

China: the pessoptimist nation

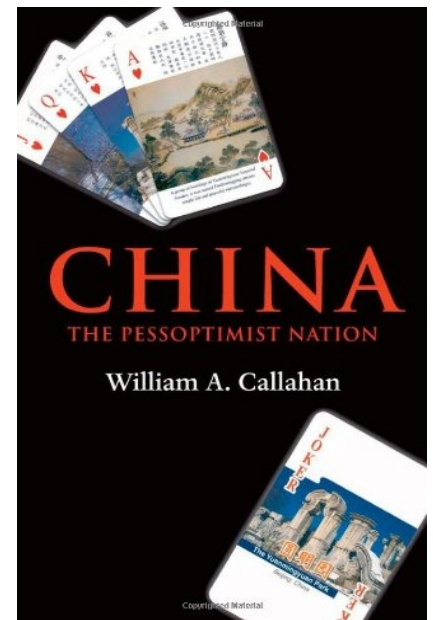
*The rise of China presents a long-term challenge to the world not only economically, but politically and culturally. In his recent book William Callahan explores China's identity politics, focusing on the power dynamic between China and the rest of the world, and the concept of 'national humiliation' and the shared emotions of a nation. **James Cuffe** is highly impressed with Callahan's work, concluding that it offers an important contribution to studies of Chinese national discourse.*



China: The Pessoptimist Nation. William A. Callahan. Oxford University Press. Paperback edition. February 2012.

Find this book:

China: The Pessoptimist Nation by [William A. Callahan](#) is a book I would have enjoyed researching and writing myself; I would go so far as to say – in a complimentary fashion – that I feel a certain amount of professional jealousy that Callahan conceived of and wrote this title rather than me. But for this the audience can breathe a sigh of relief as the more suitable scholar succeeded where the other would have failed. This intriguing book offers a contextualization of the emotional threads running through the rise of China that might be characterised as the overcoming of a century of national humiliation at the hands of Western and Japanese forces. China scholars will be very familiar with the phrase 'national humiliation' [*guochi*] but will also know there is little academic literature exclusively exploring any genealogy of the concept which is of huge importance to the internal popular political discourse in mainland China. Callahan, Professor of International Politics and China Studies at the [University of Manchester](#) brings his experience and knowledge with ease to a thoroughly enjoyable cartographic exploration of the Chinese sense of national humiliation.



It is not for no reason that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in China, as well as influential Chinese Media platforms, regularly highlight the disrespectful attitude of foreign nations to China's feelings. Arguably they are right to highlight foreign insensitivity under the dominant paradigm of *realpolitik* and 'rational' contemporary international relations; it might sound strange to talk of emotions at all in the supposedly rational sphere of political adjudication. This title is a clear case study as to the very real issue of national sentiment for international politics and adds to the call for a re-founding of certain assumptions in the field of International Relations.

The different chapters come together to propose how the problems of identity-politics in a nation with breaks in its communication processes replicate at the official and international level. This wider picture is built up by looking at the different aspects engaging the discourse of national humiliation. The role of this discourse in patriotic education highlights the inherent problematic of constructing *the other* in negative terms, i.e. '*they who did this to us*'; While such drum-beating can detract internal tensions to an external focal point, the education ministry forestalls attempts at international levels for the Communist Party to rise 'softly' in the face of domestic fervent patriotism or outright xenophobia. A problem underlined in recent publications by [Susan Shirk](#).

As the sub-title would suggest – *Pessoptimist Nation* – there is a strange quandary in maintaining rhetoric of national humiliation whilst emerging as a powerful and stable player in the world order of nations. Balancing the achievements of China with her humiliation pose contradictory positions that can not just be met with understanding achievements, such as hosting the Olympics in Beijing or the Expo in Shanghai, as ending the politics of suffering as some suggested they would be. There can be no sense of *finally* arriving on the world stage if the discourse of inequality and retribution are replicated under the banner of National Humiliation through the generations.

World map of the hurt feelings of the Chinese people (Callahan, 2010: 124)



If one thinks of the large expatriate communities whether migrant or student in the above shaded countries, the effect of feeling becomes a very real issue for European Governments in dealing with China and internal Chinese populations, for example- The Torch Relay for Beijing Olympics. Care is taken by the author not to present any essentialist view of Chinese identity or a ‘China perspective’ as he weaves the historical narrative of humiliation together. This balancing act is given best expression by a quote he employs from Peter Hessler of the *New Yorker*.

When you live in China as a foreigner, there are two critical moments of recognition. The first occurs immediately upon arrival, when you are confronted with your own ignorance... Then, just as you beginning to catch on, you realize that everybody else feels pretty much the same way. The place changes too fast; nobody in China has the luxury of being confident in his knowledge... This second moment of recognition is even more frightening than the first. Awareness of your own ignorance is a lonely feeling, but there’s little consolation in sharing it with 1.3 billion neighbours. [Callahan, 2010: 29]

One must read with the awareness that this book is written from a certain perspective that arises out of the author’s interest in the discourse of national humiliation in China as is therefore framed in a particular manner. Callahan is quite clear about this from the start. A weakness of the book lies in the manner in which chapters are delineated in a very prescriptive manner. This is solely from my own point of view and the perfectly reasoned reply would be that the book must be laid out in some particular way. Personally I would have chosen another and this should not in any way lessen the validity of the *When-, Where- and Who- is China* division the author chose. It does I feel reflect back to a more European way of dissecting and looking upon a subject but on this issue it would be difficult to find any winning position, as Callahan notes by writing that his analysis of this particular discourse can and is criticised by Chinese colleagues in that he excludes details of the crimes of imperialist powers that gave rise to the discourse in the first place. We must accept however that such an exposition is not the aim of his project.

I wholly recommend this book for undergraduate students of China Studies or International Relations with a focus on East Asia. Over and above such an audience I would also recommend this book, thanks to its fluidity and organisation, to any level of reader interested in one of the more important idiosyncrasies of popular Chinese national discourse. For reference outside of China Studies, this title fits into the international *Humiliation Studies* project looking to break the cycles of violence that incur humiliation rather than humility, see www.humiliationstudies.org.

James Cuffe is an Anthropologist at [University College Cork](#). He teaches on China Studies and Social Theory at University College Cork, National University of Ireland: Maynooth, and University College Dublin. He is interested in Chinese Anthropology, Chinese systems of thought and cross-cultural comparisons of notions of time and space. His publications include a number of review articles within China Studies and articles and chapters in Chinese and English on Sino-Irish economic and cultural relations. He maintains a profile page at www.jamescuffe.com. [Read more reviews by James](#).

No related posts.