The People’s Republic of China
Inheriting the People and Territory
from the Manchu Qing

A SINGLE FAMILY OF THE HAN CHINESE
AND FIFTY-FIVE MINOR ETHNIC GROUPS

Wontack Hong
Professor Emeritus, Seoul University

END OF THE TRIPOLAR FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

From the Opium War against the British in 1839-42 to the Taiping rebellion of 1851-64 that followed the flood and famine of 1846-8, the Qing dynasty was overwhelmed by the Han Chinese peasant rebellions and incursions by foreign commercial interests. The Qing could overthrow the Taiping with the assistance of foreigners and the hundreds of local militia organized by the Han Chinese gentry to defend their homes and fields. The Manchu banner forces’ reputation for invincibility was completely lost.

By accepting the very much extraterritorial and unequal treaty system with the Western powers and supporting the conservative Chinese scholar-generals in the provinces, the new leaders (of both Manchu and Han Chinese) at Beijing under the regency of the young Empress Dowager (Cixi) achieved the suppression of the peasant rebellions and gave their dynasty a new lease on life. The new provincial and regional armies with modern arms made peasant uprisings impossible.1

The ignorant and obscurantist Empress Dowager obstructed the introduction of Western technologies and
institutions, contrasting strikingly with the Meiji Restoration in Japan. The Qing court could not function as a modern central government. Westernization was left largely to the Chinese provincial authorities where the Han Chinese power had become dominant, and this put the Manchu court on the defensive. The Qing rulers eventually lost control of the country, which was to be dismembered by foreign powers.

Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 threw the mainland China and the Korean peninsula into a decade of imperialist rivalries. In order to check Japan, the Qing court invited Russia into Manchuria, but Japan won the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, taking over South Manchuria and the Korean peninsula.

Jiang Jieshi joined the revolution in 1911 that led to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Yuan Shi-kai (r.1912-16) negotiated with the revolutionaries the abdication of the Qing emperor in 1911, and emerged as president. Jiang also joined the third revolution against President Yuan who had declared his intention to become emperor. Yuan died in 1916 while preparing for his own exile.

THE QING RHETORIC OF “SINGLE FAMILY OF MANCHU AND HAN CHINESE”

Sun Yat-sen began in 1912 to argue for multiracial national unity. The Qing rhetoric of the “single family of Manchu and Han Chinese” could have been the source of inspiration for Sun to propose “the single family of the five races.” Sun stated that: “The root of a nation is its people. National unity means unifying the areas where Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans live as a single nation, and the union of these peoples as one people.”

According to Elliott (2001: 359-60), “the single family of the five races” strongly echoes the Qing formulation of empire, and corresponds to the five languages of the pentaglot Wudi Qingwen-jian, compiled at the order of the Qian-long emperor. Jiang Jieshi later argued “five peoples,” denying that there were “five races” at all.

Jiang began public life in 1918 by joining Sun Yat-sen’s Nationalist Party (Kuo-min-tang, KMT). Sun’s chief concern was to reunify China, which had become divided from a landed military family of Henan Province. He was the first Han Chinese to hold a viceroyalty (of the metropolitan province) and to become a grand councilor, without any academic qualification, and he enjoyed the unflinching support of Ci-xi, until her death in 1908. Yuan began his career in the Qing brigade commanded by Li Hung-zhang, which was dispatched to Korea in 1882 to prevent the Japanese advance. He was made the Qing commissioner at Seoul in 1885, and his activities there led to the Sino-Japanese War. He assumed the task of training a new Qing army.


6 Jiang married Mei-ling in December 1927, the youngest daughter of the Shanghai tycoon, Charlie Soong, and became a Christian. Mei-ling, born in Shanghai in 1899, was the sister of Qing-ling, wife of Sun Yat-sen. The marriage brought together military power, politics and finance. Mei-ling graduated from Wellesley College majoring in English literature. Commanding perfect English, she wrote many articles to publicize Jiang’s cause in the West. She became the first Chinese and second woman to address a joint session of the U.S.
Congress in 1943. She was one of the ten most admired women in the U.S. for more than two decades.

7 Mao Zedong was born into a well-to-do peasant family in 1893 in Hunan Province. Mao enlisted in the revolutionary army in 1911 to fight against the Qing dynasty. After graduating from a teacher's college, he worked as a school teacher and library assistant. Mao organized Communist guerrilla units in 1924-25.

8 The population of Manchu-guo was estimated at about 43 million in the early 1940s, including 2 million Koreans (increased from 0.8 million in the late 1920s).

9 The Korean communists found allies within the Chinese communist movement in North China, while the Korean nationalists worked with the KMT with a 3,000-man Korean Restoration Army. The Japanese mobilized as many as 16 percent of the Korean population (about 4 million people) as of 1944 and relocated them outside Korea to serve their war effort. See Eckert, et al. (1990: 322).

10 Soon after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Tibetans began fighting for their independence until subdued by the PRC army in 1969. among the warlords. Sun sent Jiang, who now had the rank of general, to Moscow in 1923 to study the Red Army. Jiang was not received by either Lenin or Stalin, but he met Trotsky and received advice from the Comintern. Jiang came back to become principal of the Huang-pu Army Officers Academy that was established in Guang-zhou on the Soviet model, and created a KMT party army. Stalin financed the Academy, sending Red Army generals as the military advisers, and supported Jiang until 1927 when he made a coup as the commander-in-chief of the revolutionary army and carried out a violent purge against the communists. Stalin supported social revolution through aid first to Nationalists and then to Communists. A massive campaign against the warlords by Jiang terminated the warlord era of 1916-27. Jiang became the head of a new central government established at Nan-jing in 1928.

