of China and its map were not a complacent default, or "factory setting," to which any new regime might revert. Remember

that the China of the Ming (“China proper,” ruled by ethnic Han Chinese) was much smaller than the Mongol Yuan or Manchu Qing maps, and after the Qing’s collapse, it was the map of these two non-Han dynasties that the Han nationalists of the early Republic claimed.

Some early leaders of the republic were willing to sacrifice territories in the interest of good relations with neighbors, support for a nascent revolution, or even the self-determination of the peoples there. Sun Yat-sen, for example, was ready to surrender Hainan as a colony to the Japanese in the 1920s, and the fate of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Manchuria were also in flux.⁴³

Taiwan had been a Japanese colony from 1895, and Hainan was also occupied by the Japanese from 1939 until 1945. During the Republican period (1912–1949), the strategic importance and economic potential of Hainan and the South China Sea was evident and widely discussed. An early Republican survey noted the island’s possibilities for economic development but bemoaned the corrupt mainland officials who used it as a political springboard and source of exploitation for graft and personal gain.⁴⁴ Besides the Japanese and mainland Chinese governments, the French in Indochina also looked to Hainan and the surrounding waters as their sphere of influence.⁴⁵ Imperial forces continued to see the South China Sea as a site of rivalry and a crossroads of great power. As in the late Qing, the Republican period saw a government too weak to back up its expansive territorial and maritime claims with effective military force.

As Hayton and Ulises Granados point out, the current claims in the region were first articulated in the early republic. Related to the priorities noted in Esherick’s examination of the empire-to-nation transition, the Chinese republic aimed to articulate boundaries in keeping with conceptions of a modern state, and with the urgency of a new nation that was beset by potentially hostile neighbors.⁴⁶ The final decades of the “century of humiliation” were perhaps the most devastating, since they saw the Civil War tear China apart and the genocidal Japanese occupation of much of China.

On Hainan, the Communist forces waged a struggle against the Nationalists that was often severed from the mainland forces in terms of supply lines and even basic communications. The Communist forces allied with the indigenous Li people to sustain a resistance movement that grew out of the island, and ultimately helped to bring about the end of both the Japanese and Nationalist occupations. The isolation of the Hainan Communist struggle,

even beyond the 1950 Communist takeover, carried on a perennial island resistance to outsiders, including mainland Chinese.⁴⁷ In terms of official Party histories of Hainan written during the PRC, one typical summary is found below, in the Party history of ethnic struggles, compiled by the Hainan Provincial Gazetteer/Chronicle Office:

During the nearly 2,000 years from the Western Han to the Qing Dynasty, the ethnic minorities in Hainan continued to fight against the oppression of the *feudal dynasties and strive for national survival* [my emphasis]. There were more than 70 uprisings large and small...In modern times, Hainan has become a place where imperialism and feudal warlords have competed for plunder. Therefore, the ethnic minorities of Hainan and the local Han people have fought heroically against imperialism and feudal warlords to protect their homeland.⁴⁸

This account goes on to cite the shared struggle of the Hainan Li people with the Communist guerrilla fighters on Hainan, against the Nationalists and the Japanese, effectively placing the alienation and exploitation of the southern island in the realms of previous regimes, with the Communists making common cause not with the authorities, but with the ethnic rebels who fought to overthrow them. While this fits neatly with revolutionary propaganda, it certainly does not square with claims to cultural or administrative continuity of maritime claims. The lineage of resistance here is with those who fought the administrators and efforts at control.

In the early days of the PRC, Beijing's decision to join the Korean War on the part of the Democratic Republic of Korea, or North Korea, also had implications in the South China Sea. Amidst the Communists' threat of taking Taiwan and the revolutionary movements in French Indochina and throughout the wider region, anxieties about the spread of communism shaped the politics of the day, leading to the blockade of the Taiwan Strait by the US Navy's Seventh Fleet.

