

Book Reviews

China: The Pessoptimist Nation

WILLIAM A. CALLAHAN

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010

xiv + 266 pp. \$45.00

ISBN 978-0-19-954995-5 doi:10.1017/S0305741010000329

China: The Pessoptimist Nation is a courageous book. William Callahan calls it like he sees it, and the picture is bleak. Arguing “against the grain of ... [the] sanguine view of China’s rise” (p. 192), Callahan presents an unflinching analysis of patriotic education and national humiliation discourse in China today, grimly concluding that “[p]atriotic education is a moral campaign that teaches ... humiliation, hatred, and revenge... National humiliation discourse ... frame[s] foreigners as barbarians: the United States as the Evil hegemon, Japanese as devils, Taiwan as the renegade province, and the Dalai Lama as a ravenous wolf” (p. 194).

Callahan claims that “[t]he heart of Chinese foreign policy ... is not a security dilemma, but an ‘identity dilemma’” (p. 13). However, his goal is not to contribute to international relations (IR) theory. While he distances himself from realist IR – “Chinese foreign policy ... entails much more than the pursuit of wealth and power” (p. x) – his primary interest is in affect and identity: “The Chinese people are looking for respect (and love)” (p. 11).

Although he appears to dislike the term “psychology” (p. 15), Callahan’s consistent focus is nonetheless on the psychological dynamics that underlie Chinese nationalist and foreign policy discourse. He is interested in “structures of feeling” (p. 10), including anger, pride and shame, which he uncovers in the nuances of the texts he reads. For instance, in his chapter on National Humiliation Days, Callahan writes, “National humiliation discourse creates a desire for *xuechi* – which can be rendered broadly as ‘cleansing humiliation’ or sharply as ‘revenge’ – that is difficult if not impossible to satisfy” (p. 74). Here, Callahan is sensitive not just to the psychological context within which *xuechi* must be interpreted, but also to the psychology of desire.

In an even better chapter on the “Cartography of National Humiliation,” Callahan argues, counterintuitively, that many Chinese maps – both ancient and modern – are less about territory than they are about identity. Imperial Chinese maps sought to centre Chinese civilization, assigning the barbarians to the periphery. Of more modern Chinese maps, Callahan writes, “With the exception of Taiwan, the goal of national humiliation maps is no longer primarily to recover lost territory; it is to cleanse the stains of lost honor and pride. The desire is not so much for material territory as for symbolic recognition, acceptance, and respect” (p. 121).

Perhaps Callahan’s most insightful analysis is of the psychology underlying recent Chinese discourse on “All under heaven” (*tianxia*). He focuses on the “Civilization/barbarism distinction” (*huayi zhi bian*), which he argues is alive and kicking in China today: “The goal of civilizing the barbarians is ... to confirm the superiority of the Han race” (p. 131). He thus takes issue with Zhao Tingyang and other *tianxia* proponents who have argued that China’s hierarchical tributary system is a good model for the future international order. Whether seeking to conquer or assimilate the barbarians, Chinese “civilization,” Callahan argues, does not allow for the co-existence of the different. The “harmony of civilizations” rhetoric of the Beijing Forum and other Chinese IR discourse is thus little more than, well, rhetoric. Even Jiang Rong’s novel *Wolf Totem (Lang tuteng)*, which reversed the civilization/barbarism

hierarchy by praising the nomads for their ferocity and freedom and criticizing the Han as soft and servile, in the end only reified epistemologies of difference between China and the West (p. 157).

My objections are minor. “Pessoptimism” lacks legs; it is unlikely that other scholars will run with it. It also does not reflect what the book is really about. Optimism and pessimism are in part attitudinal orientations towards the future; the book is more about the past in the present. Indeed, Callahan chooses as his book’s epigraph a quote from Faulkner: “The past is never dead, it’s not even past.” The title should better reflect the book’s focus on national identity and humiliation. More broadly, Callahan’s fine writing skills allow him to occasionally avoid clarifying the difficult details: “China is a pessoptimist nation... China’s national aesthetic entails the combination of a superiority complex, and an inferiority complex” (p. 9). While “pessoptimist” and “national aesthetic” sound great, left undefined they add little value to the text, leaving this reader intrigued but frustrated. What exactly is “pessoptimism” or a “national aesthetic”? And how exactly do “superiority” and “inferiority” combine?

Given the rapid pace of change in China, few China books withstand the test of time. It is therefore noteworthy that some passages in *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* ring even more true at the time of this reviewer’s reading (March 2010) than they likely did at the time of Callahan’s writing (2008?). For instance, “the Chinese people have ... experienced an inflated sense of self... This ‘propaganda bubble,’ which defines the twenty-first century as ‘China’s century,’ generates a strong sense of entitlement ... success is seen as China’s ‘right,’ while China’s rise is taken as ‘inevitable’” (p. 196). With its focus on entitlement and grandiosity, Callahan’s discussion is an almost textbook definition of narcissism. It thus anticipates the post-financial crisis, early 2010 Western discourse on Chinese arrogance and triumphalism.

In short, Callahan has produced a fine book about affect and identity in Chinese foreign policy that is both timely and likely to stand the test of time.

PETER HAYS GRIES

The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa

DEBORAH BRÄUTIGAM

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

xv + 397 pp. £18.99

ISBN 978-0-19-955022-7 doi:10.1017/S030574101000038X

In his contribution to his 2008 co-edited volume *China’s Return to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (edited with Chris Alden and Daniel Large, New York, Columbia University Press) Ricardo Soares de Oliveira criticized analyses of Chinese investment in Africa for lacking factual precision and analytical clarity, but spared Ian Taylor’s work (p. 83). Now he might have to add Deborah Bräutigam’s *Dragon’s Gift* to his list of exceptions. Replete with arguments that expose timely anxieties about Chinese expansion in Africa, this book-length study is timely in providing different and persuasive perspectives. Bräutigam’s work enjoys a special status among revisionists because of her abundant field research and sound understanding of Chinese approaches in Africa. She provides a historical analysis of Chinese aid institutions, compares their methodology with Western practices, reports on her first-hand observations of Chinese endeavours in Africa, and concludes that China is benefitting this continent by mixing aid and investment.