

"Better at Being American than America": The Chinese Copy, Too—Like We Do

Rene Girard's marvelous discovery that human desire, long held to be pure and spontaneous, is on the contrary imitative—that we copy our wants from what other people desire—can be seen today more than ever in the "mirror world"-rise of East Asia and in the developing rivalry between China and America. Of course, China's recent emergence—the most successful development in world history, according to economist Jeffrey Sachs—has been largely peaceful and is typically celebrated in terms of the country's sheer economic might. But the fact remains that so much of what the vast Chinese middle class now desires is precisely what the American middle class already has. The Chinese do want what Americans have, in the same style and brand, or near exact copies, thus confirming America's role model status, at least for its recent history. The difference today, however, is that, judging by President Obama's State of the Union comments last month, the Chinese in turn have become models for American aspirations. This is, of course, nothing new in transpacific relations, given that the Japanese, for a time in the late twentieth century, outdid America on several counts, but Obama now has officially remarked that the Chinese are "not waiting to revamp their economy"—having invested in high-speed infrastructure: faster rail and internet, billions for universities (when America's counterparts this year are going without), which attitude exactly feeds an ever-increasing pace of international competition. As award-winning Chinese author Guo Xiaolu simply puts it in *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, her powerful recent novel of a young women's allegorical move from rural China to a supersized Beijing, the Chinese today are simply "better at being American than America." Obama's sense of unease only confirms the mirror-like relationship over the Pacific: on both sides of the ocean, pervading both cultures, we can read an anxiety—a symptom that

readers of Girard, students of mimetic theory, know well now—the feeling that life is going on elsewhere, that bigger, better, brighter things are taking place on the other side of the sea.

The continuing pace of East Asian growth this century, then, confirms a trend that Girard has noted in the relationship between innovation and imitation. Writing nearly twenty years ago, he observed that "until quite recently, the Japanese were dismissed as mere copiers of Western ways, incapable of real leadership in any field. They are now the driving force behind innovation in more and more technical fields. When did they acquire that inventive spark, which, supposedly, they lacked? At this very moment, imitators of the Japanese—the Koreans, the Taiwanese—are repeating the same process." Leap to the present, and there is no doubt that China has gained a formidable edge in this competition—as Obama concedes in admitting "we cannot afford second place for the United States of America."

There are major parallels, certainly, between the rise of Japan two decades ago and China's emergence now, but one remarkable difference between the two, in terms of mimesis, may be that imitation's central role in cultural propagation seems far more widely recognized a decade into the twenty-first century than it was at the peak of the economic rivalry between Japan and the United States. Unlike the Japanese, who undeniably found in the West models for their 'miraculous' technological development, but who resented being called copycats, the Chinese seem more self-aware about their innovation's dependency on imitative practices, and in fact, judging by the sheer volume of merchandise made in China that the West now consumes, appear on occasion to revel in their manufacturers' merely approaching the standards set by Western models. Imitation today, given the acceleration and ubiquitous traces of copy trends (much as Marshall McLuhan insisted), is obvious to so many people, in a way that it wasn't twenty or thirty years ago. Sure, the Chinese are dismissed as knockoff agents, pirates, and

purveyors of cheap, imitative products, but as Guo's Chinese hero in *Ravenous Youth* declares, maybe surprisingly for some readers: "I loved piracy. It was our university and our only path to the foreign world." In a world now ever more interlaced by the Internet—which is, after all, as Wired Magazine founder Kevin Kelly reminds us, a giant "copy machine"—everybody seems more aware of the inherent function of mimesis in our hi-tech, everyday relations. That China's current youth, like Guo's hero Fenfang, have come of age at such an exciting time in China's new history, may mean that a more evolved understanding of the essential role of mimesis in human affairs, as well as of the complications that follow mimetic entanglements, spreads and is taught via the current generation. Maybe the Chinese, arriving at this moment in technological history, stand to inherit the next historical phase of collective self-awareness about mimetic desire, in a similar fashion to their "leapfrogging" uptake of cellular phone technology—having skipped much of the need for landline installation: China has become wireless to a great extent without ever having been wired.

