

Nationalism in China: Changing Parameters from 1993 to Present

Ray Xu

Abstract:

This paper examines the promotion of different nationalist discourses in China by three generations of CCP leadership: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. It analyzes the changes in Chinese nationalist discourses through the lens of CCP legitimacy and in light of the ongoing struggle in China to modernize while retaining its identity. The paper finds that nationalist discourse varied under different Chinese leadership in response to the changing domestic and international environment. Furthermore, these changing nationalist narratives highlighted China's tussle with its modern identity and its traditions.

Keywords: Nationalism; Chinese; CCP; political

Introduction

It is hard to deny that nationalism has been a powerful force in contemporary Chinese politics. Since the 1840s, when the Qing government lost the Opium Wars and had to concede many of its rights of sovereignty, Chinese people have embarked on a quest for national greatness and modernization that continues to this day.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the retreat of Communism on the world stage in the late 1980s, nationalism took on an additional role as a source of regime legitimacy under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule.

Thus, it is important to understand nationalism in China as it serves an important role in Chinese identity and regime legitimization for the CCP. This paper aims to better understand the features of both popular and official Chinese nationalist narratives in the post-Marxist-Leninist era.

The paper first shows that Chinese nationalism had been an important regime legitimization tool for the CCP and that China's different challenges influenced the management of the official nationalist narrative by the CCP. The paper argues, second, that Chinese nationalism is tethered to the ongoing struggle by the Chinese people to modernize China while retaining its Chinese characteristics.

Nationalism: A Literature Review

As prevalent as it is in diplomacy and statecraft today, nationalism remains a somewhat nebulous concept with multiple variations and strains. There are usually three areas of interest to consider when investigating nationalism: first as a doctrine, second as sentiments, and then as politics (Breuilly,146). However, regardless of how nationalism will form on which soil or socioeconomic context, the ideology has some universal underpinnings. Nationalism

is based on a set of mental and physical characteristics peculiar to a group of people that unites its members and divides them from those of other groups. At its core, nationalism is based on the concept of identity. As identity is a subjective social construct, national identity or nationalism is a product of collective imagining. Indeed, in his seminal works on the theory of nationalism, Benedict Anderson describes the concept of the nation as an "envisioned political local area united via common experiences, language, and imagery" (Anderson,175).

Anderson points out that nationalism is a political program that requires a conscious effort to implement. This collective imagining of the characteristics that uniquely attribute to the "in group" and differentiate it from the "other" is the basis of the concept of nationalism. However, as the shared experiences and characteristics that contribute to a sense of national identity are ambiguous, nationalism is also a dynamic process that requires ongoing interactions. As Bauer explains, these interactions distinguish nationalism from other communities based on character. For example, an Italian farmer may have much more in common with his German counterparts than an Italian intellectual since it is the act of living in the same towns, reading the same newspaper, and going to the same sporting events that bound the Italian farmer and intellectual in the same "community of destiny." In other words, nationalism as a political program must be maintained through shared experience and interactions. These are in the same political community, which also means that nationalism has a dimension of physical space: a shared sense of space and geographic location is crucial for forming these shared experiences and interactions. This spatial dimension of nationalism implies that the nation encompasses limited community or physical space. No matter how big the na-

tion is, its boundaries must be finite to allow the existence of the “other” groups or nations. If a nation encompassed all of humanity, then the concept of nationalism, at least in its current understanding, would be reduced to meaninglessness.

The existence of political communities of people sharing the same language, culture, or ethnic background is hardly a new phenomenon. Yet, nationalism, or the idea of the nation-state, emerged much more recently (Hobsbawm 22). For this paper, the definition of the nation in its modern sense is as follows:

1. A political group shares common characteristics and a geographical space that is different from other groups of people.
2. The governing system of the group has political autonomy in the form of a sovereign state.

Given this definition, nationalism emerged as a product of modernity. Technology and new forms of political economy allowed the emergence of an awareness of national consciousness to serve as the basis of nationalism. Since the seventeenth century, as Anderson points out, the rise of local, vernacular writing and the emergence of print capitalism in Europe created an “envisioned network” in which the newly formed reading public is connected through print. This connection served as the embryo of a nationally imagined community (Anderson 46). The connection through print and vernacular writing also created the basis for a homogenous culture that could later be transformed into a collective identity. As industrialization spreads, villagers are uprooted and driven into sprawling urban centers as a unit of the national industrial economy. In this new and enlarged urban setting, as Gellner points out, language and culture replaced village and tribal structures and relationships as the foundation of the industrializing society (Gellner 235). In this context, a mass, public, and standardized education system is needed to produce a literate public.

The public education system also has a civic role in instilling loyalty to the nation and sustaining the homogenous culture that has emerged in industrial society in Europe. The system’s curriculum often includes “national” subjects like literature, history, geography, and physical education (Smith 39). These courses aimed to produce a loyal public to the state and instilled a homogenous culture and collective identity. If the rise of print capitalism formed the embryo of an emerging national consciousness, the public education system aimed to incubate and sustain it.

To understand how nationalism is contingent on modern industrialized society, one simply needs to consider why the concept of the nation was absent in agrarian societies. As Gellner points out, Agrarian societies are highly stratified by social class. These classes further distinguished

themselves with their own culture and customs within their groups. A member of the English gentry would have identified with his French counterpart more than a member of the English peasantry. So stratified was an agrarian society that there was no basis to produce a single, homogenous culture that could serve as the basis for a nation or nationalism. Industrial societies, however, are the opposite. Each worker must be mobile, and communications must be free of context. (Breuilly 95) It is due to its close relationship with print culture and modernizing forces that nationalism is often a “garden culture” - cultivated by intellectuals and disseminated by professionals. Intellectuals define the basic characteristics of the nation, and a literate public purveys and consumes those ideas. In this sense, the intelligentsia act as midwives to incubate and give birth to the public national consciousness created by the modernizing forces mentioned above.

There remains some debate on whether nationalism itself constitutes an ideology. Some, like Ian Adams, regard it as “the simplest, the clearest, and the least theoretically sophisticated, but it’s also the most widespread and the one with the strongest grip on popular feelings” (Adams 82). On the other hand, Heywood states that “strictly speaking, nationalism is not an ideology at all in that it does not contain a set of interrelated ideas and values.” (Heywood 136) To qualify as a full ideology, a set of ideas must be able to answer a range of political questions that society generates. (Freedman 205) For example, when one examines nationalism on the issue of welfare policies – a feature of almost all ideological systems, one quickly finds that nationalism, as a standalone ideology, is limited in both its ambition and scope. Thus, nationalism is not a complete ideology; it could be a component of another ideology. It can be seen as a tool to affect public sentiment and create consensus. Nationalism requires individual identification with a nation and a collective, conscious identification with the group. Because of these features, nationalism can often take on a populist flavor. It is due to this fact that some have argued that nationalism could be a democratizing force since it allows the natural and independent opinions of the public to be expressed through public participation.