Within the South China Sea, although Beijing was not capable of projecting power on air or at sea, it projected a narrative of strength and emergent regional power status, inheriting the bold maritime claims of the Republican regime it had banished to Taiwan. Beijing also asserted that this was the end

of the “century of humiliation,” and that Mao Zedong and the Communist Party had inherited the map but not the frailty of the late Qing and the Republic. The famous Cultural Revolution drama “Red Detachment of Women” expressed a confident and dominant chauvinism in the region, particularly over Hainan and the southern seas.⁴⁹

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Hainan would move into the “reform and opening” period along with the rest of China. For Hainan, this meant an effort to finally gain provincial status, and administrative separation from Guangdong. Attempts to build up its tropical agriculture and tourist sectors, among others, would finally pay off when in 1988, Hainan was granted provincial status—the smallest province in terms of dry land, and the newest provincial addition to the PRC. This triumph took place under a cloud of corruption that would continue to dog Hainan’s development through the decades to come.⁵⁰

Questions remained about Hainan’s ability to thrive with its new provincial status. Its ability not only to avoid extreme corruption issues, but also to assert its role as provincial overseer of the South China Sea would become increasingly important as well. The role of sub-state actors in the South China Sea are important, and Audrye Wong has written insightfully on provincial actors and their economic and security roles. The role of Hainan as a provincial entity is complex, and the behavior of provincial actors may sometimes mitigate regional tensions, and in other cases, may aggravate them.⁵¹ In economic terms, provincial authorities like Hainan Province’s Department of Oceans and Fisheries are sometimes an important line of strategic claims, at the intersection of economic development and security.⁵²

In recent years, Hainan has emerged as a luxury tourist destination, but issues of corruption have remained in the headlines. Ocean Flower Island (Haihuadao) is an artificial strip of land, but very unlike the South China Sea artificial land formations that now house military installations and have attracted global attention in the past decade. Ocean Flower Island is a massive theme park and hotel development near Hainan’s Danzhou City, initially touted as the world’s most expensive commercial development ever, at \$25 billion. It is also the site of controversy related to corruption, environmental damage, and overheated real estate development. The affiliation of the project with Evergrande’s spectacular failure and the downfall of Zhang

Qi, the Party chief of Haikou, for corruption made it still more emblematic of systemic challenges not only in Hainan, but throughout the PRC. Recent moves to make all of Hainan a massive “free-trade zone” have shown the island to be open for global business, even as Beijing’s recent actions in Hong Kong have threatened to chill the economy there.⁵³

Hainan’s role in reproducing Beijing’s narrative of the region has also become increasingly important as more mainland tourists visit the island. Recently, a spectacular new Museum of the South China Sea has opened near the fishing village of Tanmen, which is also near the site of the annual Bo’ao Forum for Asia. This forum was initially touted as the “Asian Davos,” but in about two decades, it has become largely an opportunity for recitation of talking points and the occasional diplomatic flap caused by “wolf warrior” diplomats violating protocol in an attempt to assert dominance. The proximity of Bo’ao and the new museum is deliberate, since the museum is a convenient afternoon outing for Forum attendees. One recent visitor to the Forum and the museum remarked that the latter was “a vast, empty, museum concerning the South China Sea. The investment in the museum must have been huge, it was almost totally devoid of visitors, and the sheer scale of the museum indicated that China was not going to move on South China Sea issues in a thousand years, figuratively speaking.”⁵⁴ This final line indeed reflects the effort to portray an immovable permanence to the excessive maritime claims of China in the region. Isaac Kardon has recently noted this inflexibility as being key to Beijing’s policy in the South China Sea. Its aim is to establish a presence and reshape aspects of the rules-based order to suit its current needs.⁵⁵

Sustainable Futures in the South China Sea

The development of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ran parallel to the “rise of China” through the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. UNCLOS is still relatively new on the world stage, but it received a decisive endorsement in 2016 when the Philippines and China had their claims assessed by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague. Still, Beijing can point to the failure of Washington to ratify UNCLOS, even though it signed the treaty and is widely understood to act in a way that is in compliance with it. Several major recent works of scholarship from legal

scholars, historians, and political scientists emphasize the importance of fully endorsing the rules-based order, especially as Beijing continues to flout it in the South China Sea. Better understanding the history of the region and the ways in which that history is distorted and deployed to bolster Beijing's claim may not resolve the real threats to stability and peace in the region, but it will help to counter that distorted narrative and present one that is based on the rules-based international order that all parties are so deeply invested in.

