

Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution

by John Fitzgerald | reviewed by Pete Sweeney

“The failure of Africa is a failure of the imagination.” Chinua Achebe

“Bismarck only shook the tree that fantasy had planted.”
Theodor Herzl

In the wake of reading and reviewing works discussing Chinese and world history in terms of conspiracy and structure (exhausted by academic works, however rigorous, that ascribe the process of history to faceless systems and inevitable evolutions which manage to both condemn and excuse everything) it is a relief to turn to John Fitzgerald’s engaging work on the Nationalist revolution and the politics thereof, which ascribes power and influence not only to the agency of human decision but also to that of human imagination. To accept Fitzgerald’s thesis requires the acceptance of certain premises that are cached throughout the text, first and foremost that a nation is at least discovered, if not outright invented, in the mind, and that the mind, the idea, and the individual matter as much as the economic interest and the systemic demand. This is a primary premise of philosophical Romanticism—that the imagination creates reality, and I am sure that Fitzgerald, who at one point in his work profitably compares patriotism to the metaphor of romantic love, would not object to this. Where Lydia Liu ascribes a perhaps outsized and certainly conspiratorial colonial complicity to the manipulation of language, Fitzgerald has both a more comprehensible and more compelling vision of its role vis a vis the revolution: “The nation was invented in literature and manufactured in the movement for language reform.” Taken out of context this would seem to indicate that there is not much more to the thesis, but Fitzgerald’s analysis is more layered, less simplistic, and much more ambitious than this phrase implies. The work begins by describing the evolution of the national image and the “discovery” of the Chinese soul by neo-Confucians attempting to reform the Qing regime from within, and those disenchanted who rejected the Confucian model entirely and instead set about seeking the Chinese “soul,” a project in which they were in both cooperation and competition with the European missionaries, who also sought to unify China in the service of proselytizing convenience and perhaps for purely theological reasons as well.

The image-making process seized on a trope early; that of “awakening,” and Fitzgerald does an excellent job of explaining why this metaphor was so useful to the movement. Both accessible, flexible (ultimately too flexible) and practical, it served to identify the existence of a “real” nation populated by sleeping, “unconscious” people.

In large part the original force of the movement was provoked by foreign conquest. Insulted Chinese literati and political leadership, while enraged by colonial domination, conceded some of their points—on Chinese parochialism,

on table manners, on the treatment of women etc. Sun Yatsen is the largest figure in the book, dwarfing everyone else. Fitzgerald attributes Sun's influence first and foremost to his compelling image he presented to the nation, that of a tiger engaging the eyes of the beholder. "Sun Yatsen was converted into an icon of the Chinese nation because, it appeared, he alone could paint the tiger."

It is a challenge, in this short review, to catalog the trends Fitzgerald observes, emerging in coordination with the "awakening" metaphor. China's awakening marked the birth of a modern "progressive" concept of history, which was evidenced by the emergence of maps. The coalescence of the national identity coincided with an increased demand for maps of the country, of exploratory forays into the "hinterland," the challenge to China's inward frontiers, and the discovery of the "true" China as illustrated by values and behavior of the rural population, uncorrupted by urbanization and westernization— a sort of noble savage. The process also produced individual Chinese "heroes," most notably Sun Yatsen, although Fitzgerald's case that China had lacked heroes before is somewhat thinly supported.

The work is strongest in the first half, where it is most engaging and most humorous—more personality, less policy. It is where the reader identifies with and cheers for the wave of pragmatic idealism that swept the country. Here Fitzgerald gives himself the space for a sense of humor to emerge. For example, his discussion of the career and thought of the magnificently brilliant, not-quite-sane Kang Youwei:

The ideal community for Kang's awakened self embraced the "living creatures on Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Uranus and Neptune" as well as those on earth. In more sanguine moments, Kang had even hoped to put an end to intergalactic warfare: "I have pondered deeply how to rid all the stars and all the heavens of war, but could not [resolve it]." . . . In a significant gesture to practice, Kang settled for the first minimum program of the revolution, embracing peace on earth.

This half also contains the fascinating narrative describing how China engaged with the West, including its literature (such as Ibsen's *The Doll House* and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*), and where it accepted the Western premise without qualification, where it adapted or manipulated the premise (for example, they agreed that Chinese peasantry were superior to the half-urbanized city folk, but stood the foreign assertion that they were atypical Chinese on its head), and where it rejected the idea completely. For example, it appears that a large portion of the political elite, communists and nationalists alike, rejected any concept of representational democracy.

Nevertheless, it is clear that some dangerous seeds were planted from the start. For example Kang considers the family an obstacle and considers separating children from their parents for doctrinal purposes. One can see Mao scheming unpleasantly about the confiscation of minority properties and rights. And of course once Sun Yatsen's imagination hits the ground, it turns out that his image of awakening is a double-edged sword as far as

