Re-Orienting the Manchus: A Study of Sinicization, 1583-1795

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In 1967, Ping-ti Ho (何炳棣), the eminent historian of China from the University of Chicago, published a brief but sweeping overview article in *The Journal of Asian Studies* entitled "The Significance of the Ch'ing Period in Chinese History." In it, he highlighted five accomplishments of the Qing, of which the third was as follows: "[T]he Ch'ing is without doubt the most successful dynasty of conquest in Chinese history, and the key to its success was the adoption by early Manchu rulers of a policy of systematic sinicization." He went on to write, "In fact, so sinicized were the Manchus that much of what we regard as the orthodox Confucian state and society is exemplified not by earlier Chinese dynasties, but the Ch'ing period."[1]

Thirty years later, another eminent historian of China Evelyn S. Rawski of the University of Pittsburgh in her capacity as president of the Association for Asian Studies, published in the very same journal an article with an almost identical title, "Reenvisioning the Qing: The

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[1] Ping-ti Ho, "The Significance of the Ch'ing Period in Chinese History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (February 1967): 191, 192.

Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History." Rawski boldly took issue with what she called Ho's "sinicization thesis." Rather than sinicization, she wrote, "The key to Qing success, at least in terms of empire-building, lay in its ability to use its cultural links with the non-Han peoples of Inner Asia and to differentiate the administration of the non-Han regions from the administration of the former Ming provinces." As for the sinicization thesis itself, Rawski dismissed it as "a twentieth-century Han nationalist interpretation of China's past," and recommended instead a "Manchu-centered perspective" on the history of the Qing.[2]

Rawski's challenge soon elicited a rejoinder from Professor Ho, an article published two years later in the same journal entitled "In Defense of Sinicization." In it, he stood by the sinicization thesis and reiterated what he had stated thirty years earlier: "The Manchu court carried out a policy of systematic sinicization, with the implementation of the Ch'eng-Chu (Cheng-Zhu, 程朱) Neo-Confucian orthodoxy as its core, which not only facilitated the metamorphosis of the Manchu tribal-banner state into a unitary centralized empire, but also won the allegiance and dedication of the Confucian elite who saved the 'alien' dynasty by eventually wiping out the ethnic Chinese Taiping rebels in fourteen years (1851-64) of life-and-death struggle."[3]

The exchange between Rawski and Ho created a minor controversy within the field with regard to the sinicization thesis: To what extent did the Manchus, including both rulers and commoners, adopt the ways of life of the Han Chinese? The book under review contributes to the debate. It comes down squarely on the side of Ho and against Rawski as well as others whom the author lumps together as "the New Qing scholars." In addition to Rawski, these New Qing scholars would include, most prominently, Pamela Kyle Crossley and Mark C. Elliott, and possibly myself. Perhaps the one common element that they all share is the "Manchu-centered perspective" that Rawski advocated.

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[2] Evelyn S. Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (November 1996): 831, 833, 842.

[3] Ping-Ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (February 1998): 124.

Pei Huang (黃培) of Youngstown State University in Ohio is well known as the author of *Autocracy at Work: A Study of the Yung-cheng Period, 1723-1735* (1974). His present book is, according to him, the first book-length study of the sinicization of the Manchus. Its aim is "to show how they [the Manchus] adopted Chinese methods of governing and ways of life and what changes occurred among them during the years 1583-1795" (2), that is, from Nurhaci's first victory over his Jurchen rivals in southern Manchuria through the establishment of the Qing state in 1636 and the Manchu invasion of China proper in 1644 to the abdication of the Qianlong emperor.

Huang's book is organized topically. The first chapter on "the ancestry and ethnic composition of the Manchus" focuses on the Jurchens as the ancestral core of the Manchu people, but acknowledges that along the way other ethnic groups were absorbed as well. Consequently, "[d]espite their long ancestral line, the Manchus emerged in 1635 as a new people composed of four ethnic groups: Jurchens, Mongols, Chinese, and Koreans" (54). Chapter 2 traces the rise and triumph of the Manchus in Manchuria, the creation of the Eight Banner organization and the Qing state, and the conquest of China proper under Nurhaci and his two sons, Hong Taiji, and Dorgon.