As far as American activities, Gregory Poling notes in his recent book, "Forging a network of agreements to manage the South China Sea will be difficult and drawn out. But it is the only way forward."⁵⁶ Understanding the PCA ruling is essential, but it is also important to understand the historical, cultural, and legal perspective of regional players like the Philippines, as expressed by advocates like Justice Antonio T. Carpio.⁵⁷ Recent scholarship argues for a richer understanding of Southeast Asian players in the region and resisting the easy narrative of a US-China rivalry. Indeed, some would argue that there is neither a Chinese nor an American solution to the South China Sea. The only solution will come through hearing multiple actors in the region, and together charting a sustainable path forward.⁵⁸

These diverse views are not as well funded as the positions of either Washington or Beijing. Beijing's narrative, as represented by the nine-dash line, has even found its way into the background of recent blockbuster films, including *Abominable* (2019), and perhaps more dubiously, *Barbie* (2023), where an inexplicable dotted line in a briefly shown child-drawn map was enough to convince Vietnamese authorities that the film should not be released in their country.⁵⁹ While the line has been dismissed as an unintentional coincidence by representatives of the *Barbie* film, the lack of awareness of, and sensitivity to, regional players like the Philippines, Vietnam, and others is unfortunate. Furthermore, the trend of accommodating the political, historical, and cultural preferences of PRC audiences and censors in the pursuit of profits has been a common theme for major American cultural exports, including film and television.

Americans should also be mindful of the ways in which, intentionally or not, some public diplomacy proclamations, scholarly publications, and other cultural interactions can similarly pander to Chinese official audiences. This is more subtle than *Barbie*, perhaps, but equally welcome in Beijing. It may in-

clude the simple conflation of the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party; or it may entail assuming a flattering (but monolithic) timeless cultural mindset of the Chinese people, which serves to describe the ancient past as well as it does the current regime. While most cultural essentialism is fundamentally racist and ignorant, this particular brand can be flattering, since it reinforces the place of the current regime within the long duration of Chinese history, portraying the PRC as the latest to hold the Mandate of Heaven. Not only does it ignore the regime's half-century attempt to pulverize most remnants of that culture and history (from burning books to desecrating the tomb of Confucius), but it flatters the current leaders that they draw on the wisest traditions in their imperial past.⁶⁰

While some observers of China see a confident rising superpower, anxieties about history naturally plague a regime that has done so much to demolish its own culture and is reluctant to reckon with that destruction. While some foreign observers, from elder statesmen to professional wrestlers, help Beijing to smooth over the cracks in an effort to control the past, silencing the voices of history will perhaps prove to be an impossible challenge.⁶¹ These cultural anxieties reflect China's desire to retroactively impose continuity on a long historical record that is much more complex than any continuous and homogenous culture or civilization. In concluding a 2006 lecture titled "Qing Culturalism and Manchu Identity," Frederic Wakeman asked "Can Panglossian global capitalism coexist with a fragile and even touchy Chinese nationalism?... Citizens of China, I think, have every reason to be proud of their country's international progress during the 1980s and 1990s. But their pride has not yet produced a serene confidence about the future of the Han nation."⁶²

