



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Nationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy

In recent years, observers in the Asia and the West have raised concerns about how nationalism will affect the trajectory of China's rise. While awareness of nationalism's role in shaping a country's identity and foreign policy has grown, the phenomenon is by no means a recent occurrence, particularly in China's case. The historical roots of Chinese nationalism and its manifestations in Chinese foreign policy were examined by David Shambaugh, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University (GWU), at a Rising Powers Initiative conference on "Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: A Resurgence of Nationalism?" held on November 18 at GWU. The conference reconvened authors to update their findings in the book *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Historical Roots of Chinese Nationalism

Nationalism and nationalist values in China hearken back to the historical contest of China by Western powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Referred to by Chinese as the "century of shame and humiliation," the Western partition of China created the notion of an existential threat to Chinese civilization as a result of Western onslaught. China's self-described "national humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers continued into the 20th century, with nationalism manifesting itself against various external agents at differing points in time. To this day, the historical sense of shame plays an important role in shaping Chinese nationalism.

Student and citizen demonstrations at the 1919 May Fourth Movement marked early demonstrations of official displays of Chinese nationalism. Protesters expressed outrage at the Treaty of Versailles' outcomes, which granted the Shandong peninsula to Japan and led to China's sense of betrayal by the Western Allies. In the 1930s and 1940s, Japan's invasion of China and the wartime atrocities that followed stimulated an even greater sense of nationalism in China, and Japan was added to the anti-Western strain of nationalist

sentiment. Following Mao Zedong's 1949 proclamation that the "Chinese people have stood up," the nationalist struggle against anti-imperialism was incorporated as an integral part of the Party's foundation and legitimacy. During the Cold War, Chinese nationalism regarded the Soviets as the external threat: Khrushchev's request for long range radio stations to be placed in China was regarded as an infringement of sovereign rights on Chinese land and was one of the factors contributing to the Sino-Soviet split. Chinese nationalism during the Cold War was also directed against American "imperialism" up until President Nixon's 1972 visit to China and the subsequent thaw in Sino-American relations. In all of these instances, Chinese nationalism was directed towards an external threat, a trend that continues to define Chinese nationalism today.

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Seven Faces of Chinese Nationalism Today

Seven strains of Chinese nationalism are prevalent at varying times and circumstances in China today. These varying faces of nationalism combine the contradictory emotions of pride, ambition, and confidence, but also retribution, anger, and aggression.

- *Affirmative nationalism* draws its roots and influence from the "Chinese Dream" concept articulated by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Affirmative nationalism refers to the realization of the Chinese nation's "great renewal" affirms China's sense of greatness and the importance of China historically; 5000 years of Chinese history and 150 years of

shame are connected in a self-strengthening effort.

- *Aggrieved nationalism* is derived from China's century of shame and humiliation and frames the West and other external actors as a bully to China. Aggrieved nationalism is utilized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which sees itself as champion of China's revival from its century of shame.
- *Confident nationalism* is used to describe China on the world stage. As opposed to an aggrieved, insecure, angry, or assertive China, confident nationalism sees China as taking its appropriate place in the world and regional order. This strain of nationalism regards China as a proud nation without a historical chip in its shoulder and as a major power that others should defer to and respect. Confident nationalism is most widely displayed in Chinese diplomacy.
- *Assertive nationalism* is more negative in nature and is often directed against "domestic" actors the Chinese view as splittist. Assertive nationalism has manifested itself in incidents involving actors and areas Beijing regards as belonging to China, including the South China Sea, Taiwanese independence, and Xinjiang and Tibetan separatism.
- *Aggressive nationalism* is related to assertive nationalism but differs in its focus on external actors that pose a threat to China. Most recently, this has been directed at Japan and the United States; historically it has also been directed at the Soviet Union and Vietnam amongst others.
- *Angry nationalism* is xenophobic in nature and tends to erupt spontaneously and unpredictably. Angry nationalism reared its head at the 2011 basketball game between the Georgetown Hoyas and the Bayi Rockets, when a sequence of fouls escalated into a full court brawl directed at the Hoyas by Chinese players and spectators. Similar instances targeting Westerners have occurred spontaneously on the streets of China.
- *Soft power nationalism* has been an ongoing drive since 2008 as China seeks to improve its image around the world and break the discourse monopoly China perceives Western media as possessing over China and other international issues. The CCP has dedicated \$13-14 billion USD a year towards this charm offensive, promoting various facets of Chinese culture and China's rich history.

Nationalism and China's Future

While China's varying faces of nationalism are contradictory to one another, all are borne from the same set of historical roots and furthered by the CCP's inculcation of nationalistic ideology in Chinese society starting at a young age. While nationalism is fostered by the Party, it also has autonomous roots in society, thus contributing to its unpredictable nature and tendency to grow in a way that lies outside the sphere of CCP control. The negative aspects of Chinese nationalism are easily triggered by China's humiliation narrative and can quickly escalate. This lack of government control poses a challenge for the CCP, which champions nationalism and economic success as the sources of its legitimacy. As China continues to grow, will confident and affirmative nationalism prevail over aggrieved, assertive, aggressive, and angry nationalism? Given the unpredictability of Chinese nationalism, all are likely to be on display in the future, with the latter compromising China's desire to project a benign image to its neighbors and the world.

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About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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