

A British View of Chinese Nationalism

A Book Review by Wenfang Tang: *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination?* by Robert Bickers (Harvard University Press, 2017)

This book sets out to challenge China's official view of foreign invasion and the origin of Chinese nationalism. The official narrative about Western domination begins with the Opium War in 1840. The war was triggered by the Qing government's effort to stop opium trafficking by the British and American merchants. After confiscating and destroying the smuggled opium, the British navy sent its then cutting-edge steam gunboats and easily defeated the severely under-funded Qing navy.

As a result, China had to sign a series of unequal treaties with Great Britain and the United States, together with 6 other nations including Russia, Japan, France, Germany, Italy and Austria. The invaders were compensated for their losses during the war, including their lost opium.

Hong Kong was forced to be leased to Britain for 155 years. The invaders were granted their "rights" in China, such as free trade and the right to live in their protected settlements. China was divided and ruled by these foreigners for the next century.

Foreign domination finally ended in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the foreign supported Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT), and drove the foreign powers out of China. This "century of humiliation" is the core of Chinese nationalism. It is the driving force for the CCP to mobilize Chinese people and to justify its political legitimacy.

Nationalism continues to be a powerful tool since 1949 for political mobilization, economic development and foreign policy orientation. For the CCP, its goal is simple: restore China's historical glory by becoming an economic and military powerhouse so that no one can bully China again.

This version of Chinese history, whether it is distorted or not, is the key to understanding the CCP leaders' thinking, their economic goals, their vision of China in the world, and their dealing with foreign countries particularly western countries and Japan.

In *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination?* (Harvard University Press, 2017), Robert Bickers questions the foundation of such official narrative in several ways. First, he chooses his target by pointing to the truthfulness of a popular signboard at a park entrance in Shanghai in the 1920s: Chinese and Dogs Not Admitted! This phrase was widely used by the CCP to show the racism of the Europeans and Americans during that time, and it played a highly symbolic role in creating the notion of Western domination and in mobilizing popular nationalism by the CCP. While admitting the existence of racism, Bickers claims that there is no evidence such signboard ever existed, and the sample in display in a Shanghai museum after 1949 was fake. If the reader believes Bickers' assertion that this signboard was a CCP fabrication, then the CCP's version of Chinese nationalism is likely a fabrication as well.

The second way Bickers tries to challenge the CCP's story of nationalism is by showing that the Europeans and Americans actually played a positive role in China, even they occasionally acted like racists. They helped China's economic development by promoting trade; they resented Japanese invasion of China (and damaging their own interests in China); they loved Chinese culture as reflected by

their admiration of the treasures exhibited in the Palace Museum in Forbidden City; and they urged the Nationalist government to launch social reforms so that the Chinese could become more civilized. Again, if one follows this line of argument, the empirical foundation of Chinese nationalism based on the unfair and unequal treatment of China by the Europeans and Americans seems to crumble.

The third way the author discredits Chinese nationalism is by almost completely neglecting the topic of the Opium War. To be fair, the author says in Introduction that he discussed in another book the late Qing period when the Opium War took place. But this topic should be mentioned in this book that claims to explain Chinese nationalism. The Opium War only appears briefly and sketchily at the end of the book when the author talks about Hong Kong's return to China. The Opium War is so essential in the CCP's narrative of nationalism that it requires a full explanation of what happened. The author's criticism of the foundation of Chinese nationalism would be more convincing if this topic is properly dealt with.

The author further supports his theory of manufactured nationalism by showing how the CCP tightly controls the discussion of any sensitive topic related to nationalism. For example, the official media shut down the discussion about a Chinese scholar's questioning of the Shanghai signboard; the Chinese government made its version of a film on the Opium War showing China's victory; China falsely claimed that the U.S. used biological weapons during the Korean War; and the massive official effort to show China's recovery from Western domination in the Chinese National Museum with the permanent display titled *The Road to Rejuvenation* (*Fuxing Zhilu*).

Few people would disagree with the author about the CCP's effort to control the narrative about modern Chinese history. But many people would also agree that every government tries to tell its own version of the history. The Taiwanese government under the Democratic Progressive Party's rule tries to change its narrative about being Chinese. Japanese government tells its own story about WWII by showing U.S. nuclear bombing and killing of innocent Japanese civilians. No one in the West would allow any discussion about the rightful existence of Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy or Islamic extremism. It seems to this reader that a more interesting discussion about Chinese nationalism is to show why the Chinese see the outside world the way they do and how nationalism helps the CCP to accomplish what it does.

This book is mostly about how outsiders see China, but not about how the Chinese see the outside world. It starts with the end of WWI when foreign countries fight over how to divide German interest in China, and how such fight ignited the May 4 Movement in 1919 with mass Chinese protest against foreign invasion. It then continues with a brief description of some major events in modern Chinese history, such as the Northern Expedition, the anti-Japanese War, the first and second civil wars between the Nationalists and the Communists, the rise of the CCP, and the events after the CCP gained power in 1949, including the land reform, the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the post-Mao reform, and the return of Hong Kong and Macau. The author focuses less on explaining how these events took place from the Chinese perspectives, but more on showing foreign presence and influence during this time, and how foreigners see these events.

One strength of this book is its in-depth research on the interaction between foreigners and the KMT government. It would be more effective in its discussion of Chinese nationalism if the author can also get into the CCP leaders' thinking and describe how nationalism is formulated in their minds.

Another value of this book is its Western perspective, namely, how Westerners see China. Western expats who lived through the pre-1949 China and pre-1997 Hong Kong and their family members and friends will find this book the most interesting because it contains well research materials about these people.