Understanding this insecurity and the "touchy nationalism" is essential to understanding Hainan, the South China Sea, and Beijing's role there. Alarm at the brinkmanship and regular confrontations that take place on the surface of the seas can crowd out discussions of deeper currents in history and cultural identity; but they are certainly interwoven and cannot be fully understood without each other.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank Lucas Myers at the Wilson Center for his leadership, as well as others in the 2022–23 cohort of Wilson Fellows for their suggestions and guidance. All opinions and all mistakes are mine.
2. John Norton Moore, *The Struggle for Law in the Oceans: How an Isolationist Narrative Betrays America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).
3. Xinhua, “Why U.S. Overreaction to Chinese Airship is Ludicrous, Dangerous?” February 25, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230225/7803d6f11fa7491eb7538e39d0ec92c7/c.html>
4. Emily Feng and Lexie Schapitl, “How a Chinese ‘Spy Balloon’ Prompted the U.S. to Scour the Skies,” *NPR*, February 14, 2023 <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/14/1156731462/china-spy-balloon-timeline-key-dates>
5. Darragh Roche, “Chinese Spy Balloon Puts U.S. Back on Cold War Footing,” *Newsweek*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/chinese-spy-balloon-puts-us-back-cold-war-footing-1778831>
6. Xinhua, “Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site Can Launch New-Generation Rockets,” May 11, 2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinavoices/2023-05/11/content_85284392.htm
7. “The People’s Government of Hainan Province: Geographical Location,” December 3, 2021, <http://en.hainan.gov.cn/englishgov/Location/202112/047feebb898b4633b199d15fcfa7f6a8.shtml>
8. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on China’s Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and Interests in the South China Sea,” July 12, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201607/t20160712_679472.html
9. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Statement on the South China Sea,” July 7, 2015, https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1330&cs=34144
10. United States Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, “Limits in the Seas, No. 150, People’s Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” January 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>
11. Permanent Court of Arbitration, “The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China),” July 12, 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>.
12. Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Hayton expands and updates aspects of this work in his chapter “Why China Built Its New Islands: From Abstract Claim to Concrete Assets” in Anders Corr, ed., *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Seas* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 41–73.
13. Timothy Brook, *Mr. Selden’s Map of China: Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 10.
14. Timothy Brook, Michael van Walt van Praag, and Miek Boltjes, “The Presence of the Past,” in Brook, van Walt van Praag, Boltjes, eds., *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 194–195. The use of history in contemporary Chinese politics is a rich and important subject, explored by many scholars,

- notably Rana Mitter in *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); and for the Wilson Center, Emily Matson in "From Regional to National: Northeastern Scholars and the National Discourse on the War of Resistance," from Lucas Myers, ed., *Essays on China and U.S. Policy, 2021–22* (The Wilson Center, 2022), 261–282, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/2021-22-wilson-china-fellowship-essays-china-and-us-policy>; also Abraham Denmark and Lucas Myers on the memory of the Korean War, "Eternal Victory," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 2020), <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/korea-70-years-on/eternal-victory>
15. Bill Hayton is again an excellent source here, in *The Invention of China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).
 16. Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 128–154.
 17. Geoff Wade, "The Polity of Yelang and the Origins of the Name 'China,'" *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 188 (May 2009) https://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp188_yelang_china.pdf
 18. See Lewis (2006) for notes on the Wang Mang interregnum (9–23 CE), and the considerable variation across different periods of the Han, most notably the Former and Latter Han (23–24, 69, 100).
 19. Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Penguin, 2016), 137–138.
 20. This important debate was sharpened and clarified, if not settled, in an exchange between Evelyn Rawski and Ping-Ti Ho, first in Rawski's "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no.4 (1996), 829–850; and Ho's "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998), 123–155.
 21. Xin Fan, "The Anger of Ping-Ti Ho: The Chinese Nationalism of a Double Exile," *Storia della Storiografia* 69, no. 1 (2016), 147–160. Ho believed that scholarly challenges to the sinicization narrative were intended to undermine Chinese cultural identity in a way similar to that of the Japanese propagandists in World War II, and this was part of the reason for his impassioned response to Rawski and the school of "New Qing History."
 22. Erica Brindley, "Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples, ca. 400–50 BC," *Asia Major* 16, no. 2 (2003), 1–32.
 23. With the arrival of Buddhism, the tonsure, or shaving of the head for a monk or nun was one of the most stubborn sticking points in the spread of the faith in China. Then, in 1645, the new Manchu Qing dynasty promulgated the queue edict, which stipulated that men must braid their hair in a long Manchu-style queue, but more grievously, men must also regularly shave their forelock. It was this second stipulation that led to massive uprisings after the Manchus had successfully conquered China proper and were consolidating their rule. See William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 22–23. The massacres of Han Chinese in the wake of the uprisings caused by the queue edict would inspire the anti-Manchu revolutionaries of the early twentieth century. See Peter Zarrow, "Historical Trauma: Anti-Manchuism and Memories of Atrocity in Late Qing China," *History and Memory* 16, no. 2 (2004), 67–107. Also see Alexander J. Serrano, "The Manchu Queue: A Complex Symbol in Chinese Identity" (2022),

