

## The Changing Face of Chinese Nationalism

Since the Chinese defeat by British troops in the Opium War of 1840-42, Chinese political elites have been divided on how to revive the domestic and international standing of their great nation. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), meanwhile, only began to see the utility of [nationalism](#) during the 1980s, as faith in the communist social system started to decline. Shortly after the 1989 crackdown the CCP launched an extensive propaganda campaign of [education in patriotism](#). The core of this patriotic education campaign was the so-called guoqing jiaoyu (education in national condition), which unambiguously held that China's national condition was unique and not ready for adopting a Western-style, liberal democracy. Instead, communist one-party rule would guarantee political stability as a precondition for economic development. The campaign emphasised Chinese tradition and history as the CCP tried to link communist China with its non-communist past and defined patriotism in terms that had everything to do with Chinese history and culture and almost nothing with Marxist dogmas.

### **Nativism, anti-traditionalism, and pragmatic nationalism**

The CCP has developed the communist state into the assumed embodiment of the nation's [will](#). Yet the nationalist surge of the 1990s saw the development of three diverse [perspectives](#), each in line with the communist party line – but each rooted in a different assessment of the reasons for national weakness, thus offering a different approach for revitalising the nation: *nativism*, *anti-traditionalism*, and *pragmatic nationalism*.

The nativist perspective maintained that China's decline was primarily due to foreign wrongdoing. National salvation had to be attained through an exclusive reliance on home-grown virtues and ideas. Chinese nativism was confrontational, as it identified the sources of China's weakness as foreign imperialism and subversion of indigenous Chinese virtues, and saw the best approach to national revitalization in a return to Confucian tradition and self-reliance. Still today, nativists in China are particularly hostile both to the [United States](#) – as it seems to represent an opposing value system of liberalism and individualism – and [Japan](#) – with memories of wartime occupation still very much alive.

In contrast, anti-traditionalists see China's tradition itself as source of weakness and call for the adoption of western culture. This approach was especially popular in the 1980s, when the CCP began to open China to the outside world. However, in the 1990s, the mainstream of Chinese discourse experienced a drastic shift from enthusiastic worship of the West to deep suspicion. The sensibilities of many Chinese intellectuals were offended by the views expressed in major Western works, such as Francis Fukuyama's [The End of History and the Last Man](#), or Samuel Huntington's [The Clash of Civilizations](#). Many therefore came to fear that western democracies were in actual

fact eager to challenge China on geopolitical grounds. As a result, anti-traditionalism declined in importance in the nationalistic discourse of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Pragmatic nationalism, finally, saw foreign economic exploitation and cultural infiltration as the main sources of China's weakness, and thus believed that the lack of modernization was the primary reason for China becoming an easy target for western imperialism. Pragmatic nationalists identified economic modernization as the key to the revitalization of China. While nativism and anti-traditionalism have continuously lost clout in Chinese society, pragmatic nationalism has become the dominant line of thinking – primarily due to domestic political calculations, but with huge implications for China's foreign policy. While contemporary pragmatic leaders are no less determined than both nativists and antitraditionalists to establish China as a powerful nation, they have set economic growth as China's top priority, as they are well aware that the CCP's continued leadership depends largely on its ability to improve the Chinese population's standard of living, a development best described as "[consumer nationalism](#)".

### **The CCP approach**

While China's approach to modernization involved learning from the liberal western models, the communist regime always safeguarded the [prerogative](#) as to when, where and how to adopt Western ideas. For example, while the Chinese state adopted most of the basic principles of the [Washington Consensus](#), especially its emphasis on the role of the market, entrepreneurship, globalization and international trade, it managed to modify the liberal aspects that would have greatly reduced the role of the state.

