Identifying with a "Rising China"? Overseas Chinese Students' Nationalist Sentiment

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China’s emerging nationalism in the post-Tiananmen era has been closely observed by China scholars, but largely in a domestic context. Many scholars contend that the source of this “state-led nationalism” lay in the legitimacy concerns of the post-Tiananmen leadership. Political education, also known as “political-ideological education” and “moral education,” plays the role of citizenship education in China. As a form of political indoctrination, it has been implemented throughout the history of PRC with a number of themes contingent on changing political context. The patriotic theme in political education was significantly intensified in the early 1990s as reflected in the promulgation of a series of documents, such as the well-publicized “Outlines on Patriotic Education” issued by the Department of Propaganda of the CCP’s Central Committee (August 1994). As a result, the contents of textbooks for political education were greatly revised, and official interpretations of Chinese history have been changed.

accordingly to underscore patriotic themes. Sensitive topics like Tiananmen remain political taboo and the official verdict, “a counter-revolutionary riot,” is unchanged. Chinese teachers define “patriotic students” as those who “uphold national dignity”—“as did those students who protested at a foreign teacher’s display of a map showing Tibet as an independent country.” At the same time, an unofficial nationalist discourse emerged in the late 1990s. This discourse was articulated by such books as China Can Say No, Behind Demonizing China, and Unrestricted Warfare, all of which portray Western powers, the U.S. in particular, as hostile to China and hence justify the militancy of Chinese nationalism; the popularity of this unofficial nationalism was reflected in the sensations these books caused and in the events of student protest against alleged “anti-China” countries such as the U.S. and Japan. Of the popular reactions to the books mentioned above, the language was often vulgar but more effective than official propaganda in arousing nationalistic sentiments. This development was generally “unofficial” although official acquiescence and even manipulation did exist in some cases.

The year 2008 has witnessed a constant upsurge in dramatic nationalistic demonstrations by overseas Chinese students. These have taken the world by surprise, with the heroic images of Chinese youth represented by the lone student confronting a tank near Tiananmen Square giving way to a global emergence of “China-defenders” raising red flags and cursing the Dalai Lama. Chinese students on Western campuses

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6 G. P. Fairbrother, Toward critical patriotism: Student resistance to political education in Hong Kong and China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).
8 Peter Gries, China’s New Nationalism (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).
reacted vehemently to scholarly and political discussions in which they believed China’s image was being tarnished. Take the most high-profile event (April 2008), for example, in which a female Chinese student at Duke University found herself deluged by obscenities and threats from hundreds of her fellow Chinese students, simply because she, at a street confrontation, ventured to mediate between Chinese students and Tibetan exiles over issues of Tibet and the Beijing Olympics. Her parents in China were threatened as well and they had to flee their home for safety.

In fact, incidents of similar nature have been happening since 2006 in Western campuses such as Harvard, MIT and the University of Toronto. These incidents are profoundly disturbing from the point of view of a liberal-democratic society, especially as more recent events show that this type of overseas student patriotic fanaticism has turned from defensive to offensive, from campus protests to street demonstrations, endorsing the Beijing Olympics and fighting—in a physical sense on some occasions—those who questioned Beijing’s moral qualifications.

But for the changed names, times and locations, we might have mistaken the scenes to be those from the Cultural Revolution era. However, students involved in these incidents were not Mao’s Red Guards, but elite members of a generation growing up in the past two decades when China’s economy developed rapidly against the backdrop of globalization, when rights consciousness rose, and when citizenship movements increased in Chinese society. If it is correct to speculate that the open-door policy in economy will eventually open up people’s minds and lead to less control on access of

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**Footnotes:**


information and greater political tolerance, then how are we going to interpret such outbursts of nationalist sentiment among those overseas Chinese students who are supposed to be best educated and well-exposed to democratic practices in a cosmopolitan environment? What elements had contributed to the narrow-minded defensiveness which regarded realistic discussion of social and political problems associated with a regime as an offence to the nation and its people; and diverted academic discussions to the questioning of the discussants’ national loyalty? What were the values that drew hundreds, and even thousands, of students on foreign soil to support the Beijing government and to assail their dissident peers? What are the implications of such phenomenon for the future of China and the world if these students return to China to join the political elite or choose to stay in the West but remain vocal on China-related affairs? when Chinese students protested against scholarly discussions in which they thought China's image was being tarnished.

It is in the context of this surge of nationalism that I start a project with Chinese students in North America to explore two issues: 1) the development of the students’ national allegiance, attitudes and identities in relation to their political socialization/de/re-socialization experiences; and 2) the relationship between the concept of a “rising China” and the students’ “patriotic” responses.

The concept of a “rising China” has become political jargon recently. For many it represents a new national identity. Represented in this new identity is 1) a China that has suffered from and been despised by foreign powers, and now is perceived as competitive and dangerous by these countries who use “universal values” to weaken and

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even divide China; 2) a China that can only survive and develop under an authoritarian regime which may have moral and political weakness but guarantees the country’s unity and development; 3) a China that for the first time since the Opium War enables its people to “raise their heads” (especially for those abroad) as the country’s economic and military power become increasingly recognizable; and finally 4) a China that has begun to revive its old glory as the world’s only civilization that has never discontinued. The Chinese government’s recent effort in promoting Confucianism, traditional Chinese culture and Chinese language internationally is a conspicuous example of its self-claimed role in national redemption. Compared with this “rising China,” the national identity prior to the 2000s was vague, lacking an impressive adjective and not self-confident. In this regard, the “rising China” itself conveys a sense of pride, confidence and assertiveness, and for this reason people often ignore the officially limitative word “peaceful” before the “rising China.” Incidents of Chinese students venting their anger in a democratic/liberal environment annotated this new national identity in an alarming way.

In this study, I explore: 1) the extent to which the students have seen a “rising China” as a new and proud national identity; and 2) the linkage between this new identity and their support for the Beijing government and their emotional response to foreign criticism.