

Rescuing History From The Nation: Questioning Narratives Of Modern China

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Writing in Beijing, Du Gangjian and Song Gang, in a coauthored chapter, take a different tack. They do not look to Western philosophy or to international law but rather to Confucius. They try to show that the notions of "benevolence," "tolerance," and "justice" in the Confucian *Analects* have much in common with the modern ideology of human rights. They argue that the East Asian tradition itself contains the kernel of modern human-rights beliefs; it is not a foreign conception foisted upon the East (though political democracy, they imply, may be!).

The only two chapters that focus directly on human rights inside China today are by Zhu Feng, of Beijing University, and Yu Haocheng, the exiled Chinese legal scholar. Zhu Feng argues that the underpinnings for the promotion of human-rights values incrementally are being put in place in China through the gradual "breakdown of politics' overwhelming grip over society" (p. 139). Yu Haocheng, for his part, stresses the distance that China still has to travel in guaranteeing human rights in both law and practice.

All of the contributors, with the sole exception of Claude Lefort, are from Hong Kong or the People's Republic, and thus a common element in their essays is their sense that refuting the ideas contained in the Bangkok Declaration is of immediate, palpable concern. This preoccupation is seen in the two concluding chapters by Michael Davis and Hong Kong legislator Anna Hungyuk Wu, who focus specifically on the Colony's post-1997 situation. Davis discusses the grounds on which international standards of human rights might be pursued in the face of the Basic Law that Beijing has written for Hong Kong, and Anna Wu presents the legal case for instituting a human rights and equal opportunities commission in Hong Kong.

Such proposals are built upon an all too fragile hope, for it is obvious that Hong Kong's new rulers are not likely to pay any attention whatsoever to suggestions on how to better guarantee civil liberties, be it in Hong Kong or the mainland. Yet the book is to be welcomed in its own right as a strong intellectual affirmation of the universality of human rights. From multiple angles, it provides a telling refutation to the self-serving arguments about "Asian tradition" which are being bandied about today by an unholy alliance of Asian governments that have good reasons to feel defensive about human rights.

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Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China. By PRASENJIT DUARA. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. x, 276 pp. \$32.00.

In his important new book, Prasenjit Duara explores the theoretical implications of a number of the most important questions he dealt with in his award-winning, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural Society in Northern China, 1900-1942* (Stanford, 1988). Preeminent among these topics is the influence of the modern nation-state and its powerful ideologies on the ways histories are written and understood. The extended theoretical section that comprises the first half of the book begins with a critique of the notion of a progressive, linear history narrating an inexorable drive toward enlightenment. Duara labels this process "History" and traces it back to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. This set of lectures, delivered in 1822-25, adumbrates the key notion that the nation-state is the only means by which the "Subject of History" will

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