When Sun Yat-sen died in 1925, Jiang succeeded him as leader of the Kuomintang and soon started purging communists. The Communists withdrew to the countryside and formed their own army and their own government. By 1931 a communist soviet area had been established in Jiang-xi with Mao heading its government. When Jiang was to renew a full-scale assault against the communists, the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1932, giving Mao a breathing space.7

PUPPET MANCHU-GUO ESTABLISHED BY THE JAPANESE

Japan had taken over the South Manchuria Railway and the leased territory on the Liao-dong peninsula from czarist Russia after the Russo-Japanese War. The staff officers of the Japanese Guan-dong Army engineered an attack on the Chinese garrison in Mukden (now Shen-yang) in September 1931 and, after occupying the whole of Manchuria (down to Shan-hai-guan) and a portion of Inner Mongolia, established the puppet Manchu-guo in 1932. The province of Rehe (Jehol) was annexed in 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933, and the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, Pu-yi, was installed as the emperor of Manchu-guo in March 1934.

Japan occupied Manchuria, but Jiang decided to fight against the communists first. After waging a series of battles against Jiang, Mao had to retreat with an army of 200,000 men
in October 1934 from southeastern China to the northwestern mountains of Yan’an in what came to be known as the Long March of 1934-5. Communist forces retreated 6,000 miles into northern Shaansi province.9

The Japanese historians regard the full-fledged Japanese invasion of China from 1937 to 1945 as following the footsteps of the Manchu conquerors of 1644 (see Fairbank and Goldman, 1992, p. 312).

THE QING LEGACY: PRC AS A UNIFIED POLYETHNIC STATE

The Communist Party had been gaining local peasant support after the Long March. Mao Ze-dong had emerged as the undisputed leader of the Communist movement. Mao placed the peasantry rather than the proletariat in the vanguard of revolution. When war with Japan broke out in 1937, the Communist army cooperated with Jiang’s forces and with the Allies, but upon Japan’s surrender the Communists defied Jiang’s command. Civil War raged in China in the period 1946-49. Mao brought an end to the Nationalist rule at Nan-jing in April 1949. Jiang’s nationalist forces were routed and fled to Taiwan. The People’s Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949.

The PRC inherited the entire territories conquered by the Qing rulers together with the Manchu homeland, and successfully retained Tibet by its own conquest effort.10 The PRC government pushed the idea of a “unified polyethnic state” (Tong-yi Duo-min-zu Guo-jia), stating that the PRC is “a state in which many nationalities are united,” and promising equality between all of fifty-five ethnic groups.11

The Manchu had initiated the redefinition of the Chinese people, the Chinese nation, and the Chinese territory, apparently preferring the concept of “national family” dominated by the Manchu. The former peoples of the Qing dominions became the modern Chinese people. The People’s Republic of China has attempted to redefine the Chinese people, the modern Chinese nation, and the Chinese territory possibly preferring the concept of “national family” dominated by the Han Chinese, believing in eventual sinicization.

According to Elliott (2001: 361), the modern Chinese national myth is that China is “a grand harmony of many lands...
groups themselves. One of the first regions where a need for the interethnic functions of Mandarin arose must have been the Liao-dong Peninsula, where speakers of Korean, Ruzhen, Qidan and Mongol may have had no other common language than Chinese. With the expansion of the Qing dynasty, the Liao-dong variety of Mandarin was taken to Beijing.”

Ostler (2005: 145) notes that: “Mandarin Chinese can distinguish ｗŏmen ‘we(excluding you)’, from ｚămen, ‘we (including you)’, just as Mongol and Manchu do … And … one can point to the absence of consonant clusters … Altaic languages cannot abide more than one consonant at the beginning of a syllable. … and strings of previously free monosyllables became congealed into longer words.” Ostler (2005: 146) further notes that: In Mandarin “there is still a tendency for direct objects to occur rather often before the verb, and ｔｈａｎ-phrases to occur before comparative adjectives, features that might be attributed to Altaic influence.”

Mandarin is today the Sinitic language characterized by the least number of tones and the largest share of polysyllabic vocabulary, with a tendency towards suffixal morphology and syntactic constructions of the Altaic type. This structural transformation has been termed the Altaicization of Chinese. Thus Janhunen (1996: 164-8) concludes that, with some exaggeration, Mandarin can even be characterized as a Manchurian language.

THE MANDARIN MAY WELL BE CHARACTERIZED AS A MANCHURIAN LANGUAGE!

The early forms of the Chinese language belong to the Tibeto-Sinitic type, characterized by features such as monosyllabic morpheme structure, tonal distinctions, and absence of morphology. The Altaic languages are characterized by a predominantly polysyllabic morpheme structure, absence of tones, and a highly developed suffixal morphology. The 268-year rule (1644-1912) of the mainland China by the Qing dynasty (1616-1912), however, not only fostered the sinicization of Manchurian languages, but also the Altaicization of Chinese.

In an article with a rather provocative title of “Mandarin, a Language of the Manchus: How Altaic?,” Okada contends that “the Mandarin dialect of Beijing in Qing times … was a strongly Altaicized form of Chinese.”

The presence of Northern Chinese dialect with Altaic typology may well be identified long before the Ming period (1368-1644). The Mandarin was carried from the Laio River basin to Beijing by the Qing dynasty. It was the only language with which the Manchus and the Han Chinese bannermen could communicate with each other. A northern variety of the Chinese language had apparently adopted Altaic typology, and was polished through the ethnically unifying banner system. One might say that Mandarin was formed upon an Altaic substrate (i.e., an Altaic underlying layer).

Mandarin is today the Sinitic language characterized by the least number of tones and the largest share of polysyllabic vocabulary, with a tendency towards suffixal morphology and syntactic constructions of the Altaic type.