- California State University, San Bernardino Master of Arts (History) Thesis, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1496/>
24. As cited in Helen F. Siu and Liu Zhiwei, "Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan: Ethnicity in the Pearl River Delta," in Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 285.
 25. As cited in Helen F. Siu and Liu Zhiwei (2006), 287.
 26. Edward H. Schafer, *Shore of Pearls: Hainan Island in Early Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 102.
 27. H.E. Cong Peiwu, "The History and Reality of the South China Sea Issue" September 13, 2020 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China, Canada), http://ca.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202009/t20200913_4615002.htm. This verbatim repetition, sometimes considered "message discipline" is an aspect of the foreign service culture that Peter Martin examines in *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
 28. Xinhua, "Chinese Archaeologists Discover Ancient Ceramics off Xisha Islands," May 10, 2007 <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/210346.htm>
 29. Johannes L. Kurz, "Gauging the South China Sea: Route Books (*genglubu*) since 1974," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 240 (December 2019), 1135–1143.
 30. Zhou Quangen, *Sui, Tang, Wudai Hainan renwu zhi* [Prominent figures on Hainan in the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties Periods] (Haikou: Sanhuan Publishing House, 2007), 171–173. Zhou elaborates on the degrees and levels within each punishment category, which might include torture, demotion, and/or banishment, or some combination of these.
 31. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the Hainan official, Hai Rui (1514–1587). See Ernst Wolff, "A Preliminary Study of Hai Jui: His Biography in the Ming-shih," in *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* (December 1970), 147–161.
 32. James M. Hargett, "Clearing the Apertures and Getting in Tune: The Hainan Exile of Su Shi (1037–1101)," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, Vol. 30 (2000), 141–167.
 33. Leading historians of Hainan, Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling, note that these questions were central in debates about the island in the Ming Dynasty. One of their studies draws a precise comparison between military spending on Hainan and funds dedicated to the maintenance of postal roads. This perennial question is one rare element of continuity in the relationship between mainland regimes and the southern island, and of course the ways in which it was addressed was constantly a subject of debate and disagreement. Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling, "Zhongshan zhengfu youxiao tongzhi de xiangzheng: Mingdai Hainan yidao kao [Symbol of effective central government rule: Research on post roads in Ming Dynasty Hainan]," in Yan Guanglin, ed., *Hainan Lishi Wenhua* [Hainan History and Culture], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012), 21–29.
 34. Kuei-Sheng Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of the Great European Discoveries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (July-September 1974), 347–359.
 35. Hu Xiaowei, "Zheng He baochuan chidu xin kao: Cong Quanzhou dongxi ta de chidu tanqi" [A New Study on the Scale of Zheng He's Treasure Ships—From the Scale of Quanzhou's

