

## China on the Couch: Psychologizing the Nation

Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature:  
The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937.*

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 329 pp.

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The term “nationalism” generally implies claims to national greatness, success, and pride. If amnesia is necessary to nationalism, as Ernest Renan famously prescribed, it is crimes and defeats that are forgotten in narratives that accentuate the positive. Jing Tsu 石靜遠 instead proposes that failure and humiliation can be central to nationalism; furthermore, defeat gives rise to identity-formation by providing a kind of agency. This is not passive acceptance of subjugation; rather, Tsu points to rage, vengeance, ambition, and dreams as constituting “a strategy of negotiation” (p. 21) not with the outside aggressor but with the self, which sees in failure the grounds for knowledge and reform, even redemption.

This is an important book. Tsu has read very widely indeed in the works of intellectuals and artists across a critical period in modern China. The book covers ground both familiar and unfamiliar—race, feminism, eugenics, national identity, Freud, masochism, literary modernity, gender, social Darwinism—offering suggestive

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new insights through a genre-bending analysis that owes much to intellectual history and literary analysis but is beholden to neither. The book's six substantive chapters are generally structured to begin with a consideration of a general discourse, emphasizing intellectuals' formulations of a more or less specific problem, and then turn to treatments of the topic in the broader culture, especially in literature. This book might be classified under the rubric "cultural studies," though it deals not with everyday practices but generalizes about Chinese culture at a high level of abstraction. Much of what passes for "cultural studies" is a mishmash of observations unanchored in any particular discipline and often floating in an ether of assumption. Tsu's work, however, is thoroughly supported by her close readings of seminal texts, clear use of theory, and meticulous argumentation. Tsu is not alone in this basic approach, of course, but takes it in a more psychologizing direction.<sup>1</sup> Nor does *Failure* successfully answer every question it raises, but scholars of various fields dealing with modern China will want to grapple with its arguments.

Above all, Tsu offers a new interpretation of modern Chinese nationalism rooted in particular cultural trends.<sup>2</sup> She begins with a brief discussion of the Chinese reaction to the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, which reflected long-established tropes: unjust aggression, uncertain sovereignty; the unity of the Chinese people ("descendents of the Yellow Emperor"); and the need for vengeance. The Chinese self-image, then, would still appear to be one of fragility,

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<sup>1</sup> Comparable studies of a high quality include David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Yomi Braester, *Witness against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Except for a few comments in passing, Tsu does not address the ever-growing scholarly literature on Chinese nationalism; while her approach has something in common with the concept of "reactive nationalism" as well as studies of the construction of identities, Tsu ignores the topic of state-building which has preoccupied most studies of nationalism.

rather than self-confidence. The reaction to the Tibetan uprising of March 2008 seems to me to fall largely into this pattern as well, with its emphasis on Tibetan attacks on innocent Han shopkeepers and the alleged distortions of the world media.<sup>3</sup> Tsu's argument that nationalism based on failure leads to embracing failure, even to an inability to separate the identity of the self from failure, is thus of contemporary relevance. In other words, the Chinese can neither forget the wrongs of the past nor acknowledge their own successes. This is putting it very baldly, and it may be that in another generation, if economic growth is maintained, victim identity will be shed. Or perhaps not.

Tsu's main argument is not about the present or future, however, but the past. By embracing failure, defeat, and humiliation in a way that called forth both resilience against outside enemies and self-criticisms of the faults within, Chinese by the 1890s found a mode of constructing a new self. For Tsu, nationalism is not best understood by examining how the state or leading intellectuals impose nationalist doctrine, but rather how the individual undergoes a process of identification through which the nation becomes an object of desire. As the subject is invested in the nation, the passions aroused may be like love of family, yet in cases of "intense nationalism" where the depth of one's nationalism is measured by one's willingness to sacrifice—even sacrifice one's family and one's life—"love for the nation may draw not from the positive feelings one has...but from a complex psychic relation

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<sup>3</sup> China is not alone in this: much state rhetoric in the international sphere uses the language of national injury; the United States built up the largest military machine the world has ever seen on the basis of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and today maintains that its good intentions are misunderstood, while Serbian identity is famously founded on defeat at the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389. We can and should, I think, be simultaneously sympathetic to claims of victimhood and critical of how such claims are used. Criticism of victim-claims in no way excuses imperialist aggression. A study that strikes the right balance, suggesting how victim identity is institutionalized in contemporary China, is Rana Mitter, "The Duty of Memory—The Nanjing Massacre: Memory and Forgetting in China and Japan," *Chinese Cross Currents* (Macau) 3:2 (April-June 2006), pp. 106-127.

predicated on failure, the willingness and even the desire to fail” (p. 24). This is because nationalism rests on “a perpetually incitable sense of injury” that enables appeals to shame, guilt, and hatred. Failure alone cannot produce nationalism: hope is also necessary, allowing nationalism to emerge in the interior lives of individuals. In this sense, “individual freedom lies in neither the overcoming of defeat nor the restoration of a certain proper identity. Rather, it consists in the intimate knowledge that one has failed and that this failure can and should be compensated through the exercise of one’s own labor” (p. 30).