Chapter 3 examines the "economic forces"—principally agriculture and trade—that early on encouraged the sinicization of the Manchus. The Jurchens were originally hunters, fishers, and gatherers, but by the time they had established themselves in the South Manchurian Plain in the fifteenth century, they had "[i]n all likelihood" become "predominantly farmers" (101). As the Jurchens took to farming, they were able to learn from Chinese fugitives and captives about "the Chinese way of farming" (101), and they soon "developed a way of life similar to that of Chinese farmers" (118). "The more the progress in Jurchen agriculture, the more the transmission of Chinese culture" (103). Another locale for the transmission of Chinese ways was the frontier markets where "Jurchen and Chinese traders met … exchanging commodities as well as ideas and values that made their products possible" (104). "The more frequent [sic] the Jurchens visited the markets, the more they were exposed to Chinese culture" (108).

Chapter 4 describes two types of inhabitants in pre-conquest Liaodong, or southern Manchuria: frontiersmen and transfrontiersmen. Chinese frontiersmen included those who had been captured and enslaved by the Jurchens; such people "played a unique part in spreading Chinese culture among the Jurchens" (140). Many were enrolled into the Chinese Banner (漢軍 *Hanjun*) units that Hong Taiji had created and "[t]here were countless cases of marriage between the Manchu and the Chinese in the banner system" (141). Transfrontiersmen, as Huang defines the term, differed from mere frontiersmen in that they had crossed the border from one ethnic group to another; in other words, they had "gone native." They would include Chinese who "had adopted the Jurchen way of life" (146), but who nevertheless helped spread Chinese ideas and values among the Jurchens. An example was Dahai (達海), "a famous linguist serving as Nurhaci's secretary who translated Chinese books into Manchu" (148). Aside from Chinese, there were Korean frontiersmen and transfrontiersmen as well and they too "had a role in transmitting Chinese ways of life to the Jurchens because of the close similarity between Korean and Chinese political institutions, religious and ethical concepts, and arts and letters" (155).

Chapter 5 describes the administrative and legal institutions that the early Manchu rulers copied and adapted from Ming China. These institutions, such as the Six Boards and the Great Qing Code, "helped greatly in the sinicization of the Manchus because they functioned in relationship with Chinese norms, mores, and values" (173). Chapter 6, "Transformation of Social Values," looks at some of the social changes that the Manchus underwent by borrowing, perhaps unconsciously, from the Chinese. These include the gradual abandonment of early marriage, of "ultimogeniture" (i.e., inheritance by younger or youngest sons), and of cremation, the adoption of Chinese-style personal names and, most markedly, the decline of the Manchus' military heritage. "As a consequence of these changes, the Manchus lost their martial virtues and became a privileged, idle, and dissipated class. The transformation of Manchu society completed the changes the administrative and legal institutions [had] left undone" (222).

Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 chronicle the cultural sinicization of the Manchus, as they forgot their native language and instead adopted spoken and written Chinese. Manchu poets, for example, "wrote in Chinese and followed the rules of Chinese poetry" (247). The early Qing rulers also built palaces and "developed [imperial court] ceremonies and regulations after the Ming model" (269), and they embraced the ethical tenets of Song Neo-Confucianism.

This book is, in short, a full-throttle, unabashed defense of Ping-ti Ho's sinicization thesis. Sinicization, according to Huang, had begun before the Manchus overran China proper and, indeed, even before they had acquired the name "Manchu." Thus, when the Jurchens took up agriculture in southern Manchuria and learned the "Chinese way of farming" from captive or refugee Chinese, they were already sinicizing. And the sinicization of the Manchus was all but complete, if not by the time of the Qianlong emperor's abdication in 1795, then by 1865 when an imperial edict by the Tongzhi emperor "allowed them and their officers to leave the banners, choose their occupations, and register as individuals under Chinese officials" (6). The 1865 edict, according to Huang, spelled "the end of the banner system for all intents and purposes" (220). As a result, "[a]doption of the Chinese ways of life by the Manchus meant a reorientation," hence, presumably, the title of the book. "They did not have to be hereditary warriors or confine themselves to Manchu quarters. They were able to join the people surrounding them"

(308).