- East and West Pagodas], *Haijiaoshi Yanjiu* [Journal of Maritime History], Vol. 2 (2018), 107–116.
36. David M. Farquhar, “Chinese Communist Assessments of a Foreign Conquest Dynasty,” *China Quarterly*, No. 30 (April-June 1967), 79–92.
 37. Jeannette Ng, “China’s Vast History Can’t Be Caught in the CCP’s Net,” *Foreign Policy* (October 1, 2019) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/01/chinas-vast-history-cant-be-caught-in-the-ccps-net/>
 38. Xing Hang, “The Resurgence of Chinese Mercantile Power in Maritime East Asia, 1500–1700,” in Ryan Tucker Jones and Matt K. Matsuda, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean: Volume 1, The Pacific Ocean to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 682, 697.
 39. Ronald C. Po, “China and the Sea in Literature and (Mis)Perception,” in Jones and Matsuda, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean: Volume 1, The Pacific Ocean to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 563. Po furthermore makes an important point about the four major seas in the Qing realm, and the fact that our current “southeast China-centrism” is misguided in historical terms. Po emphasizes the Bohai Sea, and the more direct administration of it by the Qing, as contrasted with the southern seas. This shift in historical priorities would help balance the misperception of the Qing as inert or hermetic, in the “Western impact” model that persists in some discussions of China and Chinese history.
 40. Daria Dahpon Ho, “Naval Rivalry in the Western Pacific: Portugal, England, Holland, and Koxinga, 1600–1720” in Jones and Matsuda, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean: Volume 1, The Pacific Ocean to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 674.
 41. Mark Metcalf, “The National Humiliation Narrative: Dealing with the Present by Fixating on the Past” *Education About Asia*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2020) <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/the-national-humiliation-narrative-dealing-with-the-present-by-fixating-on-the-past/>
 42. Joseph W. Esherick, “From Qing to China” in *China in Revolution: History Lessons* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, [2006] 2022), 111–144.
 43. Jeremy Murray, *China’s Lonely Revolution: The Local Communist Movement of Hainan Island, 1926–1956* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 52–53.
 44. Peng Chengwan, *Diaocha Qiongya shiye baogao shu* [A Report on the investigation of the industry and commerce of Hainan], (Haikou: Hainan shuju, 1920).
 45. M. Savina, *Monographie de Hainan* [Monograph on Hainan] (Hanoi: Cahiers de la Société de Géographie de Hanoi [17], 1929).
 46. Ulises Granados, “As China Meets the Southern Sea Frontier: Ocean Identity in the Making, 1902–1937.” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Fall 2005), 443–461.
 47. Murray, *China’s Lonely Revolution*.
 48. Hainansheng difangzhi ban’gongshi [Hainan Provincial Gazetteer Office], ed., *Hainan shengzhi: Minzu zhi* [Hainan Provincial Gazetteer: Nationality/Ethnicity Volume] (Haikou: Nanhai chuban gongsi, 2006), 737.
 49. Jeremy Murray, “Taming the Southern Frontiers through Song and Dance: Chauvinisms (Han and Male) in *The Red Detachment of Women*,” in Paul Gladston, Beccy Kennedy, and

