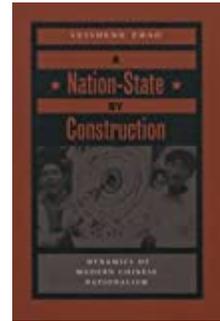




Suisheng Zhao. *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xiii + 355 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5001-1; \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4897-1.



Reviewed by Thomas Mullaney (Department of History, Stanford University)

Published on H-Nationalism (January, 2007)

“Belgrade, Mon Amour”: Still Making Sense of Chinese Nationalism

“Hi Tom. It’s your father.” “Hey Dad.” “Did you see the news?”

I paused. What a peculiar way to start a phone call, I thought.

“No ... Why?” “We just bombed China.” “What?!” “Turn on your TV.”

The year was 1999, early in May, and in two day’s time, I was to set off to investigate the intricacies of post-Mao press reform, laying the groundwork for my senior honor’s thesis (turned M.A. thesis) and, just maybe, a future career as a historian of modern China. As I tuned into CNN, all of my plans evaporated. One after the other, broadcast commentators, pictures-in-picture, and that incessantly scrolling bar all combined to tell a single, terrible story: NATO forces, and the United States military in particular, had just bombed the Chinese consulate in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Beijing was experiencing spasms of anti-American violence. The American embassy was under siege. What did it all mean?

As I sat down to review *A Nation-State by Con-*

struction, a study of Chinese nationalism by Suisheng Zhao, thoughts of May 1999 were front and center in my consciousness. Through every stage of Zhao’s study—in which he proposes a new heuristic framework with which to understand Chinese nationalism in its past, present, and potential instantiations—I kept returning to that phone call in 1999 and wondering: “Would Zhao’s book have helped me understand the Belgrade incident as it was unfolding in real time?” Does Zhao’s study provide us the much needed lens through which to understand the future Belgrades and Spy Plane incidents which, although unfortunate, will inevitably occur somewhere in the future of Sino-American relations?

Zhao, who is Director of the China Center and Professor at the Graduate School of International Studies at Denver University, outlines a four-part typology of Chinese nationalism which, in essence, is three parts primordialist and one part instrumentalist. The primordialist components will be familiar to any student of nationalism, and include “liberal nationalism,” in which parties proclaim “the civil right of participation in government”; “ethnic nationalism,” which “emphasizes cultural-

ethnic identity”; and “state nationalism,” which emphasizes “political-territory convergence” (p. 20). Zhao dedicates a sizeable portion of his book to an examination of these three types of nationalism, all of which he finds examples of in the twentieth-century Chinese experience.

Beyond these three primordial engines of Chinese nationalism, Zhao explains, there is a fourth, top-down, instrumentalist variety which plays an equally important (if not paramount) role in promoting and channeling patriotic sentiment within the country—a fourth type of nationalism the author terms “pragmatic nationalism.” This fourth type, which could also be termed simply “instrumentalist nationalism,” is driven by Chinese elites who, over the course of the twentieth century, have engineered, promoted, orchestrated, channeled, or in any number of ways manipulated popular sentiment to serve their own short- and medium-term goals. As in the case of the three primordialist catalysts of Chinese nationalism, Zhao provides examples of this fourth type as well.

Returning to that phone call in May of 1999, then, the question remains: would Zhao’s framework have helped us interpret, in real time, an explosion of Chinese nationalist sentiment such as the one we witnessed during the Belgrade episode? Where does the Belgrade bombing fit within Zhao’s four-part typology? The answer, unfortunately, is that it fits practically everywhere in Zhao’s model, a factor which throws into question the utility of this heuristic. Clearly concerned with the issue of territorial sovereignty, Chinese protesters in 1999 seem to fit into Zhao’s picture of “state nationalism.” At the same time, the activities of state authorities (who helped bus students from their campuses to the American embassy) seem to suggest that Belgrade was primarily a case of “pragmatic nationalism.” From a different angle, though, the incident seems infused with elements of Zhao’s “ethnic nationalism,” since the resultant anger was often expressed along ethno-racial lines (Asian American students, for example, reported feeling far safer in the aftermath of the Belgrade bombing than their Caucasian and African American classmates). And the list goes on.

To his credit, Zhao openly acknowledges the eliding nature of his model, calling it one which “tempers primordialism with a careful measure of instrumentalism” (p. 7). There is a cost associated with this elision, however, in that it sacrifices analytic utility. If a single incident can be located almost anywhere within his four-part typology, and can just as readily be described as “primordialist” as “instrumentalist,” then what exactly is the model telling us? Whereas there is no doubt that

Zhao’s study provides us with a rich and empirically supported nomenclature through which to describe the phenotypical expressions of Chinese nationalism, it ultimately ends up begging the question: what about the genotype? What is the underlying engine of Chinese nationalism and where does it come from historically? These questions remain unaddressed.

Finally, there are some specific points which the reader should be aware of when putting Zhao’s new book to use. First, whereas it is often unnecessary to point out minor typological flaws in a text, there are a number of issues which, although small when each is considered in isolation, add up to a problem which should certainly be addressed if and when Zhao’s book is revised and reprinted. First, the study is peppered with a number of disembodied citations. Without prior knowledge, for example, there is no way to know if Zhao’s references to opinions by Gu Shu and Xie Yong on page 160 should be regarded as primary-historical data or as a secondary-historiographical contextualization. In large part, this problem stems from the fact that Zhao’s study, in addition to addressing well-known figures from the early twentieth century, also introduces the reader (and quite commendably so) to Chinese thinkers in the contemporary period. With this contemporary focus, however, comes added editorial responsibilities to insure clarity and to avoid interpretive conflation.

Furthermore, the text relies on a joint endnote-bibliography style which places an unnecessary burden on the reader. Endnotes do not contain any reference information other than the author’s last name and page number, thereby requiring the reader to move on to the bibliography to find out remaining information (even book and article titles). The system is cumbersome, especially since, on a few occasions, author names which appear in the endnotes are not included in the bibliography (such as Jie Chen, referenced in note 2 on page 211).[1]

Many of the above-mentioned issues are to be expected, particularly when considering the book’s non-traditional endnote system. Two errors, however, are particularly problematic, and should certainly be revised should this text enter its second edition. First, on page 173, Zhao’s summary of the CCP’s nationalities policy (“â| for the strategic purpose of enlisting the support of minority groups disgruntled by the KMT’s assimilationist policy â|”) is a nearly verbatim reproduction of Dru Gladney’s summary provided on page 87 of *Muslim Chinese* (“â| for the strategic purpose of enlisting the support of the

peoples disgruntled by Qing rule and Chiang Kai-shek's nationality policy"). Fortunately, I have already had the opportunity to communicate this fact directly to Professor Zhao, who explains that the error will most assuredly be remedied should the book be reprinted in a second edition. Additionally, readers should be aware that, on page 199, Zhao's table regarding the population of Chinese minority groups contains a sizeable error. The table lists the 1990 population of Chinese minorities as con-

stituting 18.04 percent of the population, when it should read 8.04 percent.

Note

[1]. In my recent e-mail communication with Professor Zhao, he has since provided me with the complete bibliographic information. It is Jie Chen, "The Impact of Reform on the Party and Ideology in China," *The Journal of Contemporary China*, 9 (Summer 1995): 22-34.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Thomas Mullaney. Review of Zhao, Suisheng, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12794>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.