



Nationalism and Populism

Wu Qi: We didn't talk much last time about your life in Singapore or Hong Kong. Maybe we can start with this. What brought you to Singapore?

Xiang Biao: In 2003, when I had almost finished my doctorate, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had a project on Chinese migration to Europe and was looking to hire someone. That project was related to Northeast China because the European Union had noticed that people from this region were immigrating to Europe. "Illegal immigration" sounds like it is something that has been with us forever, but in terms of a policy concept it is relatively recent, and only appeared in the 1990s, like "asylum seeker." These concepts did not exist during the Cold War; then, refugees were just refugees, most of which came from Communist countries. Most of the cases involved intellectuals, and the West offered them excellent conditions. After the end of the Cold War, people from formerly Communist countries could leave when they wanted to, and at the same time there were a great many small-scale ethnic conflicts in Africa and elsewhere, which produced genuine refugees. They were different from the political cases that had been considered refugees in the Cold War, and there were so many of them that the West could not treat them in the same way, so they created the new term "asylum seeker." This is a strange term in that it does not say that you are a refugee, and does not say that you aren't, only that you are in the process of being looked into.

Human trafficking is also a political concept that emerged after the Cold War, in the early 1990s. The emergence of this concept was largely the product of the moral panic provoked by the arrival of sex workers who came to Western Europe from Eastern Europe. At first, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western Europe thought that there would be countless people coming from East, which frightened them, and they wanted to prevent it. Second, the general public in Western Europe has deep-rooted moral objections to the sex industry, but cannot denounce it, because feminism in Western Europe is strong, and feminists believe that the sex industry is a kind of “sex work” that deserves respect and protection, not prohibition and moral opprobrium. So policy turned the sex industry problem into a human trafficking problem. The sense of the policy was that if people came from Eastern Europe to Western Europe to engage in sex work, it could not be voluntary, because no woman would willingly engage in sex work, so they must have been trafficked. This is how the logic worked, and it can be seen as a denial of women’s autonomy. Human trafficking is also closely linked to illegal immigration, and fears of human trafficking are largely similar to fears of illegal immigration, because it is hard to criminalize illegal immigration. In terms of European legal principles, illegal immigration is not a crime, and is a simple matter of crossing national borders without permission, but if you turn it into a case of human trafficking, then it becomes criminal, and you can attack the problem. The concept of human trafficking is also part of the hollowing out of ideology that followed the end of the Cold War, where a sort of empty humanitarianism has come to dominate the discourse, in the world and in China.

In this environment, the European Union asked the IOM to launch a project on Chinese immigration to Europe, and luckily for me my dissertation was about finished, so I went to Geneva. During the day I worked as a member of the research team, and at night I wrote my dissertation. When I started, China still had only observer status on the IOM; China became a member in 2016. In 2017, the IOM formally became a part of the United Nations. So migration is a big issue internationally. But the perspective from which migration is defined as a problem is clear—a problem that requires intervention, that requires programs to respond, that requires assistance. It is clearly defined from the perspective of the rich countries, even though they talked about it in the language of human rights.

I worked there for more than six months, dealing with all sorts of highly formal language; most people who work in international immigration organizations have never met an immigrant—all the work is paperwork. But I learned something from this, which is that people who understand the situation clearly cannot write it up in a formal manner, and the categories used by the international organizations are often labels, which do not explain things clearly.

At the time we were setting up our migration research center at Oxford, and I was one of the applicants. The Center was approved, but there would be no money for a year, so when I got back from Geneva, I had no salary, even if there was a job eventually waiting for me. To fill the time, I did a post-doc at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. Singapore's impact on my life was considerable. That's where I met my wife, who was also at Asia Research Institute. When I was there, the head of the Institute was Anthony Reid (b. 1939), a famous historian of Southeast Asia, who does Braudel-like *long durée* studies of economic and social history. His goal is to break through the national frameworks we use today. He argues that many transnational links have existed for a long time and might be more important than nation-states. For someone like me who came out of Beida, I thought this was beside the point since the nation-state remains the most important category today and you have to confront that. Later on, I slowly understood that Reid's vision was important; the idea is not to deny the importance of the contemporary nation-state, but if you understand the history of the nation-state, then you can relativize it, you can achieve a sense of distance, and a gentry vision can reemerge. The reason that the gentry study history, or that Western intellectuals study ancient history, Greece and Rome, is not because they want to stitch together a simple self-narrative—although it can be used that way, and nationalism always wants to construct a continuous, unilinear narrative—but because another sense of time, an understanding of the *longue durée*, can give you a firmer grasp on today's politics, as well as a healthy sense of distance.