- Ming Turner, eds., *Visual Culture Wars at the Borders of Contemporary China: Art, Design, Film, New Media, and the Prospects of "Post-West" Contemporaneity* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2021), 179–200.
50. Hainan's corruption made international headlines in the 1980s in the "car scandal" that saw massive embezzlement of state funds and resources, especially fleets of imported cars. See Ezra Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 291–294.
 51. Audrye Wong, "More than Peripheral: How Provinces Influence China's Foreign Policy," *The China Quarterly*, 235 (September 2018), 735–757.
 52. Romi Jain, "China's Geoeconomic Diplomacy and the South China Sea Dispute: Promises and Pitfalls," in Nalanda Roy, ed., *Navigating Uncertainty in the South China Seas Disputes: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: World Scientific, 2021), 21–22.
 53. Xinhua, "Former Senior Provincial Official Confesses to Bribery Charges," July 9, 2020 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/09/c_139200977.htm; Reuters, "Authorities Turn Seized Home Towers at Evergrande's Resort Island to Rental, Commercial Use," November 7, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/business/authorities-turn-seized-home-towers-evergrandes-resort-island-rental-commercial-2022-11-08/>. On Hainan as a free-trade zone, see Seong Hyeon Choi and Luna Sun, "How Will China's Hainan Free-Trade Port Affect the Greater Bay Area and ASEAN?" *South China Morning Post* (April 8, 2023), <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3216325/how-will-chinas-hainan-free-trade-port-affect-greater-bay-area-and-asean>
 54. Quote and interview from author's private correspondence. Find the museum website here: <http://www.nanhaimuseum.org/>, and the Bo'ao Forum page here: <https://english.boaoforum.org/>
 55. Isaac B. Kardon, *China's Law of the Sea: The New Rules of the Maritime Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).
 56. Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 248. Poling further notes, "On the legal front, the most important thing the United States could do is ratify UNCLOS. The substantive arguments against the convention were laid to rest in 1994. An ideological minority has held the convention hostage in the Senate for too long." (252–253)
 57. Antonio T. Carpio, "Historical Facts in the West Philippine Sea," (undated), accessed here: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/228795733/The-Historical-Facts-in-the-West-Philippine-Sea#>; *The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea – Murillo Velarde Map* (2017), accessed here: <https://murillovelardemap.com/south-china-sea-dispute-philippine-sovereign-rights-jurisdiction-west-philippine-sea/>
 58. One recent example of a reminder to consider the many and diverse interests in the region, and the need for deft American diplomacy is by Lucas Myers, "Indonesia Should Be at the Heart of US Indo-Pacific Policy," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2023), <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/when-goods-cross-borders/indonesia-should-be-at-the-heart-of-us-indo-pacific-policy>. For more, see these comprehensive recent volumes: Donald K. Emmerson, ed., *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the Twenty-First Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon's*

- Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).
59. Fred Kaplan, "Does *Barbie* Need China?" *Slate* (July 21, 2023), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/07/barbie-china-map-vietnam-controversy.html>; "Vietnam Bans "Barbie" Movie Over South China Sea Map" *Reuters* (July 3, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-bans-barbie-movie-over-south-china-sea-map-2023-07-03/>
 60. This kind of civilizational, racial, or cultural analysis is ahistorical and it papers over the ruptures in Chinese history, from the arrival of Buddhism, to the Mongol and Manchu conquests, and much else. It implicitly or explicitly engages in the nationalist reading of "Sinicization" of all Chinese history and collapses any distinction between one regime or another, and Chinese civilization, as noted above. Naturally, this is an appealing take for a regime in Beijing that is desperate to forget the cultural demolition derby it enacted in the twentieth century. Perhaps most notable in this trend, on the flattering side, is Henry Kissinger in his *On China* (Penguin, 2011), which may account for his enduring status as what Beijing terms a "friend of China," and all that that mantle entails. See also Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Kissinger Went to China – Again," *Politico* (July 22, 2023) <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/07/22/why-kissinger-went-to-china-again-00107676>. Another notable example of cultural essentialism is Robert Kaplan, whose book, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Penguin, 2015) includes this line: "It is not ideas that Asians fight over, but space on the map." (33) Kaplan concerns himself mainly with the modern era, so this timeless line is especially puzzling. The enduring influence of Kaplan and Kissinger in some policy circles means that these old-fashioned fantasies about an eternal and essential Chinese mindset (let alone an Asian mindset) continue to spread.
 61. Anja Blanke, "How the CCP Has Failed to Obtain Control Over China's Collective Memory of the 1950s," in Anja Blanke, Julia C. Strauss, and Klaus Mühlhahn, eds., *Revolutionary Transformations: The People's Republic of China in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 256–274.
 62. Frederic Wakeman, "Qing Culturalism and Manchu Identity," (April 21, 2006), Lecture at the University of California, San Diego, available here: <https://www.uctv.tv/speakers/Frederic-Wakeman-97545> This was the third in a series of three lectures, "The Last Millennium of Chinese History: Transitions from Culture to Nation," in which Wakeman challenges the nationalist Chinese narrative of cultural continuity, emphasizing instead the themes of rupture and reinvention, and the need to examine each period on its own terms.