representational democracy goes; so long as people are still “asleep,” they cannot represent themselves. All in all, the book charts the descent of the revolution from idealism into totalitarian centralization, and this far before the Communists seized power. One can see the seeds of the Cultural Revolution in the anti-elitism that began to flourish, the rejection of the scholarly along with Confucianism, and ultimately the rejection of education in favor of dogma as the Nationalists/Communists began to seize control of the school systems. One also finds a preview of the political cynicism: “in the modern world,” one Chinese reflects, observing the behavior of colonialists, “only power counts.” And finally there is the depressing racism of Sun Yatsen, who rejects the multiracial Republican flag and openly advocates a return to ethnic Han supremacy . . . and gradually grows more and more sympathetic to imperial forms under new names in order to stave off more democratic (i.e. electoral) and federal visions of Chinese government. Perhaps most interesting and informative is Fitzgerald’s narrative of “capture.” In Fitzgerald’s view, the first critical success of the colonialists was in capturing China’s self image for their own use. The response to this was both intellectual and violently political; Fitzgerald attributes the most salient event associated with the recapture of the Chinese image with the literal capture of numerous powerful foreigners by Chinese bandits during the Lincheng affair. Depressingly enough, colonial opinion actually greeted this development with enraged respect, lending credence to the cynical belief that only power counts. Fitzgerald asserts – and anecdotally supports– that one of the main reasons imperialists despised the Chinese was that they allowed themselves to be colonized. “Nobody wanted to conquer China,” asserts one anonymous “sympathetic” foreigner, “but everybody wanted China to conquer herself.” Fitzgerald continues to say: “overthrowing imperialism was part of the contract with imperialism itself.” A more sympathetic description of the White Man’s Burden hypothesis I have yet to read from someone who appears to reject it. And yet Fitzgerald is no apologist. He goes out of his way to quote racist (if not, alas, extraordinarily so in the context of his times) Rodney Gilbert, who advocates the most revolting form of race war in response to the May Thirtieth movement: “It will at least spell world-war on an enormous scale in which a mere handful of Anglo-Germanic superiors . . . [will] subdue, exterminate, or enslave all the inferior peoples of the earth . . .”

The weaknesses of the work are to an extent inherent in its field of argument. It is difficult to disprove theses based on analysis of subjective evidence such as literature, journalism, art, and fashion. Fitzgerald appears to anticipate this by turning the second half of the work into a long slog through the various factional policy debates that occurred as the reality of the Chinese nation, and the authority of the Nationalist revolution, appeared to coalesce and ultimately separate. He provides a granular analysis of internal party politics, but while his concreteness is useful, it is perhaps

unnecessarily exhaustive for his thesis. However, the student of the period learns much about the personalities and mechanisms of party politics at the time.

Most strange is the conclusion. All this reading about literature, the arts, philosophy, individual personality, and so on suddenly appear as cover for a critique of Marxist-Leninist thought. While I am glad to have the theoretical framework of Marxism and Leninism brought up and discussed- it is certainly relevant- it does not seem to warrant so much attention as Fitzgerald gives it. Granted in the last paragraph he finally says that "the division between the Nationalists and Communists is best characterized not as a struggle between Marxism-Leninism and nationalism but as a struggle between two phases of nationalism." Given the near utter failure of Marxism to predict nationalism . . . or much else with any degree of reliability, does Fitzgerald accurately assume that his academic audience is still in thrall to dialectical materialism or the Labor Theory of Value? And he must perforce lead his conclusion as if an exegesis and criticism of Marxist thought regarding nationalism had been at the heart of his thesis all along? It was the "struggle of dreams" Fitzgerald documents throughout the work, and its implications for propaganda in political movements of whatever ideology, that seems the most central issue and the most worthy of study in my view.

Certainly Fitzgerald's discussion of the tension between the communist vision of a class-based revolution in contrast with Sun Yatsen's vision of a nationalist revolution that included all classes is illuminating. Also fascinating is the degree to which the two centralist, totalitarian movements were capable of cooperating and collaborating up until Chiang Kai-shek's seizure of the Nationalist movement; one could argue that the communists were simply nationalists with a bit more focus. For anyone who prefers to view the Nationalists as liberal democrats and the Communists as totalitarian dictators, this book will prove an eye-opening tonic. In Fitzgerald's view, the most powerful liberal democratic forces in China were largely led by "warlords" like Chen Jiongming, who held actual democratic elections and proposed a federal form of government. When Sun (encouraged by his rejection by Western Powers) turned to Russia for aid, he also turned away from the ideological source of political pluralism. However, from Fitzgerald's analysis of his personality, it does not appear that Sun would have been any more inclined to pluralism than a famous author would be inclined to accept the assignment of a ghost writer.

The hopeful note the work strikes is its implicit rejection of inevitability. Had Chen successfully captured Sun's headquarters, he might have also captured the idea of China, by tarnishing Sun's own image as an untouchable icon. Had a different but equally talented national artist emerged to counter Sun, who knows what image would have been painted? Had the Western Powers allowed for Sun's legitimate points, they might have diminished the role of Comintern's internal manipulation and sabotage of the Nationalist revolution for their own ends. Without engaging in

counterfactual speculation, Fitzgerald makes clear that there were, in fact, other possibilities, that meaningful decisions were in fact made by individuals.

Throughout the work, one is confronted by turning points where the literature was either overcome by political reality, or became the political reality. The individual is the entity who dreams. While such dreams can infect a mass, they must begin in the individual mind. Thus art and revolution are connected in their mandate to represent “reality” to the masses, which frequently involves representing the masses to themselves; thus the posited linkage between artistic realism and materialism, historical or otherwise.

Finally, I emerged with the impression that the decline of the socialist revolutions coincided with the decline in their artistic output, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not, but never by accident. “During a great revolution,” writes Lu Xun, “literature disappears and there is silence.” Once you have awakened, the time for dreaming is over. Thus the incredible utility and flexibility of the “awakening” metaphor persists throughout the work. Certainly Fitzgerald might take exception to Lu’s separation of literature and action. Literature can disappear, it is certain; but is this a sign of revolutionary vigor, or of its opposite? One is inclined to consider Don DeLillo’s thesis that the modern artist has been supplanted by the terrorist. The communist world oversaw one of the greatest destructions of human artistic and literary productivity since the burning of the Great Library in Alexandria. The artistic elite, politically inclined and otherwise, as Lu Xun’s example illustrates, were not entirely victims in this process. The tiger they painted emerges from dappled shadow into sunlight—awakened, self-conscious, capable of distinguishing friends from enemies. It clambers down from the canvas, grows claws, and attacks its painters.