However, this argument contains two fallacies: first, by assuming that expressing independent opinions through public participation is unique to democracy, and second, that democracy is the natural demand, or eventual demand, of a public allowed to express their independent opinions. Nationalism is much more associated with supporting an authoritarian regime than undermining one. The purpose of nationalism as an ideology is mainly to manage public sentiment and achieve social consensus (Bauer 56). This form of consensus-building is conserva-

tive. Because nationalism, at its root, is a form of identity politics, it will always require a different “other” to establish the uniqueness of any national identity. Even the most positive version of nationalism in affirmative nationalism, which centers national discourse exclusively on the positive achievements of those “in the group,” cannot escape the “us versus them” undertone of nationalism.

There are several reasons that authoritarian governments have adopted nationalism as a component in their governing philosophies. First, authoritarian governments can create a target to release popular discontent by clearly creating an “out-group” or a common enemy. Second, by defining an “out-group,” authoritarian governments can insinuate themselves on the side of the “in-group.” Third, authoritarian governments gain greater legitimacy to rule by portraying themselves as the guardians of the national interest and culture.

Chinese Nationalism: A Short History

As the last emperor, Xuantong (宣統), announced his abdication in the fall of 1912, the imperial political system that had dominated China for thousands of years ended, while Chinese identity gradually evolved.

The traditional Chinese self-image is defined as culturalism based on a common historical heritage and acceptance of shared beliefs (Townsend 100). Supreme loyalty was attached to the culture itself, not to state institutions. In the Chinese understanding, China was the only true civilization, and its cultural superiority remained unchallenged. As a result, there was no need for nationalism (as an organizing principle) in this world devoid of cultural competition. However, events during the late Qing dynasty shattered this worldview. In the words uttered by the Qing statesman Li Hongzhang (李鴻章) in 1872, China was undergoing “changes unseen in 3000 years”. (Doshi, Towards The World’s Center Stage... 202) Indeed, western imperialism had shown China truly competitive and alien cultures over which the Chinese people could not claim cultural superiority. In this sense, foreign imperialism did not have to conquer the Qing empire to destroy it. It simply needed to use its formidable military and technological might to shatter the Chinese view of the world. With culture diminishing as a form of identification and the concept of identity in doubt, the logical outcome in China was a rejection of culturalism and of the development of nationalism as the basis for the country’s new identity. Thus, the idea of China shifted from a cultural entity to a political entity. (Whitney 161)

The May Fourth movement started on May 4, 1919, and was a product of the transition from this sense of cultural identity to a political one. The process has gained mo-

mentum among students and businesspeople in China. The concept of nationalism was not new by 1919, for in 1905, the founder of the Republic of China (ROC), Sun Yat Sen, first published his “Three Principles of the People,” advocating for nationalism, democracy, and people’s livelihoods. It was a commonly held belief by the revolutionaries and China’s intellectuals that social cohesion and a national consciousness were required if China were to become a strong, independent nation. The threat of foreign powers accelerated this process, yet debate continued constructing such a national identity. The May 4, 1919 events brought the debate, which had largely been confined to publications and academic circles, into the public square.

On May 4, 1919 afternoon, about 3,000 students gathered in Tiananmen Square. They represented 13 colleges from Beijing. Each student held a flag or brochure. The students had gathered in the morning and produced a manifesto that denounced the decision of the Paris Peace Conference to recognize the transfer of German territorial rights in Shandong province to Japan. As early as 1898, Germany had taken parts of Shandong province as its colony. By 1915, Japan, in turn, had taken from Germany its Shandong territories and had made 21 demands to the Chinese government that, in effect, made Manchuria, inner Mongolia, Shandong, and parts of southeast China a Japanese colony. Although the Japanese government demanded the negotiations to be in secret, Chinese officials leaked the news to Chinese and international publications to garner public support. The event marked the first large-scale public opinion expression since the ROC Founding. Newspapers published strong anti-Japanese columns, and boycotts of Japanese goods were organized among Chinese both within and outside China. May 7 and 9 were named National Humiliation Day, and the concession to Japanese demands was subsequently written into textbooks that year. These events created a ‘Community of Destiny’ within China. (See Chapter 1) Chinese people were united in anger and realized they were a community with a shared future. ‘The atmosphere and political mood that emerged around 1919,’ in the words of historian Rana Mitter, ‘are at the center of a set of ideas that have shaped China’s momentous twentieth century.’ (Mitter, 1911: The Unanchored Chinese Revolution 2021<as above, this should be MLA format)

Another major catalyst for the events on May 4 was the New Culture Movement, which rejected certain aspects of traditional Chinese culture and reflected on reforms that could bring China into modernity. There was no singular ideology that guided the movement and no consensus on specific policies that could modernize China. However, the public sentiment almost unanimously agreed that China must progress culturally and politically if it wished

to be free of foreign domination. From then on, Chinese nationalism became intertwined with Chinese modernization. (Pye 127)

In 1915, a young intellectual named Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) returned to China after Japan had made the 21 demands. He would later co-found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with other revolutionaries and serve as the party's first secretary-general. Upon his return, he founded the journal *Youth*. The journal would play an essential role during the events of May 4th, serving as a rallying point for students and shaping the opinions of young intellectuals.

Two years later, in 1917, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培) began his tenure as the president of Peking University. In his speech upon taking office, he identified three purposes for a university: first, the university is a research institution; research should not only encompass Western concepts but also needs to develop a new culture. Second, university students should not treat the university as a continuation of the imperial examination and treat a university education as a ticket to officialdom. Third, all competing opinions and theories should be welcomed, and the free expression of these should not be impeded. Following these reforms at Peking University, a group of students founded the journal *Renaissance* in 1918. Most of the 21 founding members of the journal would become student leaders during the May 4 event a year later. Responding to the calls from intellectuals like Hu Shi (胡適) and Lu Xun (魯迅) - who advocated for a new literary movement in written vernacular Chinese (Baihua)¹ To explain how to increase the literacy rate of the Chinese public - these publications rejected classical Chinese and were written exclusively in Baihua². The journals quickly attracted a sizable readership, growing from 1,000 copies sold monthly to 36,000 by 1919.