Pragmatic communist leaders consciously cultivated nationalism as a [glue](#) to unite the nation. However, until a few years ago, this did not have a strong influence on Chinese foreign policy in a negative sense. In most instances, when popular nationalism seemed to slip out of the government's hands, the turmoil was triggered by unforeseeable acts on the part of foreign politicians (e.g. Japanese premiers visiting the [Yasukuni Shrine](#), Merkel and Sarkozy shaking hands with the [Dalai Lama](#)), or by incidents involving foreign military actors (e.g. [Belgrade bombing](#), the US reconnaissance plane [incident](#)). In reality, strong nationalist rhetoric was often followed by prudent, pragmatic policy actions in foreign affairs, along the lines of the Chinese saying: "A cat, whether it is white or black, is a good one as long as it is able to catch mice". The CCP leadership always ensured that its version of nationalism remained fully compatible with the economic requirements of attracting foreign investment and know-how.

### **The nationalist shift**

In the more recent past, however, the CCP leadership has had to compromise on their preferred pragmatic foreign policy position for internal political reasons. After all the years of promoting nationalism in order to keep control over political thought and nationalist rhetoric, an [aggressive](#) nationalist body of thought had infiltrated the mindset of the general public, and increasingly rears its ugly head. The Chinese today tend to react very strongly to external 'provocations', and thus expect their government to respond accordingly in order to defend China's national interests. Nationalism in China is no longer a mere top-down phenomenon, but has taken on both top-down and bottom-up facets. It is no longer something that can simply be dictated and controlled by the party leadership. The extraordinary lengths to which Beijing has gone to rein in public protests over

the alleged Japanese occupation of the Diaoyu (or Senkaku, to the Japanese) islands, clearly showed the CCP leadership's growing inability of leading public opinion, but instead being pushed into uncomfortable stances that reduce their options.

Ever since the violent demonstrations against the Japanese in 2005, the Chinese public has been well aware of its power to [manipulate](#) the CCP leadership and its policies. It does so by all the [outlets](#) at its disposal, whether through demonstrations, blogs or media forums. By being hyper-critical of other countries, Chinese public opinion has the power to potentially undermine official relations with other countries; yet by expecting the state to react to its demands, public opinion also has the potential to undermine state authority. And because nationalism is considered (by design) a legitimate arena for popular debate (while most other socio-political issues are not), clamping down on it can be difficult. Nationalism can be a treacherous tool. The CCP is playing with fire, and it just might end hurting itself.

Sincerely,

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## **Resources**

### **Research and Academia**

#### [Centre études Asie](#)

Asia Centre at SciencesPo conducts research and organizes debates on international relations issues and on the political and economic transformations of the Asia-Pacific. It also provides authoritative and independent analyses.

#### [Centre for Chinese Studies](#) (CCS)

The Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS) located at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, is dedicated to the study of China-Africa relations. The CCS research agenda is concerned with China's engagement with Africa with a particular focus on infrastructure, investment, aid, agricultural and trade relations.

#### [National Institute of Chinese Studies](#) (NICS)

The National Institute of Chinese Studies (NICS) is an international center of excellence incorporating the department of East Asian Studies and other scholars at the Universities of Leeds and Scheffield under the umbrella of the White Rose East Asia Centre.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations and Media**

#### [People's Daily](#)

With a circulation of 3 million, People's Daily is among the most influential and authoritative newspapers in China. It features the latest news dispatches of policy information and resolutions of

the Chinese government and major domestic and international news releases from China. In addition to the main organ, People's Daily also publishes a dozen of other newspapers such as People's Daily Overseas Edition and magazines such as The Earth. It also runs an online news service, People's Daily Online, in seven languages.

#### [Radio Free Asia](#) (RFA)

The mission of Radio Free Asia (RFA) is to provide accurate and timely news and information to Asian countries whose governments prohibit access to a free press. RFA is mandated to broadcast to China, Tibet, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma. Its programming primarily comprises domestic news and information presented in local languages and dialects. RFA adheres to rigorous journalistic standards of objectivity, accuracy and fairness.

Please see also our keywords on [China](#), [Nationalism](#) and [Chinese Nationalism](#).