Tsu argues that national failure, intimately linked with individual defectiveness, produces agency. Out of China’s failure in the face of Western imperialism, came fantasies of future conquests and supremacy; the prospect of race war helped to define the nation itself. The eugenics movement disparaged the faults of the Chinese body and spirit, while confidently prescribing a cure. For all his pessimism, Lu Xun’s 魯迅 demands for self-critique, exemplifying a May Fourth mindset, rested on the assumption that through knowledge of the self would come improvement of the self. Of Lu’s most famous short story Tsu suggests, “Although most commentators agree that Ah Q embodies the undesirable national characteristics of the Chinese...few would entertain the possibility that Ah Q as a literary and cultural phenomenon, actually helps produce a viable self-image of the Chinese,” and that ever since Lu Xun, criticizing Chinese faults has been “importantly productive and impassioned industry of building modern Chinese national and cultural identity” (p. 125). Women, coming to write about themselves in the 1920s and 1930s, literally found their selves in their victimization, taking suffering as their authentic identity; they thus rewrote the interiority of female identity as “alternative agency” (p. 166). Male authors not only described the pleasures of masochism and humiliation, but thereby created a space for self-reflection.

Tsu's goal in this book is certainly not to explain nationalism *tout court* as neurosis, but to show how the passionate link between individual and nation, a matter of the interior or psychic life, is shaped by culture. She argues that Chinese modernity was centered around failure, or more precisely, attempts to deal with failure that offered at least a chance of "redemption." In this process, the individual and nation were strongly linked. As Tsu is well aware, this was a highly paradoxical process. Identity emerges out of encounters with the other, which for modern China were humiliating encounters. Then, once an identity is created around failure, it is threatened by success, and so success cannot be logically contemplated. Redemption is a goal that can never be reached, for if it is reached, the self's identity would be threatened (pp. 30-31). Yet, "The weak transforms into the formidable, and failure becomes strength" (p. 13). Even more ironically, failure itself can define a kind of success: success in achieving self-knowledge, for example. Or, take Guo Moruo's 郭沫若 claims to be more contemptible than any of his literary acquaintances, as if he were living out an intellectual version of an Ah Q fantasy.

For Kang Youwei 康有為 and other activists of the 1890s, racial improvement was the key to national survival, and a key to racial improvement was miscegenation (with the White Race, at least). This much is well-known, and Tsu emphasizes that overall Chinese accepted racial hierarchy, only insisting on the paired superiority of Whites and Yellows. But at the same time the extent of empathy expressed with other subjugated races in the literature of the period should be noted. Lin Shu's 林紓 translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, explicitly related the fate of American slaves to Chinese indentured servants. And science fiction also turned the West's fears of the "yellow peril" into the promise of future Chinese superiority. Tsu suggests that such visions, or fantasies, represented a rejection of evolution (or at least social Darwinism), but it strikes me that the Chinese authors accepted the terms of

evolution—and continued to predict the extinction of inferior races—only anticipating the superior adaptive abilities of the Chinese.

By the 1920s and 1930s, according to Tsu, as China's crisis continued unabated, racial thinking turned to eugenics, and a more general interest in sexuality, reproduction, family, marriage, and love emerged. Eugenics offered a seemingly scientific solution to the problems of the "race," which was to say the Chinese. A continuing sense of failure and fear of degeneration, if not extinction, fueled the new discourses. Tsu suggestively links the eugenicist Pan Guangdan's 潘光旦 concern with improving the body and mind to the remedies imposed by the New Life Movement. Pan simultaneously insisted on the value of many traditional institutions, including the family and the examination system in his quest to breed superior persons. Tsu further suggests that Lu Xun's reading of the national character shared much with Pan's. Subsequent discussions of Ah Q have revolved around the character's Chineseness and his universality. Lu Xun's concern was not with any essentialized interpretation of supposedly Chinese characteristics but with the need for honest self-examination.<sup>4</sup> Not specific defects of the Chinese character but "a more radical commitment to a Chinese character preserved in failure" (p. 123) preoccupied Lu. Tsu's reading of the Ah Q story revolves around the problematique of agency and triumph. On one level, Ah Q represented the utter inability to acknowledge failure, yet his rationalizations show some awareness of his defeats. Lu Xun himself claimed to practice ruthless self-examination, and Tsu suggests that self-attributed failure at least reasserts consciousness of the self, which can be seen in various ways