The May 4 movement and the series of cultural and political movements that preceded it were led mainly by intellectuals who wished to re-examine the institutional foundation of the Chinese socio-political order. As a result, "Chinese nationalism in the early 20th century was anti-regime, revolutionary, and progressive." (Wu 476) Some conservatives still defended traditional Chinese doctrines, while reforms were needed at the same time. On the other hand, young Chinese intellectuals gathered around "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science."² And

1 The Baihua Chinese is based on spoken Chinese, in contrast to classical Chinese, which is used officially in imperial China.

2 The concepts of democracy and technocratic leadership symbolized the May 4 Movement. In 1989, students again raised slogans invoking Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science.

advocated for "a mixture of post-17th century Western thought". "Their mainstream ideas were derived from the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolution." (Chou 145). While the intellectuals had gained national consciousness, they recognized that the same was not true for most of their countrymen. Chen Duxiu, one of the founding members of the CCP, summarized his criticism as follows: "Chinese people only know their families. They do not know they have a country. They only think about how to find a wife. They do not think about how they can make the country prosperous, stronger than other countries" (Chen 56). Chen attributed China's humiliations at the hands of foreign powers to a lack of national consciousness. The need to awaken a sense of social responsibility and to develop public citizenship was crucial to China's development in its vision of a new China.

In her book, *The Good Neighbor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power*, Mary Stuckey argues that Roosevelt's rhetoric united his nation and facilitated a top-down, national mindset rather than a bottom-up, local orientation. (Lu 232) Stuckey's research provides a relevant framework for constructing a nationalist narrative in China since 1949. In his speech announcing the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao famously declared that "Chinese people, comprising a quarter of humanity, have now stood up." (UCLA, The Chinese People Have Stood Up, 2006<MLA citation) Since 1949, the CCP has attempted to construct a narrative with roots from the May Fourth and New Culture Movement to transform the family-oriented mindsets of Chinese people into a political and national worldview. The narrative rests on two major components: first, a historical narrative of victimization, and second, a common vision for a modern, powerful China.

Mao used "three mountains" to describe the oppression of the Chinese people: the mountain of feudalism, the mountain of imperialism, and the mountain of capitalism. The CCP has constructed a historical narrative of victimization to illustrate the need for Chinese nationalism as well as to legitimize the CCP as the protector of the Chinese people from foreign oppression. The root of this victimization narrative can be traced back to the May Fourth movement, during which anti-imperialist sentiment was a major driving force behind the formation of a national consciousness. This narrative was effective because, at the time of the founding of the PRC, the memories of the Japanese occupation and the eight-nation alliance occupation of Beijing,³ which were still fresh in the minds of PRC

3 Responding to the Boxer Rebellion, which aimed to rid China of Western influences, troops from Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the USA, Italy, and Austria-Hungary

citizens. Avraham defines nationalism as “a psychological phenomenon”. (Avraham 284) The fear of foreign occupation had become deeply rooted in the Chinese psyche. Through this narrative and the emotions it elicited, the CCP aimed to create a “Community of Destiny” (Brucily 135), in which citizens are bound by a memory of the past and linked to the future.

As the CCP began implementing communist reforms in China, a new nationalist narrative promising a reinvigorated China began to take shape. State propaganda no longer evoked images of Chinese people being victims. In 1949, Mao proclaimed: “The era in which the Chinese people were regarded as uncivilized is now ended. We shall emerge in the world as a nation with an advanced culture.” (Lu 246) Mao referred to the culture not traditional Chinese culture but a new national culture elevated by modernization and communism. In this context, the many social and economic policies of post-war communism, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution during Mao’s rule, can find their roots in the spirit of the May Fourth movement. Whether it is the nationalist ROC or the Communist PRC government, Zhao writes that “they shared a deep bitterness over China’s humiliation and were determined to rejuvenate China... and they shared a strong sense of entitlement that China deserves a great power status as they believe China’s decline is a mistake in history that they should correct.” (Zhao 2006, 342) This attitude towards China’s past and expectation for China’s rise defined Chinese nationalist discourse during the Mao era.

Nationalism: A Stabilizing and Destabilizing Force

By the 1980s, Communism was in full retreat on the world stage. After decades of experimentation, the communist economic model had succumbed to the capitalist West, and a sense of disillusion permeated communist nations. A popular term in China reflected this disillusionment at the time: the “Three-Belief Crisis,” referring to the loss of faith in Marxism, Socialism, and the CCP. Communist nations faced an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. In this context, Mikhail Gorbachev unleashed his perestroika movement in the Soviet Union, and Deng Xiaoping began experimenting with reforms in China.

The decline of communism left an ideological vacuum in China. The nation’s identity, once unquestionably associated with communism under Mao, was in flux. The situation brought back memories of 1919 when Chinese students and intellectuals were engaged in a passionate

invaded northern China. The invasion culminated in the occupation of Beijing in 1901 by the Allied forces

and public debate about the identity of the Chinese nation. Encouraged by the reform policies enacted by the central government and influenced by Western individualism, Chinese students began to envision a China governed by Western liberal norms. Seventy years after the events of May 4, slogans inviting “Mr. Democracy” once again appeared in Beijing by May of 1989. According to Zhao, about one million people gathered in Tiananmen Square at the height of the protest. (Zhao 2008 171) The students demanded structural reforms to the CCP government, including freedom of speech and an end to corruption by CCP officials. Echoing their forbearers during the “May 4 Movement”, the students believed that their demonstrations were patriotic and nationalistic and demanded that they be recognized. Slogans such as “We love our country but hate our government” were displayed on the square. However, by June 4, the government’s crackdown on the demonstrations and their subsequent failure made it clear that the CCP had no intention of allowing nationalism to become a mechanism of popular influence and that the government must remain the ultimate authority on Chinese nationalism.

The June 4th movement culminated in a legitimacy crisis that had permeated the CCP after the decline of communist ideology in China. In the absence of Mao’s cult of personality and communist indoctrination, popular nationalist discourse, mixed with Western liberalism, emerged as a challenge to the CCP’s authority. This discourse considered that nationalism must be grounded in a democratic basis to guarantee that the state and people would have the same interests. (Estaban 200) This line of discourse was subversive to the CCP’s legitimacy as it drew a distinction between the ruling party and the state. The CCP understood the danger of the burgeoning democratic nationalist movement and quickly took measures to regain control of the official nationalist narrative.