After I finished a year-long post-doc in Singapore, I stayed on as a visiting scholar, and even after returning to Oxford, I spent more time in Singapore. Later on, Prasenjit Duara became head of the Institute, and the power of his imagination, as well as his insights on important issues of the moment, had a huge impact on me. He held a lot of international symposiums in Singapore, hoping to put the university on the world's intellectual map, and these events really opened my eyes. But what I found

most remarkable about Singapore was not the people like Duara and Anthony Reid, but the group of dedicated people behind them. You've probably never heard of them, most of them are women, and they may not spout grand ideas, but they put their heads down and get to work, with an attitude of thorough professionalism. They work in teams, they are open-minded, and they are quite selfless. There are a lot of people like this in Singapore. Everybody talks about how great Lee Kuan Yew was, and of course, he was important, but getting things done requires not only a great plan but also the step by step implementation. If you don't do it today, if you don't make today's mistake today, you'll never know how much you will get done tomorrow, so the only solution is to do it. To me, this is the Singapore spirit. Oxford is not like this, because Oxford can rest on its laurels, but for many Asian countries that are coming from behind, Singapore is worth studying.

I'm against ideas of creativity or genius. Everything comes from labor and effort. Our textbook story about Da Vinci drawing eggs endlessly¹ when he was a kid tells us something that is true. Art doesn't rely completely on imagination. Art is very concrete, just like the feeling of the ray of sunlight that touched you this morning. If you want to get a good hold on that feeling, you have to learn to make it, by carving, or painting, getting the color right. Beida is a bit representative of the opposite, in that students there, talk big but are not particularly good at getting things done. When I was a student there we all had memorized the sentence "[Beida] is holy ground..." A friend of mine studying political science said that if you call where you are standing "holy ground" you'll turn everyone else off. China is huge, what is everyone outside of Beida going to think? What kind of attitude was this teaching Beida students? I thought he was right. Big talk is kind of scary, as if some kind of feeling got you all worked up, but once it blows over there is nothing left.

Wu Qi: Singapore doesn't have this kind of ecology?

Xiang Biao: No. At present, they lack that bit, but their infrastructures and work methods are excellent. What they can do, they do very well, but as for incorporating different ideas to achieve a huge breakthrough, they are not there yet.

¹ Translator's note: It is commonly believed in China that when Da Vinci started to learn to draw, his master made him draw eggs for three years so that he could achieve complete mastery. The detail is not found in Walter Isaacson's biography of the artist.

Wu Qi: You just talked about the importance of a long-term view of history, which reminded me of when you talked before about your debate with the head of a College at Oxford, when you argued that a short-term view of history can sometimes reveal more layers of an issue, and your preference at the time for short-term views of history in the context of your own research. I wonder if there is a contradiction here?

Xiang Biao: At the time, what I said was that a long-term view of history was like a long novel, which meant that you could take a long period of time to explain yourself, while as an anthropologist, I preferred a poem or a play, which has to explain things clearly within tight limits. Now I kind of regret saying that; I was just ignorant and hadn't grasped the importance of history. In fact, a good play needs a good feeling for history to know what to include and what to leave out.

When I talked about a long-term view of history during our conversation just now, it was in the context of nationalism and contemporary politics, so it was a different question. A long view of history can serve two purposes: one is to build continuities, the longer the better, which makes everything look more consistent, and identifies the point of departure all the more clearly. Nationalism insists on having a single starting point, from which all else flows. A typical example of this is how we used to talk about how the geologist Li Siguang* (J. S. Lee, 1889–1971) discovered oil, as if this ancient thing had been made just for the People's Republic of China. This is a typically nationalistic explanation. The other use flips this on its head, insisting that because there has been so much history, you can see the series of ebbs and flows that make up the world, the different social arrangements, public projects, fights over power, divvying up of interests, etc., which tells us that the current situation, in this much longer context, is a short and temporary situation. Of course, we still have to engage seriously with the world in which nation-states will almost certainly outlive all of us, it's just that in the process of doing so, we should not essentialize the nation, to use an academic word. When you essentialize something you say that it has always been like this and that it should continue to be like this. When you de-essentialize something, you say, yes, things are like this, but this is relative, or, in Marxist terms, this is historical. This means that everything has its history, its origin, its development, its decline, and the concrete expression of concrete factors.