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<sup>4</sup> In Tsu's reading, Lu Xun was an enemy of cultural reductionism, and, while interested in the phenomenon of stereotyping, was not influenced by the likes of the missionary-commentator Arthur Smith—contra Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity--China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 45-76. A rich study of the topic, not cited by Tsu, is Lung-kee Sun, *The Chinese National Character: From Nationhood to Individuality* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).

in Ah Q. In the long run, Lu's dissection of national faults continued to form "a sustaining mode of cultural identity" (p. 127).

It was a sense of defects in the national character, according to Tsu, that legitimated the project of the "New Woman"—although there was little agreement about what the ideal new woman should actually be, and many drew back from the prospect of women's autonomy. Tsu takes "Dr. Sex"—Zhang Jingshen 張競生—more seriously in his role as a utopian philosopher than as a popularizer of sexology. Zhang's vision of a society dedicated to ideals of aesthetic and spiritual perfection owed a great deal to eugenics and broader May Fourth concerns for racial rejuvenation. Woman writers themselves, in Tsu's subtle and sensitive readings, were not necessarily dedicated to "defiant counternarrative" but sought to appropriate suffering to define their authenticity. The female voice was not so much directed against the oppression of men or the nation, as it was working out a sense of the self through self-vigilance; paradoxically (again), women found themselves in suffering and oppression: "...the restriction of feminine agency in many ways enables the real possibility for its own voice. Female suffering can inhabit subjugation in such a way as to preserve rather than sacrifice agency" (p. 154). In Xiao Hong's 蕭紅 *Market Street* (shangshijie 商市街, 1935), the woman narrator offers voluntary sacrifice and renunciation, calmly accepting her deprivation. And in this way creates a space for her self-consciousness. Similarly, Ding Ling's 丁玲 "Miss Sophie's Diary" (shafeinushi de riji 莎菲女士的日記) is a protest against male oppression but also highlights internal oppression and the need for self-discipline, even renunciation, before feminine autonomy can be achieved. The suffering of Miss Sophie is not entirely at the hands of the patriarchy; her problem is how to determine her own desires.

Indeed, Tsu suggests that self-preservation vis-à-vis the all-imposing nation may

lie in masochism, renunciation, and desire for failure. Same-sex love (whether lesbianism or male homosexuality) raised its head in many of the discourses of the 1930s, usually dismissed as a perversion but also hinted to be a source of psychic energy. However, of the sexual perversions, it was male masochism that caught the eye of the era, to be partially forgotten by later generations of literary historians. It could not be wholly forgotten, given the placement of Yu Dafu's 郁達夫 "Sinking" in the modernist canon, but Tsu argues masochistic themes emerge in a wide range of literary works. Tsu offers a useful discussion of the introduction of Freudianism to China, but given the lack of interest in such concepts as the Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality, it is not clear if Western psychology was an important factor in Chinese interest in masochism. The connection between the nation and masochism is clear. Yu Dafu, for one, explicitly linked the humiliated sensibilities of his characters to the humiliations inflicted on China. The links between masochism and masculinity and "expiation," however, I find less obvious, even if, as Tsu shows, much fiction featuring masochism involves a female interlocutor set against a heterosexual male's desire for pain.

It seems to me that even in the darkness of the 1920s and 1930s masculinity was constituted by more than masochism, and indeed Yu's own efforts to distinguish himself from his characters argue as much. Even more tenuous is Tsu's proposal of a process that leads through masochism and guilt to expiation and redemption. I simply do not see the latter; we seem to be witnessing shame and humiliation without much possibility of any redemption beyond the pride (to exhibit paradox again) of further wallowing in guilt: or exhibitionism. Tsu claims, "It is not national humiliation that wreaks havoc on masculine identity" (pp. 186-187), but surely that is precisely the case. It may be that masculinity can imagine redemption only through redeeming the nation, which makes sense to me. It is also evident that women

scarcely needed to resort to masochism to discover suffering. This is to gender Chinese history in a very radical way indeed, though Tsu does not pursue the issue.