As Jiang Zemin was selected as the CCP general secretary on June 24, 1989, in the wake of the June 4th demonstrations, he was tasked to stabilize a nation rocked by the Tiananmen events. As the party began to reflect on the event’s root cause, the lack of an ideological education was identified as one reason for the student movement. Speaking to generals on June 9th, 1989, immediately after the June 4th crackdown on student demonstrations, Deng Xiaoping admitted that: “During the last ten years, our biggest mistake was made in the field of education, primarily in ideological and political education — not just of students but of the people in general. We did not tell them enough about what China was like in the old days and what kind of country it was to become. That was a serious error on our part.” (Dor, China’s WW2 Remembrance... 2015) Thus, the CCP believed that it was crucial

to craft a new nationalist narrative to rebuild the CCP's legitimacy and to avoid a Soviet-style collapse. Under this context, the Patriotic Education Campaign was adopted as a nation-building policy in 1991. Under this Patriotic Education campaign, historical events such as the burning of the Imperial palace (火烧圆明园) and the Nanking Massacre (南京大屠杀) were written into elementary and middle school textbooks. Thus, the historical narrative of victimization became a major ideological tool to construct citizenship and national identity. Although this narrative had been widely accepted since 1911, there was a major difference between the new victim narrative and the narrative that had existed during the Mao era. Under Mao, China's past humiliations were used to highlight a "victor narrative"—it was under the leadership of the CCP that China overcame foreign oppression and won national independence. (Wang 2008, 789)

However, during the Jiang era, the victim narrative was repackaged to "shift the focus of student's youthful energies away from domestic issue ... and redirect protest toward the foreigner as an enemy." (Callahan 186) As a result, the Patriotic Education Campaign aimed to produce a generation of youth who subscribed to an assertive brand of nationalism to combat the encroachment of Western liberalism on China's youth. The Patriotic Education Campaign, therefore, was a signature policy that represented a shift in the nationalist narrative in China. Accompanying the education policy was the mobilization of various government agencies aimed at expanding the reach of the new nationalist narrative to the entire Chinese population. For instance, the government now sponsored public exhibits displaying Japanese war atrocities, movies recreating the Nanking massacre, and presented human rights criticisms to China, the Tibetan question, and US weapons sales to Taiwan both as interference in Chinese domestic affairs, as well as a violation of Chinese sovereignty.

As the Reform and Opening up policies continued into the 90s, their positive effects on the national economy complemented the official nationalist narrative and reinforced CCP legitimacy. Chinese intellectuals became confident and eager to defend the Chinese path to modernization. According to Chinese nationalist academics, the Chinese path to development is more rapid, socially just, and peaceful compared to the capitalist and colonial model of development that the West had taken earlier. (Wu 472) The "China Advantage Theory" somehow filled the void of ideological superiority after the retreat of communism on the world stage earlier in the decade. Chinese nationalists claimed that the Chinese development model was competitive, if not superior, to that of Western nations. In contrast to the critique of Chinese cultural and political institutions that embodied the nationalist discourse during

the May 4th movement, the new affirmative brand of Chinese nationalism exuded confidence in the Chinese development model.

In the final years of the Jiang administration, the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, Macau in 1999, and the successful bid to host the 29th Olympic Games in 2001 cemented the rise of China as a global power. They represented the recovery of Chinese national dignity. These events enhanced the legitimacy of the CCP. They reinforced among Chinese people the state nationalist narrative that the CCP is the only champion of Chinese interests and the country's international prestige. Although it is difficult to gauge how successful the nationalist narratives derived from these events were, it can be reasoned that they influenced Chinese people. For example, one million people gathered in Tiananmen Square the day before the Hong Kong Handover to celebrate the event. Similarly, about 400,000 participated in the celebration in Beijing for the successful bid to host the Olympic games. (Estaban 198)

Despite the success of the official nationalist narrative, rising popular nationalist sentiment among Chinese people created challenges in governance for the Jiang administration. The dangers of a rising popular nationalist sentiment, to which the government had contributed with the Patriotic Education Campaign, and the negative portrayal of the US and Japan in state media were on full display during diplomatic crises. The best-seller book by a group of students in 1996, *China Can Say No*, shows that popular nationalism has at times gone beyond the official nationalist discourse in calling for more assertive foreign policies and criticizing the more conciliatory diplomatic stances that China held at the time (Ali 2007, 174). Understanding that a hawkish popular sentiment at home could constrain Chinese foreign policy and the government's continued effort to deepen global trade, the Jiang administration sponsored books such as *Heart to Heart Talks With The General Secretary* and *China Will not Be «Mr. No.»* These books attempted to sway public opinion to support a cooperative relationship with Western countries. (Estaban 201)

They may not have achieved their intended goal, as they had in 1999, but widespread student protests broke out in major Chinese cities following the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. As the news reached China the day after the May 8 bombing, thousands of students gathered in front of the US embassy in Beijing and the US consulate in Shanghai. They threw bricks at the embassy and attacked US-based corporations. Ten years after the 1989 student demonstrations, large-scale protests again broke out in China. However, the brand of nationalism these students championed was entirely different due to the effects of Chinese educational policies and nationalist narratives.

Following the event, many commentators in the West believed Beijing was deliberately promoting the student protests. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Matt Forney and Ian Johnson claimed, “China’s reaction has been almost all deliberate and state-organized” (Forney, Johnson WSJ). However, some observers, such as Zhao Dingxin, concede that while the Jiang administration had allowed the student protest to continue, the main rationale was the fear that the students’ passions would turn against the Chinese government if the protests were actively suppressed. Indeed, while the Chinese government had been implementing the Patriotic Education Campaign and promoting anti-western rhetoric during the 1990s, its purpose was mainly owed to domestic concerns, not a diplomatic strategy. Nevertheless, the 1999 incident highlighted how promoting nationalism could become a double-edged sword. Although the Jiang administration needed a relatively peaceful international environment for its development goals, popular nationalism at home has sometimes constrained its foreign policy options. Since the student protests were seen as both morally and politically correct, the Jiang administration opted to allow the protest to take place or risk losing its legitimacy or its authority on nationalist discourse.

Chinese Nationalism Redefined?

