Saving Face

An Analysis of Chinese Nationalism

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It is commonly said by historians and political scientists that the nineteenth century was the British Century, that the twentieth century was the American Century, and that the twenty-first century will be the Chinese Century. Indeed, since the end of the Chinese Civil War, the People's Republic of China has skyrocketed from an impoverished, backward country ravaged by warfare to an economic powerhouse and a potential global superpower, capable of challenging the hegemony of the United States. Therefore, Sino-American relations are especially important in today's world. These relations, however, have been hampered by incidents such as the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 spy plane collision over Hainan Island, due to the impassioned protests of Chinese nationalists. Their behavior and tactics are often described by Western observers as irrational, even though nationalism is a phenomenon in the West as well. Clearly, there is something inherent in Chinese nationalism that sets it apart from Western nationalism, but what is it? How is Chinese nationalism different from Western nationalism? This is the question that I will seek to answer in this paper.

In answering this question, I will use Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism as stated in his book *Imagined Communities* as the basis for Western nationalism because his theory is exceptionally well-regarded in academic circles for its account of nationalism. On the other hand, Anderson's theory of Western nationalism cannot be extended to Chinese nationalism for two reasons: it describes official nationalism in the West as a response to popular nationalism and it contends that Western national sentiment originated from in-group relations. Neither was the case in China. Instead, I will argue that Chinese nationalism is based on out-group relations, in that Chinese nationalist activity stems from feelings of distrust and hostility toward a perceived national enemy, the Western powers (including Japan). These hostile feelings

originated in the "century of national humiliation," and due to the importance of saving face in Chinese society, the humiliation endured by the Chinese people has become ingrained into their very identity, resulting in the persistence of these feelings to the present day. In making my argument, I will first present Anderson's theory of nationalism and explain why it does not work for China. Then, I will give a brief account of China's "century of national humiliation" and explain the significance of face in Chinese nationalism.

Western Nationalism versus Chinese Nationalism

One of the most well-known accounts of nationalism is in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which describes the development and evolution of nationalism in the West and in African and Asian colonies. Anderson is especially recognized for his definition of "nation":

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. … It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. … The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. … It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. … Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived of as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson 2006, 6-7).

It is evident that Anderson presents the nation as a socially constructed phenomenon as opposed to a primordial one, and indeed, the modern Chinese nation is an imagined political community, both limited and sovereign, that was socially constructed. However, that is where the similarities end.

According to Anderson (2006, 9-36), the first form of nationalism that appeared in the West was popular linguistic nationalism, which arose as a result of the decline of religious communities, dynastic realms, a paradigm shift in the perception of time, and the emergence of print-capitalism. The waning legitimacy of sacred languages and the divine nature of monarchs allowed people to open their minds and think about themselves in new ways (Anderson 2006, 36). Also, whereas early books were mainly printed in Latin, the proliferation of vernacular languages led to the publication of works in these print-languages, with audiences specific to certain linguistic groups that could not otherwise communicate with each other due to varying dialects (Anderson 2006, 37-46). Newspapers were particularly significant in the development of national consciousness; as people began to realize that they were reading the newspaper at the same time every morning as other people in the same language, they began to develop an imagined bond with these people (Anderson 2006, 34-36). Therefore, Western nationalism emerged as people found attributes in common with each other, without reference to outside groups. This was not the case in China, in which nationalistic bonds developed from a mutual animosity toward the Western powers.

Furthermore, the advent of popular linguistic nationalism in the West posed a potential threat to the political legitimacy of dynastic and aristocratic regimes because European elites felt excluded from the new imagined communities (Anderson 2006, 109-110). To prevent themselves from being completely marginalized by their own subjects, these elites imposed unifying written languages on territories under their rule, effectively creating new imagined communities that are top-down rather than grassroots-based (Anderson 2006, 83-86). This new, official nationalism emerged in the West as a response to popular nationalism, but the reverse was true in China

(Anderson 2006, 86).

