

Review - Staging the World

Written by Kendrick Kuo

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Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

By: Rebecca E. Karl

Durham: Duke University Press, 2002

Staging the World is Rebecca E. Karl's attempt to break Chinese nationalism out of a dichotomous dynamic between Western imperialism and late Qing intellectuals and into a global context. Karl argues that "China's situation at the turn of the twentieth century was conceptually linked to the world around it, and particularly to emergent nationalist and anticolonial movements in the non-Euro-American world of the time" (3). Her innovative idea is that the intellectual turmoil of the late Qing era was not a struggle with modernity, but actually a product of modernity.

When late Qing thinkers looked at the world, they did not merely see two clashing entities—the West and Japan on one side and China on the other. Rather, Karl believes they saw a world in flux with modernity driving change. This presented not only a problem for a China confronting modernity, but an opportunity to be transformed and to shape the global order (hence the title "staging the world").

Karl's first theoretical move is to disaggregate "nation" from "state". In Western historiography of modern China,

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these two are often conflated, constricting national strengthening to the realm of constructing a strong state. But Karl wants to show how the strengthening of the nation was envisioned separate from the state. This isolation of the Chinese nation from the state allowed late Qing intellectuals to find in other national revolutions the seeds of their own national revitalization. For Karl, nationalism is “a congeries of diverse intellectual praxes and concept-formations, which are not reducible to the pursuit of a political state, and which are *endowed with translocal significance precisely because of the emergency of nationalism globally* (italics mine). (24)”

Redefining *Guo* and *Tongzhong*

After the failure of the reform movement in 1898, China's reformers moved from state-optimism to people-optimism. Though a state could be lost, an active people (*minzu*) could be sustained. Karl argues that Poland's partition weighed heavy on the minds of the reformers and the Polish struggle for ethno-nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) was trumpeted as an example for the Chinese nation. *Guo*, a Mandarin Chinese word previously used for “state,” was now retranslated into “nation.”

There was also a rearticulation of the concept of *tongzhong*. *Tongzhong* was initially used in a civilizational context, with Japan and Korea both being *tongzhong* (of the same kind or race) of China. Karl, rather shockingly, shows how famous Chinese reformers of the likes of Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei shifted *tongzhong* into a notion of “regional-racial” sameness rather than exclusively civilizational. The example is Turkey. Turkey, also being a “sick man of the East” and in the midst of empire decline, was a considered *atongzhong* of China fighting for survival in modernity. *Tongzhong* also changed from an idea for unity into one that divided nations and justified domination and conflict.

Three Nations, Three Pillars of Chinese Nationalism

Karl examines three examples of national awakenings outside of China and how they affected Chinese thinking on nationalism and their survival.

Deterritorialized Politics in Hawaii

When King Kalakaua of Hawaii visited China in April 1881, he advocated for a pan-Asian alliance against Western imperialism, to the surprise of his Chinese hosts. Li Hongzhang, head of the Foreign Affairs Office (*Zongli Yamen*) was baffled that Kalakaua believed China and Hawaii were both Asian, that they were of the same race, and that they should join forces against the West. For Li, Hawaii was distant, different, and irrelevant to the Qing understanding of the world.

Things changed after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Chinese intellectuals began to conceive of a shared threat among Pacific nations. Karl tells the story of Liang Qichao leaving Japan in 1899 to raise funds for the Save the Emperor Society and being quarantined in Hawaii on his way to the United States due to an epidemic. It was in Hawaii that Liang conceived of “loss of country” (*wangguo*), a concept describing the potential overthrow of the dynastic state, to the “loss of cultural identity,” which he saw occurring among the Hawaiian race (69).

It was also in Hawaii that Liang met these Chinese Hawaiians spoken of by King Kalakaua, in Hawaii's Chinatown. The solidarity between the Chinese in Hawaii and those in China was not of ethnic or cultural similarity, but a socioeconomic and sociopolitical crisis. They were “stateless” and required the “creating [of] a self-reliant national people that bypassed the state altogether” (79).

Colonialism in the Philippines

Watching colonialism unfold in the Philippines, the Chinese national project came to identify their arch nemesis was not Western imperialism, but Manchu colonialism. The Filipino uprising (1896-1898) was initially labeled banditry and disorder (*luan*), but from 1898 to 1903 was dubbed a revolution (*geming*). No longer were the Chinese merely behind the Euro-Americans, but also behind the Philippines and the Transvaal (discussed below).