By the time Hu Jintao ascended to the office of General Secretary on November 15, 2002, he inherited a country poised to significantly impact the world stage. Just a year prior, in 2001, China had formally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). After 15 years of negotiations spanning the collective efforts of two generations of Chinese leadership, China’s ascension into the WTO was a milestone in its path to becoming a world economic power. As a WTO member, many trade barriers for Chinese goods were removed globally, allowing China to quickly become the undisputed “factory of the world” during the next decade.

Just a few months before China’s joining, the US experienced the largest terrorist attack on its soil on September 11, 2001 (known after that as 9/11). The event would divert much of the US’s foreign policy focus onto the Middle East. The Sino-US relationship, which had been rocked by multiple high-profile disputes ranging from the Taiwan Strait to the Tibetan question, assumed a steadier course following the event. The 9/11 attack and the subsequent shift in US foreign policy provided China with a rare opportunity to rapidly develop its economy in a relatively peaceful and favorable international environment. In the words of Anatol Lieven, “The clear victor of the global war on terror appears to be China” (Lieven 189). Capitalizing on these events, the Hu administration pur-

sued national policies that prioritized economic development in the decade from 2002 to 2012. As a result, China’s national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by 580% during the Hu decade, averaging 10% annual growth in national overall GDP. The GDP per capita increased from \$1,149 in 2002 to \$6,301 in 2012. The Hu Era also saw China quickly overcoming the adverse effects of the global financial crisis 2008, rebuilding its cities in Sichuan after a devastating earthquake, and successfully hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. As a result of these achievements and the government’s focus on economic development, official nationalism evolved to become more positive and less aggressive. The CCP constructed a more affirmative brand of national narrative, attributing the economic achievements during the Hu era to China’s unique political and institutional advantage.

The Hu period witnessed the CCP undertaking a national project to carefully redefine a nationalist narrative to “try to make sense of China’s place within the international community.” (Leibold 5) Such a project was tethered to an inclusive vision of China as an important member of the international order. It contained an implicit message of peace and coexistence with the West. However, as the anti-western nationalist narrative had been a tenet of Chinese official and popular nationalism, this new nationalist narrative that the Hu administration tried to craft faced multiple challenges. Chinese nationalism during the Hu administration contained multiple contradictions, and its attempt at maintaining a facade of cohesion at times became too strenuous to uphold.

On August 8, 2008, at 8:08 p.m. Beijing time, the 29th Olympic Games officially began. As the number 8 symbolizes prosperity and wealth in Chinese culture, the opening date and time of the ceremony signified Beijing’s implicit goal of showcasing its economic achievements by hosting the games. The opening ceremony was divided into two acts filled with traditional Chinese symbols and motifs. The first, titled “Brilliant Civilization,” showcased China’s contribution to world history and its four great inventions: gunpowder, paper, printing, and the compass. The second act, “Glorious Age,” centered on China’s economic prosperity. By displaying the glories of the Chinese past and the present economic achievements of the country, the opening ceremony presented contemporary China as a logical continuation of Chinese history that its prosperity and ingenuity had always distinguished. (Cabula, *Emerging Negative Soft Power... 2023*)

The Olympic Games pursued a twofold objective. On the one hand, it tried to rebrand China to the world through its soft power as a peaceful, responsible world power. On the other hand, it aimed to rally domestic audiences around the appeal of cultural nationalism and pride. To

international audiences, the Hu administration hoped to allay fears about China's growing economic and military power through the games. The official slogan of the 2008 Olympic Games, "One World, One Dream," projected an inclusive vision of China as a member of the international community, adhering to universal values. In this sense, the Olympic Games were a continuation of the policies adopted by the Hu administration to reshape official Chinese nationalism to be less aggressive with the West. As early as 2003, the CCP began to disseminate the concept of China's "peaceful rise" (first used in Bo'ao forum speech Nov 23, 2003). The clear desire to shift away from the country's revolutionary and anti-western past by the CCP was further shown in 2005 when the Chinese Ministry of Culture refused to cooperate with the New York Asia Society's exhibition, which showcased multiple images of Mao. (Pogrebin, 2008) Beijing's goal of dissociating itself from the antagonistic connotations of Mao was further shown when the Olympics commemorative 10-yuan bill, in contrast to the normal 10-yuan bill, which displays a portrait of Mao, instead featured an image of the Chinese Olympic stadium. (China Briefing, New Olympics Bank Notes... 2008)

For domestic audiences, the Hu administration used the Olympic Games as an opportunity to construct an affirmative brand of nationalism. The event's promotion aimed to evoke national pride by showcasing China's recent achievements. Although the games centered around competition, some major themes of the domestic messaging of the games were inclusiveness and participation. In this sense, the content of the domestic messaging was in substance in line with inclusive messaging for the international audience. The domestic messaging for the Olympic Games demonstrated the Hu administration's intention to construct an affirmative official nationalist narrative based on pride in China's achievements and culture. This was a departure from the previous official nationalist narrative that had been based on victimization.

However, as the following examples demonstrate, this new nationalist narrative faced two challenges. First, the anti-western nationalist narrative had been a tenet of Chinese nationalism. The Patriotic Education policies further cement this narrative. During the Hu administration, these policies continued to be in effect. Second, as nationalism at its roots is a form of identity politics, it requires an "other" to establish the uniqueness of any national identity. Although the new brand of affirmative nationalism tried to minimize this confrontational element, it could not escape the "us versus them" undertone.

On May 18, 2008, an earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale struck southwestern China. The earthquake caused massive damage and led to a death toll of nearly

80,000. As it took place during the afternoon class period, many of those who perished due to building collapses were schoolchildren. The Chinese government's response to the disaster was swift: Chinese troops were deployed to aid the search and rescue efforts, and disaster relief goods were rushed to the affected areas. The CCP capitalized on the disaster as a nation-building opportunity. Portraying the disaster as an "imagined invader," Chinese state media urged the Chinese people to unite and resist the destructive forces of the earthquake. (Zhang 2015) The nationalist discourse used by state media to report on the disaster generated a "straightforward identification of community belonging for the people facing the crisis" (ibid 9). In this context, the nationwide outpouring of support from volunteers, associations, and private companies focused on Wenchuan, the earthquake's epicenter. Only two weeks after the earthquake, public donations reached 30 billion yuan, roughly the same as the total public donations made in 2007. (Shawn and Deng 176)

The event can be seen as a successful attempt by the Hu administration to strengthen civil society within China. However, the narrative constructed around the earthquake has its roots deeply embedded in the aggressive brand of nationalism common in the Mao and Jiang eras. State media framed the relief effort as "a new resisting war, a nationalistic war; in the face of the war imposed by nature." (*Southern Weekly*, 22 May 2008) 这是新的抗战，就是全民族抗战；面对大自然强加的这场战争。 In the media narratives framing this story, the Chinese nation as a narrative character resisted the invasion of the "deity of demise" and achieved victory. (*People's Daily*, 20 May 2008) By evoking the collective memories of the Chinese people resisting foreign invasions in the past, the narrative around the earthquake was very effective in uniting Chinese people around this regional crisis. However, this narrative also highlighted that the Chinese nation-building effort is still rooted in a shared memory of victimization and confrontation. This brand of nationalist discourse ran counter to the more inclusive nationalist narrative that the Hu administration officially tried to construct.