Such a vision, at least, remains a clear possibility and certainly seems like it will be a successive phase in collective self-awareness following the dynamic seen in the mimetic rivalry between Japan and America after the Second World War. Too much of that rivalry illustrates clearly the dark side of human imitating and its sacrificial effects. For many Americans, the bombing of Hiroshima appears to have been a decisive and arguably necessary measure in ending the war in the Pacific, but for Japanese of course, the super-violence had a strange and unprecedented effect on the spirit of the nation. The Japanese, one observer comment, felt the bombs had delivered Judgment Day and Creation again all at once. The atomic bombings had exactly the sort of "supernatural" effect on the Japanese that Girard has described as a result of primitive, sacrificial violence, in primitive religions. An ultimate violence appeared to have

ushered in a period of peace, which then (by treaty, artificially) has reigned ever since. The strangest consequences followed: in its re-birth, Japan did so well emulating American development that Americans in turn looked to the Japanese—not only in business and design, of course: cultural trends also were mutually inspirational. Beat generation authors sought the Far East for its Zen mystics—at the same time, Jack Kerouac realized, that "actual Orientals over there [were] reading surrealism and Charles Darwin and mad about Western business suits." Westerners looked to the Far East at the same time East Asians looked to the West, both overlooking one another. The disturbing outcome, though, as William Gibson put it, is that "the Japan that emerged in the latter half of the century to outmanufacture, outmarket and outsell the Americans was in large part the inadvertent creation of America." In other words, postwar Japan, from a certain perspective, became a direct product of mimetic conflict, and the effect of this has been obvious in the literature of writers like Yukio Mishima, whose reversion to the sword and to sacrificial rites, including his own public suicide in 1970, betrayed the lingering national resentment born of humiliation, along with a dark faith in mythological, sacrificial "solutions"—a violence arguably traceable back to the end of the war: violence begetting further violence.

A contraction of China's currently peaceful and expansive economic emergence, into a form of nationalism, might bring the tension between China and the U.S. to a pitch, so that future events could resemble a crisis and history much like Japan's recent past. So much hope and investment argues against anything like this happening, of course, and the Chinese faith that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting," which bears a remarkable resemblance to the positive kinds of mimetic engagement, suggests that China's continuing engagement with the West will remain peaceful. But the tensions remain, iconic in the country's skyscrapers' that China scholar Ian Buruma has come to see as "brutal copies of the civilization

they hope to surpass." As many China watchers have noted, given the Chinese drive to acquire the same levels of affluence as Americans, along with the acquisition and use of natural resources necessary for that rise in the standard of living, the central conflict, a double bind in essence, may be that America will not be able to ask China to desist in pursuing whatever path of development it chooses, certainly not without setting its own example for China and others to follow. In other words, as Bill McKibben writes, "try to imagine the political possibilities in America of taking Chinese aspirations seriously—of acknowledging that there isn't room for two of us to behave in this way, and that we don't own the rights to our lifestyle simply because we got there first."

To ignore the challenge of this mirror-like situation would seem to invite consideration of a bleaker, deteriorating relationship between China and the United States. And evidently, according to strategists, the center of gravity for U.S. Central Command already is in the mid Pacific. Compared to China, military commentators have added, in a recent *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "How We Would Fight China," the conflict in Iraq represents "a blip." Today's convergence of East and West—after centuries of mutual isolation—may indeed emerge as a mimetic crisis unlike anything ever seen. But having come to understand the role of mimesis in the very genesis of conflict, and now understanding positive mimesis in increasingly powerful ways, we can begin to address this life-threatening crisis. Let us hope that our current, continuing investigations into mimesis in all manner of contemporary fields on both sides of the Pacific bear greater, more fruitful results than the likely prospect suggested this week by author of "Crazy Like Us," a study reporting the Japanese have been importing the same psycho-pathological diagnoses generated in America along with the pharmaceutical "cures" to go with them, importing wholesale an American mental health epidemic—of depression—we

know now to stem from complications of mimetic desire turned in on itself. China may indeed become more American than America, but if so let us hope again this time that it is for much more positive reasons. In sum, the current mimetic tension across the Pacific, and the distinctly novel character of mimetic desire in contemporary Chinese society suggest we now devote considerably greater attention to China's current literature, culture, and technology.