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Chinese intellectuals saw a parallel between “the social and political structures of colonization and reform in the Philippines and China” (97). More specifically, the administrative assimilation of the Philippines by the Spanish smacked of the assimilation of China by the Manchu. To throw off the yoke of the Manchus required that “the people” be forged through action.

In 1897, China’s solution lied in “true” Confucianism, but by 1903, the solution was revolutionary transformation side-by-side with other colonized peoples. Challenging imperialist ideology was not found in a particular civilization or territory, but was a global endeavor to bring about a new global order.

The Ascendance of Ethnos and the Boer War

Who are “the people”? In answering this question, two theories stood as primary contenders. First, nation-statism (*guojia zhuyi*), which conceived the people as a citizenry, led to a political strategy to rearticulate the dynastic state as a constitutional monarchy. Second, ethno-nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*), the Chinese were to come under a “Han ethno-racial sign” and “the people” would come together in its expulsion of the Manchu (117). Those advocating nation-statism saw the enemy as Euro-American imperialism, whereas ethno-nationalists saw colonialism by the Manchu as the true challenge of modernity.

The Boer War, for late Qing intellectuals, demonstrated that not only was Asia coming into modernity with the Philippines Revolution, but Africa was as well. When the Boer War broke out in October 1899, the British narrative was accepted, which saw the Uitlander and the Boers as two political peoples (*guomin*) with equal claim on the Transvaal state. This justification for British military involvement eroded and the Boers became not *guomin*, as statists would have it, but a distinct *minzu* connected to the Transvaal and hence an exclusive and legitimate claim.

Seeing both the Philippines and the Boers resist colonialism, Chinese intellectuals began to espouse “a nation-building process that relied upon the ‘spirit’ of a *minzu* ready to resist ‘slavery’ at all costs through non-state-centered social militarization” (130). The only way to resist colonialism was self-conscious individuals binding together to defend themselves.

Warning against “epistemological ethnocentrism” and a blind adherence to the “historical priority” of the West.

This was not the only way to interpret the Boer War, however. Liang Qichao, in contrast to what he wrote about Hawaii, argued that the Boers lost because the state was not in fact strong enough. The war was an imperialist endeavor and to be seen through the lens of territory, property, and state sovereignty. Liang in fact left behind a colonial framework for the China problem and ended in the state-nationalist camp.

China’s National Project as Global and Local

Karl’s concluding chapters follow the development of an “Asian” identity to the abandonment of a global revolution for China’s particular revolution. To do this, she ties into the narrative the case of India, Egypt’s reform movement, and Turkish constitutionalism. To sum up the final chapters of her story, she writes:

With this conflation complete, ethno-nationalism also came to be separated from the previous expansive global understanding of *tongzhong*, which had linked different peoples of the world together in a politically understood category of “sameness” welded together by the threat of *wangguo* [lost country], or colonization, and was now reduced in scope to a specifically internalist proposition that indicated *tongzhong* and *minzu* as the sole proper foundation for separate nationalisms worldwide. In this final guise, *minzu* became the basis for modern Chinese nationalism—as discourse and practice. (191)

Both anticolonial and anti-imperialist trajectories of the Chinese national project found their grounding in a global space of modernity.

An Assessment

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Karl's book could easily be rewritten for a popular audience because she has a global story to tell that many will find fascinating, especially lovers of imperial history. Her perspective is fresh, but is too often stifled by theoretically-laden phrases such as "historical problematic" that only begin to make sense after reading it in context over several pages. This is to be expected of an academic book, but Karl does not make it easy.

Karl's exegesis of the works of prominent Chinese intellectuals is useful and much appreciated in a book such as *Staging the World*, where the high-level overview can obscure the gems to be found among the weeds. Unfortunately, the exegesis does not mesh well with the historical narrative she is telling. Most confusing was learning of Liang Qichao's thinking on "the people" in Hawaii only to find that he later changes his mind two chapters later when she is expounding on the Boer War. Since different currents of thinking on China's national project flowed simultaneously, keeping them separate can become burdensome without good structuring.

Finally, those who are not experts on Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century may be left wondering why the "dyadic" readings of China and the West continue to hold such sway over how the era is taught if in fact it misses the big picture. Is Karl writing a revisionist history that picks and chooses relevant data and disproportionately weights them? I leave more qualified scholars to answer this question.

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