

Make China Great Again

Online Alt-History Fiction and Popular Authoritarianism

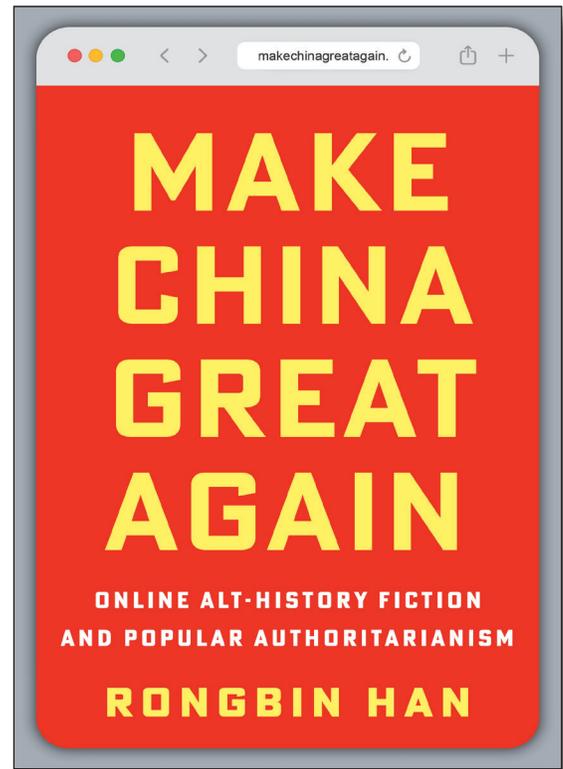
Rongbin Han

On the Chinese internet, alternate history is booming. Millions of writers and readers fantasize about going back in time and changing their country's fate. One envisions saving the Southern Song Dynasty from the Mongols and turning China into a capitalist democracy. Another portrays a contemporary traveling to 1905 and sparking a communist revolution before the Chinese Communist Party was even founded. These stories and others like them share a theme of national revival that echoes both the official narrative of the "Chinese dream" and populist movements around the world. Why is alt-history so popular in China, and what does it reveal about politics and culture under authoritarianism?

Rongbin Han examines the production and consumption of online alt-history fiction in China, offering new insight into how authoritarian rule gains popular consent. Combining in-depth digital ethnography with analysis of dozens of alt-history novels, he explores how state intervention, market forces, and consumer preferences interact. Han argues that alt-history literature is a project of imagining an ideal China, which simultaneously legitimizes and contests state ideology. Tracing the popular resonance of the regime's nationalist vision, he demonstrates how citizens play a crucial role in constructing and maintaining the state's dominance. Because many see national revival as imminent under the party's leadership, they are willing to tolerate authoritarian rule, in contrast to Western democracies, where discontent has fueled populist politics. Introducing readers to the uncanny world of alt-history, *Make China Great Again* underscores how aspirations for the rebirth of the nation can bolster undemocratic politics—in China and elsewhere.

RONGBIN HAN is professor of international affairs at the University of Georgia. He is the author of *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (Columbia, 2018); coauthor of *Directed Digital Dissidence in Autocracies: How China Wins Online* (2023); and coeditor of *The Xi Jinping Effect* (2024).

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"The momentous birth of 'Make China Great Again' fiction as a genre of cybernationalism, lucidly delineated in Han's stunning book, commands the attention of everyone interested in China and the internet. This is a pathbreaking study of digital pop culture as everyday ideology and politics."

—Guobin Yang, author of *The Wuhan Lockdown*

"This book is an essential read for anyone interested in digital culture, popular nationalism, and authoritarian governance in China. Drawing on extensive research on online fiction, it reveals how state, market, and citizens coproduce legitimacy through entertainment and everyday participation. By introducing the concept of 'pop hegemony,' the book offers a fresh perspective on how power, ideology, and pleasure intertwine in China's digital sphere. It will appeal to students and scholars of Chinese politics, media, and society, as well as anyone seeking to understand the cultural foundations of the 'Chinese Dream.'"

—Genia Kostka, Freie Universität Berlin



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