Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937 by Jing Tsu
Review by: Louise Edwards
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This is an important book which should be of considerable interest to all scholars and students of modern Chinese history, literature, diaspora studies, contemporary politics and culture. Its central focus is on exploring the creation of a national identity of victimhood in China since 1895. Tsu has analyzed the manner in which China has claimed the position of victim in the international arena and has fashioned victimhood into a moral position. Being a victim, we learn, is not merely a response to injury or humiliation, but also a modality of cultural identity. From this underlying premise Tsu examines the ways that victimhood functions as a cultural experience, ranging from the benign to the dangerous—including nationalism and racism. Victimhood is an immensely flexible identity since it need not relate to actual humiliation or victimization. The narration of victimhood has been a consistent theme in both Chinese political thought and popular culture for over a century, yet until now no scholars have explored the impact and consequences of this persistent identity on China’s evolution. While nationalism has been the focus of many studies, Tsu shows that a key ingredient in Chinese nationalism has been the mobilization and articulation of China’s position as an international victim.

Tsu’s wide-ranging and meticulously researched volume includes discussion of phenomena such as the recent anti-Japanese riots, the bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade and overseas Chinese experiences of racism, as well as key historical events such as the Boxer Wars, the New Culture Movement and the anti-Japanese War. Evidence for its arguments is drawn from such diverse sources as science fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, political treatises, philosophical texts, internet debates and movies. Tsu provides new insights into the ideological significance of many familiar materials by exploring them in the context of earlier and later texts. For example, we learn that, while Zou Rong’s Geming jun calls for the murder and rape of Manchus in order to wash away the humiliation of the Han race, it emerged from a context in which moderates like Kang Youwei were writing extensively about racial hierarchies. Kang, for example, espoused the view that Chinese and whites should aim to purify the world of lesser races—such as Indians and Africans—by intermarriage.

The volume helps explain many apparently contradictory trends within Chinese political history. For example, Chinese intellectuals often express the desire for democracy without equally endorsing the conditions required for freedom. If one premises nation-building upon a discourse of failure and victimhood, one then removes the burden of agency within any of the espoused ideals. From the position of such an identity one can struggle for a democratic political system yet stop short of giving votes to the peasant masses.

The chapter on “The Quest for Beauty and Notions of Femininity” provides stimulating insights into the sex culture of the New Culture Period and the gender order upon which this was built. As with much work on the New Woman, the chapter tells us primarily about men and their constructions of women and desires.
about heterosexual sex. Where other scholars have shown how the New Woman evolved to alleviate male intellectuals’ anxieties about their place in the nation and the world, Tsu shows us that she is indispensable to the definition of masculinity and male identity in its search for masochism and failure.

An important and commendable aspect of the volume is the dexterous manner in which Tsu has contextualized Chinese thinking within the global modes of thought at any given time. In reading about Chinese conceptions of race politics or racial hierarchies during the last few years of the nineteenth century, readers are also made aware of the connections these trends of thought have with Western thinking, for example about social Darwinism. So often in Chinese Studies research, China is treated as if it were sealed from the world—Tsu demonstrates beautifully how Chinese thinkers were engaging with international ideas on key issues and transforming these ideas for their particular political purposes. This feature of the volume helps dismantle the tendency to exoticize China by exaggerating the uniqueness or particularity of China’s situation. Moreover, *Failure, Nationalism and Literature* reveals an important possibility for Chinese Studies to contribute to developing and extending contemporary Western critical thought. In the context of extensive literature on the manner in which nations are “imagined”, Tsu demonstrates that “failure” and narratives of victimization can be a potent and dynamic force in nation-building. Indeed, Tsu shows us that the production of identity—individual or national—can be premised on the absence of ideals of abundance, empowerment and strength.

In sum, *Failure, Nationalism and Literature* achieves two important features of excellent scholarship—it helps make sense of the past in new and challenging ways and in so doing provides numerous new points of departure for future scholarly work. Moreover, it stands as an excellent example of the unique contribution first-rate literary analysis can make to enhancing our understanding of the complexity of China’s path through the twentieth century. This is a seriously good read.

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*House Home Family* is an extraordinary collection of essays addressing the culture of Chinese vernacular architecture and its transformation over the last century as a result of Westernization. Fundamentally an interdisciplinary project, this text combines essays from some of the most renowned anthropologists, art and architectural historians, cultural geographers, curators and historians of China, for a well-rounded examination of daily life in the traditional Chinese home. This book, the inaugural volume in a series entitled “Spatial Habitus: Making and Meaning in Asia’s Vernacular Architecture”, is meant to be a starting