

BOOK REVIEWS

THE POLITICS OF IMAGINING ASIA. By *Wang Hui*; edited by *Theodore Huters*. Cambridge, MA: *Harvard University Press*, 2011. 360 pp. US\$35.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-674-05519-3.

Wang Hui is now established as one of the foremost thinkers in the humanities from China following upon the publication of his four-volume *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* and other translations. In this latest collection of his translated essays, there is a certain poignancy that a casual reader might miss. These writings embed a pervasive struggle between a commitment to the modern nation-state that is a rising China and the idealism of socialist anti-imperialism with a wider commitment to regional and global justice.

The first essay, “The Politics of Imagining Asia,” lays out the framework to think of the relationship between these two commitments, which, to be sure, Wang himself does not perceive as one of struggle or tension. The modes by which imperial China was linked and managed relationships with its neighbours to the south, east, north and west through the tribute system, networks, trade, etc., is contrasted here and in a later chapter with the nation-state system which Asian societies had to willy-nilly participate in to survive in the modern world. Thus the imagination of Asia will have to draw upon these historical resources to form a non-imperialist relationship that in turn must transform the global order established over the last few centuries. At the same time, however, Wang Hui is clear that “the nation-state is still emphatically the main force behind advancing regional relations within Asia” (59).

Most of the remaining essays are centrally concerned with modern China, and in particular with the process of nation-formation. There is an insightful essay on the creation of modern Chinese as a national language that develops very differently from our conventional view of “vernacularization” drawn from the European model. It was not a case of the oral replacing the written, but rather of an older form of literati writing that was replaced by a modern, urban written language that was initially as foreign to the masses as the old, until its “massification” by the communist revolutionaries.

Even more centrally, the essays are concerned with the territorial sovereignty of modern China. On the one hand he shows that the imperial order was not intrinsically concerned with national or ethnic formation, but Wang is also eager to show that non-Han imperial dynasties in China such as the Jurchen, Mongols and Manchus affiliated themselves with the earlier Chinese and Confucian imperial traditions, thus establishing

a historical continuity of state legitimacy. The particular significance of this older historiographical statement of state continuity becomes very vivid in Wang's long chapter on the "Tibetan Question."

This essay adopts a polemical tone. In Wang's view, the question of Tibetan independence is largely a product of Western *realpolitik* and Orientalism as it continues to be sustained by a romanticized vision of Tibetan spirituality. There has been a long-term collaboration between Western powers and Tibetan elites that has opposed the legitimate incorporation of Tibet into the PRC. Moreover, the PRC's views on Tibet as a part of China is not simply a statist perspective but one supported by patriotic citizens of China all over the world, as demonstrated by their opposition to supporters of Tibetan independence during the Olympic torch relays in 2008. More crucially, Wang seeks the legitimacy of Tibetan incorporation in the history of Chinese state rule and hence sovereignty over Tibet. This leads him to take the rather nationalist position that translates tribute and other premodern political relationships into claims of modern sovereignty. The problem is that these are incommensurable positions and we cannot retreat into history to make sovereignty claims. Claims of sovereignty in modern polities are justified by popular will.

The last part of Wang's essay on Tibet deals with questions of the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation state. He reveals how many of the problems in contemporary Tibet are in fact the extension of problems in the rest of China, relating to the commodification of social and cultural relationships, growing inequality and the rapid expansion of numbers of outsiders into a relatively stable society. Tibetan protests in recent years index these processes but are complicated by the additional ethnic factor. This is a reasonable position and he indicates that the majority within a multi-national state must treat minorities with dignity and equality. Yet I believe that this chapter could be much better balanced by an investigation and evaluation of proposals to build the institutional foundations of dignity and equality.

In other essays, Wang is more intent on exploring the emancipatory potential of anti-imperial nationalisms. Discussing the Cold War order in East Asia through the optic of the Okinawa he shows how Chiang Kai-shek definitively declined the proposal by Roosevelt for the ROC to take control of Okinawa in the postwar period. Thus one can see here an exemplification of anti-imperialism and how "tribute" relations did not translate into sovereignty claims. In concluding the essay, Wang determines that the goal of national liberation movements can only be achieved by combining three aspects: the liberation of peoples, their achievement of an independent state, and the fulfilment of revolution or reform of existing inequalities. These continue to be noble ideals. But there are two problems. Wang himself struggles, particularly in the last chapter on Weber and China, with the imposition of categories developed from the Western

historical experience on China. Since each of the terms from the goals of national liberation movements—people, state and inequality—represents an external imposition, it will take considerable creative investigation and thought to respond adequately to them. More critically, at a time when domestic problems are becoming inseparable from planetary sustainability and the globalization of resources, can nationalism be an adequate or sufficient response?

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WORSE THAN A MONOLITH: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia. By *Thomas J. Christensen*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. ix, 306 pp. US\$24.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-691-14261-6.

When looking at the political landscape of a rising Asia, it is difficult to ignore the importance of history and alliances that are deeply entrenched in its regional security dynamics. In *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Thomas Christensen argues that “disunity, lack of coordination, and intra-alliance rivalry increased both the chance that regional conflicts would occur and the likelihood that existing conflicts would persist and escalate” (1). He pinpoints the early formation period of an alliance and during the questioning of “the continued leadership capabilities of the most powerful ally” as key moments where these factors will likely occur (11). Christensen extensively examines the alliance conditions and interactions in East Asia from the lead-up to the Korean War through the US involvement in Vietnam. Moreover, the author further looks at the region moving from the normalization of relations between the US and the People’s Republic of China to the post-Cold War positioning of the Asia region.

Christensen cites numerous historical documents, memoirs and cables, many of them translated from Chinese and Russian sources, to illustrate the miscommunication and distrust among the alliances during these crises throughout the Cold War. Similar to other well-documented books, the author’s footnotes often provide useful insights, further elaborating on the historical players and the minor differences in interpretation of events by noted researchers. The first half of the introductory chapter primarily focuses on theories describing alliance formation, ideology, behaviour, leadership and power capabilities, but without specific examples it can be a little confusing. Fortunately, the second half of the introductory chapter provides an outline of the book and the historical cases it analyzes. Moreover, the real-life examples in the second chapter’s examination of the build-up to the Korean War easily allows the reader to follow