The book is well sourced and well documented. The bibliography, which runs to thirty-five pages, includes a vast range of published and unpublished archival materials, official compilations, and genealogical records, as well as monographs in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and English. Only Manchu-language sources are noticeably absent, although the author seems doubtful of their utility or relevance. Referring to the Manchu archives, the author states "While they may contain some important messages, as the 'New Qing' historians speculate, there is also a possibility that these documents do not carry any information about sinicization" (8).[4]

There is, of course, no doubt whatsoever that the Manchus became to a great extent "sinicized." Nevertheless, there were some areas where sinicization never occurred. Even the author takes notice of certain "Manchu traditions [that] lingered in the Qing state structure," notably the Eight Banner system, the Office of the Imperial Household (內務府 *Neiwufu*), and the Court of Dependent Peoples (理藩院 *Lifanyuan*) (303). Yet, there were many other lingering Manchu traditions that Huang either minimizes or ignores altogether, such as the legal distinction between the Manchus (classified as "banner people" [旗人 *qiren*]) and most Han Chinese classified as "civilians" (民 *min*), the "Manchu cities" (滿城 *Mancheng*) in which many, perhaps most, of the banner population were quartered, the institution of dyarchy—or, as Huang calls it, "the principle of numerical equality between Manchu and Chinese appointees" (186)—by which half of all high governmental positions (what I call "ethnic slots") were reserved for officials of bannermen status, and the refusal of Manchu women to adopt the Han Chinese practice of foot-binding. All of these differences continued to the end of the Qing dynasty.

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[4] In the interest of full disclosure, I should confess that, unlike other New Qing historians, I do not read Manchu.

There are also instances of sinicization cited by Huang that were only partially effective. For example, among the "court ceremonies and palace regulations" that the early Qing rulers developed "after the Ming model" were "the court and official robes," which were "also adapted from the Ming originals" (269). In fact, however, the court and official robes of the Qing were quite different in appearance from those of the Ming and reflected the Manchus' equestrian origins.[5]

Another example of partial sinicization concerns Manchu naming practices, which, as Huang writes, "underwent a transformation," with the Manchus adopting Chinese-style personal names "of appropriate sound and with good meanings" (210). "By the end of the dynasty, for both cultural and political reasons, all Manchu clan names had been replaced by Chinese family names" (212). This is an overstatement. For down to the end of the dynasty, most bannermen, unlike the Han Chinese, refrained from using their family name and called themselves only by their personal name—a practice that Huang himself calls attention to in a note about Manchu authors in his bibliography: "the Manchus are always mentioned only by given names" (326).

Yet another area where sinicization was only partially successful was Manchu mourning practices. As the Manchus became sinicized, according to Huang, their mourning practices went "from simplicity to extravagance" and cremation gave way to full body burial (209). Unmentioned, however, is the fact that the Manchus, for whatever reason, did not adopt the Han Chinese practice of mourning the death of a parent for three years (actually, twenty-seven months). Instead, bannermen officials were required to step aside and mourn for only a hundred days, after which they could resume their duties or accept immediate reassignment. The differences between the Manchus and the

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[5] Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 60-61.

Han in naming and mourning practices, too, persisted down to the eve of the republican revolution.