I am more sympathetic to nationalism than many other intellectuals. Indian scholars have a clear understanding of this. They say that the British aristocracy had no sense of nationalism, and when Indians opposed

colonialism by promoting nationalism, the British aristocracy saw them as provincial, and lacking a broad perspective, and claimed that only they, the British, were looking at all of humanity from a global perspective. We should emulate this Indian sensitivity. First, there is no true “all of humanity,” and claims made in the name of humanity always reflect a particular perspective. Second, if we follow someone else’s “all of humanity,” we are in fact betraying our own position in the world. If we want to respect our history of being colonized and oppressed, we must rely on nationalism to counter that simplistic, abstract narrative. Thus I feel that nationalism remains quite important today, and I see it as a tool of struggle. But if you take nationalism as an essentialized, eternal expression of the Chinese people’s relationship with the world, then this makes no sense, because we know that nationalism only appeared in China in the late Qing period, and was the result of the struggle of many people.

These are the two uses of a long view of history. Do you want to dig a tunnel through a mountain, where you enter on one side and come out the other, or do you want to get out and see the bigger picture, a broader horizon?

Wu Qi: While we’re talking about nationalism, perhaps we could make a conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism, especially since today more and more things seem to circulate between the two and it’s easy to lump them together. I’m thinking of the patriotism of Chinese overseas students, of “fan culture” on the Chinese Internet, of the support for Trump and other populist leaders...How should we understand these? How do we find the more healthy and organic aspects of nationalism without descending into populism in our daily practice? Is there any room to maneuver here?

Xiang Biao: That’s a great question. Maybe we should look at specific cases because it is hard to establish a standard for what is good and what isn’t. European historians make a distinction between civic nationalism, found to the west of the Rhine, and ethnic nationalism found to the east of the Rhine. By “west of the Rhine” they mean the republics, of which France is representative, which have common political understandings to the effect that regardless of your skin color or your ethnicity, you are a citizen as long as you respect the country’s political ideals and the constitution. “East of the Rhine” is Eastern Europe, where the key questions are “who is your father?” “What is your surname?” “What is your religion?” and “what color is your skin?” This is based on ethnicity, not on

political principles. Of course, I am oversimplifying it, but it illustrates that nationalism can take on different colorations.

When nationalist feelings are stirred up, you first need to realize that this is not necessarily a bad thing, and not necessarily a good thing. Everything depends on whether nationalism is the result of a reflection on the world situation and power relations, or instead a reflection on ethnic identity. I have problems with Chinese nationalism as an expression of ethnic identity, but from the perspective of resisting American hegemony, it is not unreasonable. In fact, the question is complicated. I once wrote that in China's socialist revolution, nationalism and internationalism were tied together, because otherwise there would have been no socialism, which is international. In the eyes of the Chinese government, Mao Zedong's greatest contribution was not building the new China, but was instead "being a great Marxist," and raising socialism to new heights, which was a contribution to the world. Now, however, Mao is seen as a nationalist. There were a lot of nationalists in China, including Zhang Taiyan*² (1869–1936) and Sun Yat-sen*, who started out opposing the Manchus and then embraced the Republic. They were looking to define their place in the world, and in this process where to draw the lines around a particular nation kept changing because "nation" is not a natural category. Today, many expressions of nationalism essentialize the nation, ignoring how peoples and nations evolved in history. A way out is to pay more attention to details. If you're unhappy about something and want to explain it away through nationalism, then maybe we should first have a chat about why you are unhappy, and see whether nationalism is really the solution to your problem.

² Translator's note: Zhang Taiyan was an important philosopher and politician in late Qing and early Republican China.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

