



Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism. Pride, Politics and Diplomacy*

Berkeley & London, University of California Press, 2004, 215 p.

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Gary D. Rawnsley

"This only is denied to God : the power to change
the past"

Agathon

"Though God cannot alter the past, historians
can"

Samuel Butler

- 1 I read *China's New Nationalism* in one sitting having re-read Iris Chang's *Rape of Nanking* (Penguin, 1997) the day before. Although a coincidence, my timing was fortunate. Peter Hays Gries's superb survey of Chinese nationalism is an indispensable complement to the (not always fairly) criticised Chang. Gries's discussion of *Rape of Nanking* helps readers to put the book in a context that is based on the history of Sino-Japanese relations and what appears as an unyielding struggle for status in Asia. He also discusses the academic community's disapproval of Chang, and rushes to her defence by explaining : "Chang never claims to be a historian ; she is a sincere young woman enraged by what she has learned about the atrocities of December 1937" (p. 84). However, instead of examining the details of the debate, Gries is more concerned with how what he refers to as "the *Rape of Nanking* sensation" provided "an opportunity for a public contest between Chinese and Japanese narratives of the past before a jury of Western opinion. Thus, two projects are intertwined in victimization narratives : quantifying the pain and presenting the Chinese case to the world" (Ibid.). The book's research is driven by a desire to understand the origins of this narrative and explain why the discourse of humiliation contributes to Chinese self-identity, identification of "the other", and ultimately the importance of nationalism in Chinese politics. This is a very recent development : Gries reveals that the discourse of humiliation—the

narrative of victimization—challenges the heroic “victor narrative” of history that dominated the first three decades of post-revolutionary China.

- 2 The aim of the book is deceptively simple : to offer readers an opportunity to engage with the usually neglected Chinese perspective on Japan and America and their relations with the Middle Kingdom. By careful research in multiple Chinese media, Gries realises his goal through the prism of nationalism, here defined as the ideology of the fourth generation leadership. China's nationalism, like its practice of socialism, is far from doctrinaire. Rather, China's nationalism is essentially pragmatic and evolves through interaction with the international community. As Gries reminds us, the making of foreign policy does not occur in a vacuum, but is constrained by the behaviour, interests and ambitions of other actors in the international system. Gries's most significant contribution is in recognising that the Chinese people themselves are gradually asserting their power, using the nationalist discourse as a way of expressing their own ideas and emotions to the Chinese leadership and the outside world. He is critical that the west has too often regarded structures of political power as the sole authorities that can define Chinese nationalism and determine how it might be expressed. To prove this novel idea, Gries carefully analyses public reaction to two critical events of the past five years : the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the collision of an American spy plane and a Chinese air-force fighter in 2001. His conclusion is persuasive : that the eruption of popular nationalism among Chinese around the world that so enraged the Americans was not engineered by the leadership in Beijing, but were the spontaneous outpouring of anger. “The Western press's insistence that a diabolical Communist elite manipulated the Chinese protestors tells us more about ourselves than about what actually happened in May 1999” (p. 133). Gries argues that contrary to Western opinion, the Chinese authorities feared these outbursts because they epitomised the Communist Party's gradual loss of control over nationalist discourse.
- 3 Less convincing is the following claim : “The Chinese people are demanding a say in nationalist politics : the fate of the nation is no longer the Party's exclusive dominion. Western policymakers should also recognize that because the party's legitimacy now depends upon accommodating popular nationalist demands, the Foreign Ministry must take popular opinion into account as it negotiates foreign policy” (p. 20). This is a rather bold claim. We can accept that the anti-American rhetoric suggests a renewed popular activism that is embedded in nationalism, and there is evidence that the Chinese political elite were forced to respond to this nationalist mood. However, this does not prove that public opinion now plays an important role in formulating and conducting foreign policy, and Gries needs to provide more evidence to support this claim.
- 4 Most engaging are Gries's insights into Chinese “face”, though he is careful to impress upon his readers that “face” is a universal, rather than oriental concept. The discussion takes some surprising turns. Gries reveals that the Chinese were unconcerned with Samuel Huntington's bizarre argument that the world is facing a “Clash of Civilizations”. (Gries is not alone in believing that “Neither the structure of the world system nor the cultural differences between China and America make conflict between China and the United States inevitable” (p. 140). The same also applies to Islam, rarely separated from Al-Qaida and too often treated as a homogenous civilisation). Instead, the Chinese were delighted that the West had finally recognised that their status

deserved elevating, even if it meant they were now perceived as a substantial threat to world peace. Similarly, Gries contrasts the enduring Chinese love affair with Henry Kissinger and their suspicion of Richard Nixon. Kissinger is courted as an intellectual equal to the Chinese (though, ever the fawning diplomat, Kissinger claims Mao an intellectual superior). In contrast, Nixon is admonished as weak because he was forced to open relations with China supposedly against his will : “Because face is a zero-sum game, China’s win [in entering the UN in 1971] must be America’s loss, and American humiliation at defeat must be represented by Nixon’s red-face fury” (p. 63). We can argue over the historic detail, and there is every reason to challenge the Chinese interpretation of these events : what is important is that, right or wrong, “Dissing Dick” and “Hugging Henry” are part of a Chinese narrative that has been carefully constructed to reinforce “face” and restore nationalist pride in the Middle Kingdom.

- 5 However, the Chinese reserve the full force of their national venom for the Japanese. Anyone familiar with Chinese history is aware of the bitterness that continues to underlie Sino-Japanese relations. (In Wu Nian-zhen’s film, *Buddha Blessed America*, set in 1960s Taiwan, one of the main characters played by Lin Zheng-sheng casually dismisses the Japanese by saying they are not really Asian anyway.) China’s defeat in the Jaiwu war, resulting in the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), was more a humiliation than the Opium Wars because “little brother” Japan had beaten “big brother” China : “The loss of national face was even worse than defeat itself. Because Japan is depicted as having caused the public loss of national face, anger directed against Japan thus assumes a moral legitimacy and is not just a base desire for revenge” (p.72). The Rape of Nanking (itself a symbolic term), and perhaps more importantly, Chinese discourse about the events of 1937 (and about comfort women, the need for Japanese remuneration, the demand that Tokyo issue an official apology for the atrocities committed in China, etc.), further fuelled Sino-Japanese antagonism and helped to define Chinese in relation to “the other”. Clearly, history, the interpretation and re-invention of the past, can have an enduring effect on the national soul ; the Chinese have a particularly long history on which to draw.
- 6 *China’s New Nationalism* is a readable analysis of a very important issue in Chinese politics with far reaching potential consequences for the future of the political system. By reminding us that the way we see ourselves and others does matter in international relations, Peter Hays Gries has made an invaluable contribution to the scholarship on Chinese identity, nationalism and foreign policy.