Huang might argue that such Manchu-Han differences were relatively unimportant, that they were "not enough to prove the separation of the Manchus from the larger population of China" (303). Furthermore, following the 1865 edict, which decreed that "all banner people [*qiren*] who wish to go out and make their own living … be permitted … to venture forth,"[6] Huang writes, "one may assume that the legal and social cleavage between the two groups was further diminished" (304). To the objection, as stated in the reviewer's work *Manchus and Han* that the 1865 edict was merely permissive and did not in fact remove any of the existing Manchu-Han differences, Huang's reply is a dismissive, "It needs to be further studied" (309, n. 6).[7]

Sinicization must also be evaluated in conjunction with its correlate, what the reviewer calls "Manchufication." That is, just as the Han Chinese influenced Manchu ways of life, so did the Manchus affect Han Chinese ways. Huang concedes that "[s]inicization was not a one-way street" and mentions some of the Manchu influences on Han Chinese life: Manchu loanwords in Mandarin Chinese, the adoption by Han Chinese men of the bannerman's riding jacket (馬褂 *magua*), and most obviously, the imposition of the Manchu hairstyle, the queue, upon all adult Han Chinese men (304). Han Chinese women also adopted the Manchu women's gown (旗袍 *qipao*), though this occurred mainly after the Qing dynasty had been overthrown; until then the dress and hairstyle of Manchu women were quite different from those of Han Chinese women. Huang, however, pays little attention to this aspect of the topic. As he insists, "the present study only concerns itself with the Manchu adoption of Chinese culture" (304). Nevertheless, sinicization is a relative process, to which a one-sided analysis such as Huang's is ill-suited.

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[6] As quoted in ibid., 35.

[7] Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*, 35-36, 68.

Finally, there is the thorny question of who, after all, were the "Manchus." (There is also the question of who were the "Chinese," but in Huang's book, they are understood, without any explicit discussion, to be the Han Chinese.) Many scholars, including Elliott and the reviewer, define the Manchus by membership in the Eight Banner system. In other words, the "Manchus" may be taken as being synonymous with the "banner people" (*qiren*).[8] As such, they included not only members of the Manchu Eight Banners, but also those of the Mongol Eight Banners and the Hanjun. Huang seems to go along with this definition in some parts of the book. Thus, he acknowledges that the Manchus "were not a homogeneous people" (295), that, as noted above, they were originally "composed of four ethnic groups: Jurchens, Mongols, Chinese, and Koreans" (54) and that, in particular, Chinese frontiersmen in Manchuria, when they were enrolled in the Eight Banners (presumably the Hanjun), "were *treated as Manchus* by the Qing court" (298; emphasis added).

Elsewhere in the book, however, Huang seems to deny that these Chinese bannermen, or Hanjun, should be considered as Manchu at all. Instead, he seems to regard them and their descendants as still inherently Chinese. Thus, when a Hanjun married a member of the Manchu Eight Banners (Baqi Manzhou), Huang treats it as a case of "intermarriage" between two ethnic groups rather than one of "intramarriage" among Manchus. "Intermarriage" as a result "created generations of people of mixed origins, readier than their forebears to adopt Chinese customs and values" (141). Then why should children of such mixed origins necessarily become sinicized? Why could they not just as easily adopt Manchu customs and values and so become "Manchufied?" Huang's explanation is, “It is true that the Chinese Banners were influenced politically and, to a certain extent, culturally by the Manchus …. But in a prevailing Chinese society … the Chinese Bannermen were able to retain their major traditional values, while the Manchus, in their own best interest, were steadily moving toward the mainstream” (141).

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[8] Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*, 18; Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14-15.

It is by this interpretation that Huang is led to claim that the Kangxi emperor himself was born to a mother of Chinese descent, that in his harem were seventeen “consorts of Chinese descent,” and that of his twenty-four grown sons, seven “were born to Chinese consorts” (153-154). This extraordinary claim, which the emperor probably would not have embraced, is based, in part, on the genealogy of Tong Yangzhen (佟養真, d. 1621), whose family were originally Hanjun, but were later allowed to switch their registration to a Manchu banner. It was Tong Yangzhen’s granddaughter who was the Kangxi emperor’s mother. It turns out, however, that the Tong clan may not have been “Chinese” at all, but were sinicized Jurchens, that is, transfrontiersmen of Jurchen ancestry who had gone over to the Chinese side of the frontier (151, 298). All in all, this book, which is otherwise a thoughtful monograph, epitomizes what Rawski called a “Han nationalist interpretation of China’s past.”