The generalized angst and suffering highlighted by modern Chinese was captured in the term *kumen* (苦悶). Tsu argues that both the term and the condition it describes played an important role in shaping, even producing, a distinctively modern Chinese literature and culture in the 1920s and 1930s: a “regenerative cultural identity protected from destruction and sustained in suffering” (pp. 195-196). Born in struggle with the West, the point of *kumen* was not victory but the on-going struggle itself—struggle with the self, with the past, and with the very mood *kumen* expressed. Tsu links this twinned sense of suffering and struggle to the rise of more radical and socially conscious writing. She points out that one reason for the intellectuals’ sense of angst was their own growing irrelevance, which they could combat through empathy with the suffering of the masses. Failure thus fueled revolutionary passion. Lu Xun ascribed the *kumen* felt by artists to their condition caught between the old and the new. Born in an ancient civilization, they see new ways of thinking but remain imprisoned; rebellion risks loss of self. “For Lu Xun, ‘Chineseness’ is a sedimented identity constituted between westernization and the failure to create that semblance. Failure in this sense, however, is not predicated on the certainty of a successful version of modernity, as would be implied in westernization. Rather, it removes Chinese modernity from the necessity of tracing itself to Western inspirations. The consciousness of that failure provides the foundation for the Chinese character and thus creates its own modern national and racial identity” (p. 218). Tsu concludes that under the surface “enlightenment” and modernity we associate with May Fourth lay a passionate discontent, a foundation of despair that in turn supported great ambitions.

In sum, of the centrality of failure—and dejection, humiliation, sorrow, and

suffering—to modern Chinese culture, there is little doubt, and it seems accurate to see failure in this sense as also constituting in no small measure the culture and the nationalism that so prominently marked it. I think, however, the notion that failure led in any direct way to agency has to be qualified. Granted, failure provided fertile grounds for self-reflection, but agency remained very limited. There is agency in fantasies of racial revenge, in renunciation, in masochism, and even in the decision to love one's country, but surely this is a very limited sort of agency. Even a perverse sort of agency that chooses not to choose. As Tsu describes the feeling of the day: "Somehow, the severity of suffering promises a new birth and even health" (p. 200), but the problem remains in the "somehow."

There were also limits to self-critique, as well as a series of questions worth further exploration. How exactly may self-critique produce subjectivity? Does it lead to a narcissism of guilt that could turn against others? That is, a self-critique that actually leads away from the self and toward Manchus, women, old feudals, and traitors of any kind. By the time of the guiltier-than-thou contests that the likes of Guo Moruo indulged in, one is reminded of today's cases of false or assumed trauma: recently exposed memoirs of holocaust victims, gang members, and drug addicts who were never anything of the sort. Granted, Tsu is concerned not with authenticity but rather how victimization "operates within a cultural and historical frame as a way of mobilizing the power of identity" (p. 7). But this leads back to the question of whether identity itself implied agency. Tsu notes, "No vengeance can wash away a memory that tenaciously holds on to the nation's destruction. As long as there is blame, directed at oneself or others, national memory can choose not to be at the mercy of history" (p. 226). I take the point that blame is enabling, but it is also limiting, and as long as people are condemned to relive national traumas, they remain damaged.

It is not always clear if Tsu is describing “China” or the culture of a few intellectuals and artists, and if this distinction matters. For all its originality, this work largely follows a kind of May Fourth narrative that posits a radical break between a lost tradition and a hegemonic (if complex) modernity. In other words, conservative voices, who had their own versions of failure, are not heard here. And conservatives who maintained confidence in the existence of some bedrock strength of traditional culture might well have been expressing the ideas of most Chinese better than the radicals Tsu discusses. The ultimate position of the Communists—that traditional elite culture was feudal and evil but popular culture was vibrant and vital—was perhaps a version of traditionalism as well. And what about the capacity to have fun? It scarcely needs saying that Chinese culture displayed a capacity for happiness, or maybe it does need saying. It would not necessarily have been schizophrenic for an artist to spend a few hours in the deepest and most sincere anguish followed by a pleasant dinner and drinking games with friends. If this sounds more like the life-style of contemporary American adolescents than modern Chinese intellectuals, nonetheless it is revealing that Tsu barely mentions Hu Shi 胡適 or Lin Yutang 林語堂. The early twentieth century was not a happy age, but clearly it was not devoid of pleasure. Though we might reflect on the words of Harry Lime: “In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed—they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.” The worst of both worlds, of course, would be to suffer and still produce only a cuckoo clock.

Using foundational texts of Chinese modernity along with some texts scarcely noticed before, Tsu has defamiliarized China. She highlights the shared cultural world of political statements and literary works that are often analyzed separately,

enriching our understanding of each. Tsu's approach offers opportunities for cross-cultural studies as well, moving beyond the now-familiar deconstruction of imperialist ideologies to examine how a new culture is actually produced and creates a capacity for resistance.