Before we can compare Chinese nationalism with Anderson's depiction of Western nationalism, we must ask ourselves whether the phenomena associated with Chinese nationalism is popular or official in nature. Peter Hays Gries, an expert on Chinese politics and foreign policy, notes that Chinese nationalism is often depicted as party propaganda, constructed by the Chinese Communist Party to garner popular support for their policies (2005, 252). For example, some may argue that anti-American and anti-Japanese protests in China were encouraged by the Party as part of a Machiavellian scheme to further a more aggressive foreign policy. Gries acknowledges that the Party-state is an actor in Chinese nationalism, but also emphasizes the foolishness of believing that the Party-state is in control of it (2005, 253). Not only is much of the nationalist discourse directed against Beijing's policies, but Chinese popular nationalists are becoming increasingly effective at influencing policies, "better able to convert popular opinion into political action" (Gries 2005, 251; Seckington 2005, 24). The Party is afraid to lose the consent of the people that they govern, especially in an age in which communist ideology can no longer be used to guarantee legitimacy (Gries 2005, 254; Seckington 2005, 25). This explains why China did not clamp down on the protests even though they had the capability to do so: it would have been a hugely unpopular move in the eyes of the people, undermining the legitimacy of the Party-state. Overall, it is safe to say that Chinese nationalism is a popular phenomenon due to the inability of the Party-state to exert control over it and its influence on official policy.

Nevertheless, Chinese nationalism has not always been predominantly popular in nature. It first appeared in the early 1990s as official nationalism and was instituted by the Party-state to strengthen their legitimacy for two main reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, adherence to

communist ideology can no longer guarantee legitimacy due to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe along with Deng Xiaoping's new policies of reform and modernization, so the Party-state determined that the best way to mobilize popular support was by emphasizing patriotism and national pride (Guangqiu Xu 2001, 152). In addition, official nationalism was used to counteract the loss of legitimacy suffered by the Party-state after the Tiananmen Square crisis (Ben Xu 2001, 120). They diverted attention away from Tiananmen and its subsequent anniversaries through displays of official nationalism. For instance, instead of recognizing the first anniversary of Tiananmen, the Party-state chose to commemorate the May Fourth Movement and the 150th anniversary of the First Opium War, both of which were struggles against Western domination (Ben Xu 2001, 121).

The feelings of patriotism not only permeated the minds of the Chinese people, but were also discussed by intellectuals in Chinese academic circles, many of whom felt true disillusionment with the West (Ben Xu 2001, 121). In the mid-1990s, these intellectuals published books intended for an audience of ordinary Chinese people, attacking policies of the West and asserting the need for Chinese unity (Ben Xu 2001, 124). These intellectual writers, however, were independent of the Party-state and occasionally expressed harsh opinions against official policy, usually calling for more aggressive action against the West (Gries 2004, 125-128; Seckington 2005, 27). Many of these books were consequently taken out of circulation by the Party-state, but the damage was already done; these books proved to be a sensation among the people and the Party-state lost its monopoly over Chinese nationalist thought, beginning the transition from official nationalism to popular nationalism (Gries 2004, 125).

We can thus see two distinctions between Anderson's account of Western nationalism and

Chinese nationalism. First, in the West, official nationalism was a response to popular nationalism, but exactly the opposite occurred in China. Second, Western nationalism is rooted in commonalities shared by a people with no regard to outside groups, while Chinese nationalism is rooted in the perception of a common enemy, the Western powers. The promotion of official nationalism led intellectual thinkers to ponder the relationship between China and the West, and to question official policies governing relations with the West. By publishing their thoughts, these intellectuals have allowed the Chinese people to think more for themselves, causing the Party-state to lose control over the direction of Chinese nationalism and paving the way for popular nationalism. The question remains though, why do Chinese nationalists see the West as their enemy so strongly? The answer lies in the "century of national humiliation" and the Chinese concept of face.

The "Century of National Humiliation" and Face

It is agreed among scholars that the focal point of Chinese nationalism is the "century of national humiliation" (百年国耻 *bainian guochi*). China has continually been regarded as a powerful empire throughout modern history, but the "century of national humiliation" marked a great decline in China's stature at the hands of the Western powers, beginning with the Chinese defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, but also events such as the burning of the Yuanming Garden palace by British and French soldiers, the Sino-Japanese War, the failed Boxer Uprising, and the Nanjing Massacre (Callahan 2004, 204-205). Although it was generally thought to have ended with Mao Zedong's successful "reunification" of China in 1949, the trauma of this century was so overwhelming that it has become infused into the very identity of the Chinese people,

similar to the way in which the Holocaust has shaped the identity of the Jews (Gries 2004, 46-48).

