



# Nationalism in a Transforming China

## By Yuan Weishi

**How should one approach the question of Chinese nationalism? China is in the midst of a transformation.**

**With any question concerning China today, this fundamental point must be understood. The case is no different with nationalism.**

CHINA IS A NATION OF diverse ethnic groups, and nationalism is, therefore, an issue that concerns both its internal and its external affairs. In this article, I deal primarily with nationalism as it pertains to China's external relations.

Nationalism emerged in China in the 19th century. As the country suffered aggression and invasion, nationalism was typically manifested as patriotic devotion to defense of the homeland. Even if nationalism could not, by itself, offer protection, a sense of righteousness was passed on like a spiritual birthright from generation to generation. As saving the nation became the overriding objective, the government and people were bogged down in traditional culture, and cultural nationalism was raised like an unshakeable fortress against the encroachment of advanced cultures from the outside. The negative aftereffects of this insularity would become only too evident.

During the first half of the 20th century, nationalism was as a double-edged sword. As China struggled against major invasions from Russia and Japan, nationalism was a flag under which the nation could rally in collective hatred of the enemy. But its negative aspects were impossible to ignore.

As the imperial government pushed a project of political reforms in the first decade of the 20th century, China received considerable assistance from Japan. The assistance rendered by the government and people of Japan was substantial and sincere, particularly as it pertained to China's most successful and deep-reaching

reforms – the elimination of imperial examinations and the feudal justice system.

But from the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 up to 1945, Japan's brutal path of aggression and its efforts to transform China into a vassal state under an expanding colonial empire, subjected the Chinese to wave upon wave of disaster. Nationalism emerged as a spiritual force mobilizing opposition from Chinese at home and abroad to resist foreign aggression and preserve the freedom of the homeland.

Even as nationalism drummed up support for the cause of justice on the international stage, its negative affects reared up inside China. Inappropriate measures and responses hardened gradually into convention as patriotic zeal overwhelmed rationality. This had drastic consequences. For example, during the patriotic May Fourth Movement of 1919, as students exercised their legitimate right to protest, they spurned existing laws. They beat to death those they determined to be "national traitors." They set fire to homes. They destroyed property. All of these episodes blazed the path for subsequent manipulation of student movements by Chinese political leaders.

During the Anti-Japanese War of 1931-1945, as the Kuomintang government rallied the nation under the slogan, "The people first, the nation first," autocratic rule was tolerated in the name of resistance to foreign aggression. Under the Kuomintang, the government woefully lacked public oversight, and democracy and the rule of law were never systematized. This contributed to rapidly festering corruption and set the stage for subsequent tragedies.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, nationalism emerged among Chinese at home and overseas as they yearned for the prosperity, strength and unity of the nation. This could be seen in national service initiatives along these lines. But no sooner had China extricated itself from the dangers of foreign aggression, than it was once again sealed off by Mao Zedong's romanticized notion of China as the "political center of world revolution." This fantasy, premised on nationalist arrogance,

propelled China in the wrong direction and meant wasting precious years as China posed as the commander of the worldwide Communist movement and leader of revolutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

#### NATIONALISM AND ITS CONSTRAINTS ON AN OPEN CHINA

China's reform and opening policy, launched in 1979, broke through its self-imposed isolation. China progressed from a foreign policy of revolution to a more peaceful foreign policy that laid the foundations for economic growth. These were invigorating changes both inside and outside China.

In this era, a new brand of nationalism arose more organically among the people, as opposed to nationalism simply manipulated by the leadership. However, over the last decade this chronic disease has surged in China, seeking time and again to check the country's progress toward openness and reform. This nationalism can be glimpsed through the following trends and events:

1. Nationalistic clamor among a small group of scholars in the 1990s, focusing criticism principally on the United States, draws enthusiastic response from the Chinese public. A series of books, including *China Can Say No* (1996), *Behind the Demonization of China* (1996) and *The Way Out for China: Under the Shadow of Globalization* (1999) sold hundreds of thousands of copies. This signaled that a fanatical nationalist mood had taken root in a segment of the population.
2. Conflict with Japan and the United States grows more strident. The U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999, sparked mass demonstrations across China. The collision of a U.S. reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in 2001 stirred another wave of popular protest. Repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2004 fanned long-smoldering anti-Japanese sentiment. As Japan pushed to be-

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come a permanent member of the UN Security Council, large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted across China.

3. Violating codes of conduct, several top military officers in China issue wildly arrogant calls for no-holds-barred military engagement. In 1999, two senior colonels in China's People's Liberation Army, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, released a book called *Unrestricted War*, which urged China to "thoroughly play a Machiavellian round in military affairs, taking no-holds-barred action to achieve its goals." In 2005, Major General Zhu Chenghu, head of the Defense Affairs Institute of the People's Liberation Army National Defense University, told foreign reporters that if the U.S. targeted Chinese territory with precision guided missiles, China would respond with its nuclear arsenal. "We've prepared ourselves for the destruction of cities from Xi'an all the way to the east," said Major General Zhu. "Of course, the U.S. must also prepare for China's destruction of several hundred U.S. cities." A spokesman from China's Foreign Affairs Office gravely explained afterwards that these were Zhu's personal views, but the extreme nature of the comments underlined the radical and unwise thinking of some members of the military establishment. This was cause for alarm.
4. A movement coalesces in China advocating the return of "Chinese national culture" and

concepts of traditional values. Published in 1996, *Behind the Demonization of China*, said: "What the United States fears most are traditional Chinese value concepts... If the Chinese people persisted for 5,000 years in upholding the values of collectivism and self-sacrifice, well, Americans can't possibly bring China under domination by its new colonialism."