In another example, on April 9, 2005, an estimated 20,000 protestors surrounded the Japanese embassy in Beijing, throwing rocks at the building and chanting anti-Japanese slogans. Other demonstrations erupted in other parts of the country, including Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Only six years after the protest that erupted after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, popular nationalist protests once again broke out across the country. This time, the protesters demanded that Japan acknowledge its past aggressions in its school curriculum and opposed Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. By mid-April,

Chinese authorities took measures to curtail the protests as the politically charged anniversaries of May 4 and June 4 approached. The authorities feared that these anniversaries, born out of a brand of popular nationalism with a liberal flavor, could point the current protests toward unwelcoming directions.

Many blamed the Chinese government for stoking nationalist sentiments for political gain. Shinzo Abe, the then-premier of Japan, stated that “deepening social inequality [in China] was behind the Japanese protests. Beijing was using the protests as an outlet to vent that anger.” (Chan 2005) Indeed, the unprecedented economic growth during the Hu era created social imbalances not seen in previous leadership eras. Social tensions due to wealth disparity, land disputes, and labor disputes, among other causes, were palpable. According to the Europe China Research Advice Network, the number of mass protest incidents totaled 8,700 in 1993; by 2005, the number had risen tenfold to 87,000; by the end of the Hu era in 2011, the number was estimated to have been between 180,000 to 230,000 a year. (Göbel 37) In this context, Beijing’s allowance of the 2005 anti-Japan protests can be seen as an attempt to alleviate pressure from domestic issues. However, the event also demonstrated the Hu administration’s inability to resist the urge to revert to a more aggressive brand of nationalism when it was politically convenient. The 2005 episode thus demonstrated the Hu administration’s challenges in constructing a nationalist narrative of China’s “peaceful rise”. It highlighted the deep-rooted elements of confrontation within popular Chinese nationalism.

Nationalism with Chinese Characteristics

When Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao assumed the position of General Secretary and Premier of the CCP, many liberal-minded observers believed the new administration would reform China into a more prosperous and democratic nation. These hopes weren’t unfounded: as the former head of the Communist Youth League, Hu Jintao represented the technocratic and more open-minded faction within the CCP. Premier Wen Jiabao was seen as a reform-minded official who, along with Zhao Ziyang, was sympathetic to the students during the 1989 protest. However, unlike Zhao, who was purged from the CCP for his support for the students, Wen survived the aftermath and became premier in 2002.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the rapid economic growth after China’s ascension to the WTO created many social problems within China. The Hu administration initially planned to alleviate these issues by strengthening

the rule of law, crafting a social safety net, and establishing more democratic decision-making mechanisms. However, by the latter half of the Hu administration, it became evident that political reform attempts faced substantial resistance and challenges. As a result, these reforms stalled, and mounting problems such as corruption, wealth disparity, and environmental degradation, among others, were not sufficiently addressed. Thus, many political observers have referred to the Hu era as the “Lost Decade” for China, referring to the failure of the administration to carry out meaningful political and economic reforms.

When Xi Jinping took over the reins of the party in 2012, he inherited a China that was both mighty and anxious: corruption had reached all levels of business and politics in China, and while the economic engine that had lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty moved forward, growth was slowing, and inequality and pollution were worsening. These social ills, in turn, led to increasingly frequent and violent protests across China. It was increasingly evident that, without adjustments, the CCP’s future seemed tenuous. (Megan 7)

In this context, Xi, newly in office on December 22, 2013, warned party members in a speech to heed the lessons of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Xi also required CCP cadres to watch a six-part documentary portraying the steady infiltration of subversive Western values that had ultimately toppled the Soviet regime. (Zhao 2018) The speech may have reflected Xi’s belief that the CCP was experiencing a legitimacy crisis similar to one it had encountered in the 90s. Indeed, there was a widely held conviction within China that the economic reforms in the PRC in the past decades had rendered ideology obsolete. The Hu administration actively sought to distance the CCP from its revolutionary past. The central governing theory of the administration was labeled “Harmonious Society,” drawing inspiration from Confucianism rather than Marxism.

In a speech on March 17, 2013, Xi proposed the “Three Confidence” theory: confidence in the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, confidence in China’s chosen path, and confidence in China’s political system. (Zhao 2016, 117) By 2014, cultural confidence was added as a fourth element. The theory is reminiscent of the “Three Confidence Crisis,” a term popular in the 90s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It refers to a lack of confidence in Communism, Marxism, and the CCP. The “Confidence Theory” readopting in contemporary Chinese political discourse reflected a leadership anxious about the CCP’s diminishing legitimacy. In a widely-circulated party directive named Document Number 9, Xi ordered senior party officials to combat seven subversive currents within Chinese society and listed “7 Don’t Speak” doctrines,

including Western constitutional democracy, universal values, human rights, media independence, civil society, extreme pro-market neoliberalism, and nihilistic criticism of the CCP's past. (Zhao 2016, 119) In another widely circulated speech by Xi, the general secretary called for the party leadership to emphasize ideological work because it "concerned the life and death of the party(ibid,121)."

Despite Xi's calls to reject criticisms of the CCP's past, he has avoided directly incorporating Communism or Marxism into his signature theories. While Xi may have aimed to use ideology as an umbrella term to defend the CCP's political system and governing style to the Chinese people, the ideological campaign takes the form of a state-led effort to construct a new cultural nationalist narrative. Nationalism is a major component of Xi's ideological campaign because it has always been a reliable source of legitimacy for the CCP. By identifying the Chinese party-state with the Chinese nation, the CCP can deflect criticisms by claiming them to be unpatriotic acts. Communism or Marxism may seem alien to young people in today's China. Yet, Communism has reliably allied with the Chinese government when it positioned itself as the defender of China's interest, pride, and territorial integrity (Wang 27). In addition, as the CCP's legitimacy since the Deng era has relied upon both the economic performance of the Chinese economy and nationalist sentiments, nationalism needed to take on a more significant role for the CCP to gather support as Chinese economic growth inevitably slowed down in the coming years.