The "century of national humiliation" forms the basis for China's national narrative, but the manner in which the narrative is told is equally important. In the years after the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Party gained popular support by spreading a "victor" narrative that emphasized the heroism of the Chinese communist revolutionaries in fighting back against the Japanese and the corrupt Nationalist Party to end the "century of national humiliation" (Gries 2004, 48). However, in the early 1990s, the Party-state began promoting a new narrative, the "victimization" narrative, as part of their campaign for official nationalism (Gries 2004, 48). Whereas the "victor" narrative was focused on mobilizing support for Chairman Mao and his communist policies, the "victimization" narrative condemns the West as the culprit for China's humiliation and underscores the importance of Chinese solidarity against the West (Gries 2004, 48). And, as demonstrated by a *People's Daily* editorial entitled "This is not 1899 China" regarding the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade, the "victimization" narrative continues to be a motivating factor for Chinese nationalists even after the Party-state began to lose control over Chinese nationalism in the mid-1990s (Gries 2001, 32). Every perceived attack at China, whether it be unintentional or intentional, is seen as another attempt to humiliate the Chinese nation.

The final question is, why is the "century of humiliation" taken so seriously in China? The events of that century were unquestionably tragic, but the prolonged hostility of the Chinese people toward the West can be seen as a bit extreme, especially since the West has repeatedly affirmed its desire to develop better relations with China. This leads us to the concept of face.

Face can be difficult to grasp because it can refer to either of two different but related Chinese concepts, *lian* (脸) and *mianzi* (面子). Both are similar to the Western concepts of honor and dignity, but *lian* is objective whereas *mianzi* is subjective; people's *lian* are based on their adherence to an accepted set of moral standards, while their *mianzi* is judged by their social performance relative to those that they are interacting with (Lam 1993, 6-12). In this context, face is equivalent to *mianzi* because China is more concerned about its reputation and achievements compared to the West, regardless of the morality of their actions. For example, the Chinese did not lose *lian* over the Nanjing Massacre because it was the Japanese who acted unethically and not them, but they felt humiliated nonetheless. Therefore, face refers to *mianzi* in the realm of Chinese nationalism, which again shows that Chinese nationalism is based on relations between its people and external groups.

The relevance of face varies from culture to culture. Sarah Rosenberg categorizes nations into "low-context" and "high-context" societies. Low-context societies, including the United States and other Western nations, are individualistic and verbally direct, and as a result, social conflicts in these societies are seen as "personal embarrassments" and can be resolved by a simple apology (Rosenberg 2004). On the other hand, group harmony is stressed in high-context societies, which include China and other East Asian nations (Rosenberg 2004). Damaged relationships can be difficult to repair in these societies, and many feel that being humiliated, or losing face, is "a fate worse than death" (Rosenberg 2004). This ultimately explains the significance of saving face and avoiding humiliation in Chinese nationalism, as well as how the "century of national humiliation" became infused into the Chinese identity. In line with the common depiction of mid-twentieth-century China as a raped woman, China is still picking up

the pieces from her shattered harmony and it will be a long time before she can come to terms with her former oppressors.

In sum, Western nationalism as described by Anderson in *Imagined Communities* is different from Chinese nationalism. Popular nationalism led to official nationalism in the West, but the reverse was true in China. The Chinese Communist Party instituted a form of official nationalism to mobilize popular support following the global downfall of communism and the Tiananmen Square crisis, but the publication of nationalistic books by intellectual writers independent of the Party-state influenced a new generation of Chinese nationalists, encouraging them to criticize official policy for the good of the nation. Also, Western nationalism came into existence when people began to bond over their similar characteristics without regard to outside groups, but the defining element of Chinese nationalism is the perception of the West as an external enemy due to their role in bringing about China's "century of national humiliation." Since China is a high-context society, the atrocities and humiliation suffered from this century still resonate in the minds of the Chinese people and will not be forgotten easily, and this loss of face at the hands of the West is at the heart of Chinese nationalist sentiment.

By understanding the overwhelming significance of group harmony and saving face in Chinese culture, the "irrational behavior" of Chinese nationalists may not seem so irrational after all. The traumatic experience of the "century of national humiliation," and thus the conflict between China and the West, has become ingrained into the identity of the Chinese nation; distrusting the West, although perhaps not always consciously, has become an irrevocable part of being Chinese. There is no easy solution to this seemingly endless conflict, but in order to break

the distrust, the West must understand the nature of Chinese nationalism and be willing to approach China as a high-context society, respecting the value of saving face at all times. It will undoubtedly be a significant step toward improving relations with China, a goal with an importance that cannot be underestimated.

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