When a society is in the midst of transformation, the appearance of nationalistic voices is an understandable result of growing social diversity, and can even be seen as a favorable sign of greater tolerance. However, when speech that is deranged or extreme finds a ready market, this is dangerous writing on the wall. For China, this begs three further questions.

#### **A CLEAR DOWNWARD TREND**

The first question we need to ask is how nationalism is developing in China. Is there any danger that this trend will throw China's project of economic reform and opening off course?

In my view, the answer to this question is, "NO." Political scientist Samuel Huntington once predicted that Confucian culture would come into conflict with Christian culture. More than 10 years on, Huntington's forecasts seem hollow. This is because Huntington overlooked the dramatic changes gripping Chinese society. It is inconceivable that events like the Boxer Rebellion or the Cultural Revolution, those twisted

and fanatical expressions of nationalism, will be re-played in China.

The economic foundations of China have changed. Since the onset of economic reforms, China's economy has become profoundly connected with the world economy. China's first five years as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) have shown that China's dealings with the world are a win-win relationship. A great number of Chinese have enjoyed the benefits that come with a market economy, and there is no force that could drag China back into the isolation of the planned economy era.

The intellectual foundations of China have changed. The net rate of college education in China has already surpassed 21 percent, so that higher education has become a popular rather than an elite pursuit. The education now enjoyed by China's future elite, while still marked by ideology, also involves new kinds of knowledge more suited to the market economy. All research universities in China encourage the use of overseas teaching materials and instruction in English. In a number of the social sciences, such as economics, law and politics, the material covered by students is the same as that of their counterparts in developed nations. Since the 1990s local governments in China have been sending young officials overseas for training, thus expanding their horizons and exposing them to new modes of thought. As the intellectual foundations of government change in China, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine a return to the lunacy of the reclusive past.

China's government has changed. Chinese leaders have at times manipulated nationalism. Protests following the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and the collision of a Chinese fighter jet with a U.S. reconnaissance plane are both examples of manipulated na-

**For the foreseeable future, as has been the case for the last decade, the primary targets of Chinese nationalism will be Japan and the United States, but especially Japan.**

tionalism. In a society ruled by an authoritarian government, unless society faces extreme disintegration and crisis, one can be sure the hand of the ruling party and government is behind any protest occurring on a national scale.

And yet, in the majority of instances where nationalist sentiments have been kicked up, the government has applied a rational approach to controlling them. Due in large part to the government's determination to curb them, anti-Japanese demonstrations and such excesses as the smashing up of Japanese commercial properties have been localized and short-lived. It is, of course, wrong for the government to intrude on political rights by curbing all demonstrations not organized by the party or by government groups but the actions do tell us that fanatical nationalism does not enjoy the encouragement or support of China's leadership. Nor does the leadership sanction anti-foreign violence. The majority of China's elite is cool-headed and rational in their outlook.

As books like *China Can Say No* that voiced extreme positions became all the rage, proponents of liberalism in China stepped up and offered staunch and timely analysis and criticism. Their counterstrike was reasonable and thorough, debunking irrational untruths and playing a key role in preventing their spread.

The facts also suggest nationalism trended downward in China between 1996 and 2006. *China Can Say No* and *Behind the Demonization of China* stirred debate in 1996, but those in support and those opposed were more or less equally matched. The government even used press releases from China's official Xinhua News Agency to introduce *China Can Say No* outside the country, so that there was hubbub worldwide about the book.

The most evident sign of nationalism in 2006 came as 10 PhD students released a manifesto calling for the blackballing of Christmas in China, which drew widespread support on the Internet. This absurd proposition was roundly criticized by scholars and editorial writers, and voices in support were faint. Most people in the social mainstream responded with a snort of contempt to the zealous views of these young students. Christmas celebrations, whether spiritual or commercial, went ahead without disruption and the whole affair became a storm in a teacup. There were similar campaigns for the reinstating of traditional Chinese apparel over Western-style clothing. Once again, this idea was a source of amusement for the average citizen, who passed it by as though it were a fleeting street performance.

#### NEUTRALIZING THE EFFECTS OF NATIONALISM

The second question that needs to be answered is how to neutralize the effects of nationalism in China. The gradual decline of parochial nationalism hinges on a number of internal and external factors. Included among the internal factors are full integration with the global market economy, a general rise in education levels and the free flow of information. But there are also important international conditions that need to be in place.