Under Xi, Chinese culture and history have taken on a more politicized role in Chinese nationalist discourse. In the nationalist narrative the Xi administration has constructed, China has always been a great power on the world stage. Thus, the mission of the CCP to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and lead China to reach its rightful status in the world. (Michael Chan, Feb 24, 1999) The CCP under Xi has often reminded Chinese people of the importance of rejuvenation for themselves and the nation: "China was once the world's greatest power, then it has fallen into the position of being beaten. This historical tragedy must not be repeated! Realizing the nation's rejuvenation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the Opium War. It is our goal and responsibility to the nation, our predecessors, and future generations." (China Embassy Web 2018). The Xi administration has labeled the goal of achieving national rejuvenation the "Chinese Dream." In the cultural, nationalist narrative constructed by the Xi administration, Chinese culture is vital to achieving this "Chinese Dream." At a seminar in 2016, Xi said: "China can follow its path with great determination, with boundless horizons ahead and a peerless civilization behind it." (SCMP Oct 15, 2020). In

Xi's reasoning, China has produced a glorious civilization; its path to national rejuvenation today must be unique and appropriate to Chinese culture.

By invoking Chinese culture to legitimize its rule, the Xi administration has borrowed elements from China's imperial rulers of the past. During the dynastic transitions before modern China emerged, the question of regime legitimacy was answered with Culturalism. In this concept, legitimate rule rested on adherence to universal values (Confucianism). As ancient Chinese believed China to be the only true civilization, a legitimate ruler, ethnic Han or not, must govern according to Chinese norms. This worldview, supported by the empire's size, wealth, and power, gave it great, lasting power(Townsend 183). Whether Han or not, Chinese rulers all upheld values that supported the Chinese tradition. In Xi's reconstruction of a cultural nationalist narrative, defending and upholding Chinese culture play the same regime-legitimizing roles as they do in the Chinese Culturalist concept. However, as China today no longer uses Confucianism as its governing principle, the Xi administration has tapped into Chinese civilization to base its source of legitimacy. Nevertheless, both the new cultural nationalist narrative and the traditional Culturalist concept served to derive regime legitimacy based on a sense of historical continuity.

This sense of historical continuity also taps into the strong historical consciousness of the Chinese people. For some citizens in China, history supplants the role of a value system. As Zheng Wang points out: "[The Chinese] don't have a supernatural standard of right and wrong, good and bad, so [they] view History as the ultimate Judge." (Wang 187) For example, the "Century of Humiliation" is deeply ingrained in the Chinese national consciousness. Confucian officials in the past held being remembered favorably in history after their death as their ultimate purpose in life. As the popular poem by Wen Tianxiang (文天祥), a Song Dynasty duke who refused to yield to Yuan invaders despite being captured and tortured, encapsulates: "Who can avert his death since time immemorial? Let my heart remain true to shine in the annals (人生自古谁无死 留取丹心照汗青.)" By declaring that the mission of the CCP was to restore China's rightful place in the world, Xi bolstered the CCP's legitimacy by conferring an important role in Chinese history. The narrative also equates support for the CCP to aid China in accomplishing its historic mission.

Revising the Hu Era nationalist narrative, which projected an inclusive vision of China accepting international norms and becoming an important member of the international community, the Xi Era nationalist narrative emphasized China becoming a great power that retained its unique identity. In 2022, the Winter Olympic Games were held in

Beijing. Contrasting the “One World, One Dream” vision as promoted by the official slogan of the 2008 games, the Winter Games highlighted China’s determination to differentiate itself from the international community. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 2022 games, Cai Qi, the president of the Olympic organizing committee and Politburo member, referred to “civilization integration” and “mutual tolerance and understanding across differences.” (SCMP Feb 4, 2022) The messages highlighted China’s centuries-long struggle to come to terms with its identity in its quest for modernization and becoming a member of the international community. But in refusing to modify its identity, China had fallen victim to the fallacy that “it could join the modern world entirely on its terms, sacrificing nothing of its ideological purity.” (Spence 179)

On October 1, 2023, a communist party-run television station aired a five-episode series named *When Karl Marx met Confucius*. In the program, actors portraying Karl Marx and Confucius pontificate on their philosophies and discover that their ideas are in perfect harmony. (Schuman, Xi is Fighting a Culture War... 2023) Both men found their ideas concerned equality and the well-being of the masses. During one of the scenes, even Mao Zedong appeared and conversed with the two on the need to preserve certain aspects of traditional Chinese culture. After the initial showing, the program soon attracted over ten million viewers across various platforms with a mixed reception. Some found the program too theoretical to engage, while others found the concept too whimsical.

Yet despite its mixed reviews, the program had a political goal: it is one of the creations of the “Second Integration” campaign launched by the CCP in July of 2021. This campaign, introduced personally by Xi, aims to “integrate the basic principles of Marxism with China’s specific realities and its rich traditional culture.” (Zhang, When Marx... 2023) The integration campaign belied the anxiety of the CCP leadership over its legitimacy. The economic challenges China has faced since the Covid-19 pandemic have undermined the CCP’s public support. As Ci observes, the CCP “can have no other publicly avowable source of legitimacy than the one tied to its communist revolutionary past.” (Ci 183) Yet the CCP’s past is tainted by disastrous campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward. Thus, Xi explicitly forbade “Historical nihilism,” a term used to describe criticisms of the CCP before the reform and opening-up period. However, as the trauma from these policies still loom large in the collective memories of the Chinese people, it is difficult for the CCP to derive its legitimacy from its Communist past.

There are multiple reasons that Xi has incorporated Chinese culture as a major theme in his nationalist narrative. The CCP has always equated itself with the Chinese na-

tion; however, by portraying itself as the defender and inheritor of Chinese culture, the party aims to attach itself to the Chinese people’s deepest and most cherished ideals. In Xi’s words, Chinese culture is “part of the people’s DNA, rooted in people’s hearts and imperceptibly influenced the way they thought and acted.” (SCMP Oct 15, 2020). The mandate of cultural nationalism allows the CCP to claim itself as the rightful leader of the Chinese people. Its legitimacy derives from its responsibility to the Chinese people and its historic mission to reinvigorate Chinese civilization. In addition, by stressing the uniqueness of Chinese culture, the CCP argues that China must forge its unique path to modernization through its unique political system led by the CCP. In this line of reasoning, universal values such as constitutional democracy and media independence are merely seen as Western values. Thus, China should reject these Western values, look to its own culture, and forge a value system that is compatible with today’s world.

The attempt by the Xi administration to integrate Marxism with traditional Chinese culture and history has influenced a popular sense of nationalism within Chinese society and, in some instances, has bolstered nationalist sentiments that were once on the fringe of Chinese nationalist discourse. The Xi administration politicized Chinese culture yet not attempt to define it. However, efforts made by the CCP to celebrate the achievements of Chinese culture have been rooted exclusively in Han culture. This exclusivity, combined with Xi’s frequent references to China’s historical grandeur, has given rise to extreme Han ethno-nationalist sentiments. As the CCP attempted to reinterpret its rule and achievements through a historical context, the Han ethnic nationalists sought to restore the vast territorial expanse of Chinese history, encompassing lands governed by China’s past dynasties. Their expansionist ideology is driven by a desire to reclaim lost territories and reinforce Han dominance. (Hu, The Rising Tide... 2023)

Unchecked, these demands could seriously harm the already tenuous ethnic relations between the Han and other ethnic groups within China. The faction’s territorial claims also risk straining diplomatic relations, potentially limiting Beijing’s diplomatic options and harming China’s international image. The Han ethnic-nationalist narrative supports the CCP’s legitimacy by blending communist and Chinese imperial elements. However, this narrative invites an unwelcoming implication for the CCP by implicitly equating the CCP regime with a traditional Chinese dynasty. In Chinese history, no dynasty has escaped the fate of eventual collapse. The CCP, in its early years, had actively distinguished itself from the imperial rule of the past and attributed its past humiliations to the backwardness of China’s imperial system. Thus, the imperial

comparison would undermine the image of the CCP. Regardless, the Chinese people and government's wrestling with the past and present, with tradition and modernity, offers a window into China's ongoing quest for identity.

Conclusion

This paper has documented the transformation of Chinese nationalism, particularly focusing on Chinese nationalist narratives under three recent Chinese leaders: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. The analysis of official and popular nationalist narratives in China reveals that nationalism is used both as a regime-legitimizing tool for the ruling party and as a reflection of the ongoing struggle for China to define itself on its path to modernity.

The collapse of the USSR and the decline of Communism worldwide in the 1990s produced an unprecedented legitimacy crisis for the CCP. After 40 years of failed policy experimentation, the CCP now faced a nation disillusioned with Communism. Thus, nationalism overtook ideology and the cult of personality during the Mao era and became a major tool legitimizing the CCP. This is why some self-proclaimed nationalist movements, such as the June 4 protest in 1989, were suppressed. These movements tried to subvert the official nationalist discourse by incorporating liberal concepts such as democracy as nationalist ideas. Thus, for the CCP, official and popular nationalist narratives must be carefully managed to prevent unwelcoming elements in these narratives to subvert CCP legitimacy.

This paper further outlined the evolution of official nationalist narratives as a regime legitimization tool under different Chinese leaderships. Drawing from Chinese history, the nationalist narrative under Jiang centered its nation-building effort around the history of humiliations China had suffered. As a result, Western nations like the United States were depicted as the "other," and nationalist sentiment took on an assertive tone. Branding itself as the protector of Chinese security and national interest, the CCP successfully blurred the distinctions between itself and the Chinese nation-state to rally support and silence dissent. During the Hu era, the Chinese nationalist narrative struck an inclusive note. As one of the greatest beneficiaries of global trade, China under Hu affirmed its place in the world and strived to become a responsible power under the then-existing world order.

When Xi assumed the position of General Secretary, a legitimacy crisis again arose due to the increasingly sharp social tensions within Chinese society. Since the decline of Communism, there has been an ideological vacuum within China. As this vacuum continued to exist, the CCP had to resort to nationalism, albeit with different flavors,

to defend China from the "threat" of Western liberalism encroaching on Chinese society. Therefore, since coming to power, Xi has prioritized the importance of nationalism, and he constructed a nationalist narrative that defined the mission of the CCP as restoring China's historical grandeur on the world stage. Under Xi, the CCP began to explore more ways to ground Marxism within Chinese culture and historically contextualize the CCP to draw regime legitimacy from Chinese culture.

Despite the importance of nationalism in the Chinese political system, this paper has demonstrated how official nationalism could push popular nationalism into unwelcoming directions. The 1999 mass protest after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the 2005 mass protest over the Japanese bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, and the recent Han ethno-nationalist groups that have been gaining influence within China demonstrate the danger of popular nationalism fostered by official nationalist narratives. These incidents have limited Beijing's diplomatic options, damaged bilateral relationships, and intensified ethnic tensions within China.

Just a little over a century ago, thousands of students took to the streets on May 4, 1919, to voice their anger over Japanese aggression and to reflect on traditional Chinese culture. These students lived in an age of belief and disbelief: Culturalism, the belief that Chinese culture was the only supreme civilization in the world, had been shattered by the humiliations China had suffered by Western nations. Identifying traditional Chinese culture as the obstacle to the country's modernization effort, Chinese intellectuals began to critically reflect on its ills. At the same time, debates about foreign theories, ideologies, and political systems raged on in writings and conversations. Intellectuals hoped that a reformed culture compatible with the modern world could allow China to compete with its global counterparts. Thus, since its inception, Chinese nationalism has been closely intertwined with China's modernization and struggle to define itself about the rest of the world.

As China recuperated from its century of humiliation, and as its economy rapidly expanded to become second only to the US, China acquired a new-found confidence in its culture and its unique path to modernization. The CCP leadership had reached a consensus that China must forge its unique path to modernization and become a member of the international community while preserving certain Chinese characteristics. The CCP, which tried to topple the traditional Chinese value system, unexpectedly found itself as its defender. When asked about the effects of the French Revolution by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, then PRC premier Zhou Enlai replied that it was too early to say. The same answer could be applied to the May 4

movement: it exemplified Chinese nationalism and the ongoing debate about Chinese identity as China debuted on the world stage. As China continues to adapt and evolve while attempting to preserve some immutable characteristics, the nationalist debate symbolized by the May 4 Movement will continue in China.

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