China, Japan and the United States are already linked inextricably on the economic front. Thanks to the convergence of a number of factors, the Taiwan issue, which has long plagued relations among them, is no longer clouded with the prospect of imminent military conflict. The experience of sporadic tension and mediation in recent years can be summed up as follows: worsening tensions owe less to problems in mediation than to short-sightedness on the part of national government leaders.

Reviewing the waves of nationalism that have struck China over the last decade, it becomes clear that ill-advised statements often lit the fuse. It is important not to overlook one fact: China has chosen the path of openness and shown determination in reforming its system to accommodate the principles of the WTO. It is not the Soviet Union. While political reforms have lagged behind, and such errors as abuse of human rights deserve to be singled out for criticism, we must appreciate that China is in a process of transformation, that the new is supplanting the old and a hodgepodge of old and new persists.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was a politician worthy of praise for his handling of structural reforms in Japan. But his continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine were an error that spoiled Sino-Japanese relations and heightened the nationalist mood in China. It also threw up obstacles to Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This was one of Koizumi's most unfortunate political blunders.

Wars, even if they are in a just cause, are chapters in human brutality. But the prospects for East Asia avoiding another war are good. The best possible way to neutralize nationalism in China, Japan and South Korea, and to moderate the tensions between them, is to work toward build-

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ing a community of nations in the Asia-Pacific region. The first step would be an East Asian free trade zone, allowing the economies of Greater China, Japan, South Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – and perhaps also India and Pakistan – to merge. Life in Asia is already heading in this direction, and the decision about whether to hold back or accelerate the process depends on whether politicians have enough foresight and vision. Under such an institutional framework, we could encourage peaceful negotiation and free exchange between scholars and experts from various fields. Differences and localized conflicts of interest could be eased with relatively little hindrance. Nationalism would in this way weaken and eventually wither away.

**ERRORS IN THE NOTION OF  
“CULTURAL SUBJECTIVITY”**

The third question we need to answer is how to treat the issue of so-called “cultural subjectivity?” As China’s economy has grown and quality of life

improved, there has been robust interest among Chinese in raising their cultural sensibilities and seeking out their cultural roots. Both research and popular interest in traditional Chinese culture are on the rise. This is a normal process of renewal during the course of modernization. So long as this process advances hand in hand with free discourse and does not exclude outside cultural influences, it could potentially become an integral part of the Chinese cultural renaissance many eagerly anticipate. But some short-sighted nationalists have sought to derail this process and encourage a kind of fanatical cultural exclusivity. One of their strategies has been to pose the question of “cultural subjectivity;” they say human rights, freedom and various forms of academic norms and research methods are impositions from the West. We must not, they say, allow ourselves to be colonized culturally.

In a country that has not yet entirely thrown off its isolationism, this topic can easily set off a wave of nationalism.

What exactly is cultural subjectivity? When you leave the core values of a culture or a civilization, there's no such thing as cultural subjectivity. In an era when the world is moving toward integration, the core values of modern civilization are individual freedom, human rights, protecting the rights and interests of citizens, and the progressive implementation of the rule of law and constitutional governance. These form the basis of our cultural subjectivity in the modern world. To depart from these values when talking about national or cultural subjectivity is to promote isolationism. In a nation that has not yet achieved full modernization, such assertions of cultural subjectivity are a snare by which rulers can deny the rights and benefits of citizens, or a fig leaf with which they can legitimize autocratic rule. Giving credence to such notions would risk dragging China once again onto a dangerous detour.

What are the core values of traditional Chinese culture? Everyone has their own idea of core values, but no one can claim to know entirely what they are. According to the late historian Chen Yinke, the so-called "three relationships" and "six kinships" of feudal Chinese society are already beyond revival. More than a few scholars have attempted summaries and interpretations of traditional Chinese culture, but these manage only to be expressions of personal viewpoints. If we could bring Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu back from the dead, they would most probably take issue with these readings. And how much tougher would it be to get ordinary people to accept their authority? Of course, we are also talking here about the traditional culture of the Han Chinese. To present this tradition as the sum total of Chinese national culture is not only arrogant, but in a nation of many diverse ethnic and cultural groupings, it reeks of Han chauvinism.

A number of scholars, including some who are firmly opposed to parochial nationalism, have begun to talk also about the issue of "academic subjectivity," the notion that the norms of scholarship may differ from one culture to another. In my opinion, this, too, is unacceptable.

The social sciences, like the natural sciences, are not restricted by national or cultural subjectivities. In other words, scholars from around the world, using shared academic principles, can freely engage in research on Chinese economy, society, politics or law. If we depart from these shared principles and methods, there will be no way for us to obtain credible results from our scholarship.

And what about the humanities? If we do not work diligently to get at the truth, if we do not respect logic, if we depart from the established norms of academic research, we might be able to sing our own praises behind closed doors for what we have created, glorifying in our subjectivity, but there will be no way for us to converse with our intellectual colleagues in the wider world, and we will have no hope of passing muster when we are challenged and evaluated.

If we talk grandly about subjectivity, regardless of our ultimate designs, in the end we can only be of use to champions of nationalism and we will produce ideological trash.

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**Article translated by David Bandurski.**