

COVER STORY

China's New Nationalism

Confident, vocal, and performative, China's patriotic fervor has grown up a lot over the past decade. And with self-interest coexisting with sentiment, it will be dismissed or underestimated at our peril.

BY ALEC ASH — AUGUST 8, 2021



Illustration by Tim Marrs

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In the spring of 2008, the Olympic torch wended its way around the globe on its way to Beijing. It was due to arrive by 8 p.m. on the 8th of August at the Bird's Nest stadium, to light the cauldron and open the summer Olympics after a ceremony of fanfare and drumbeat. After two decades of rocketing growth and rising prosperity, many Chinese citizens felt this was finally an opportunity to be proud of their nation's accomplishments.

Yet in Europe and North America, a firecracker string of [protests](#) had broken out, threatening to mar China's debutante moment. Beijing had recently cracked down on uprisings in Tibet, and protesters showed their anger by waving Tibetan flags and chanting "Shame on China!" as the Olympic flame passed through their cities. Some even tried to grab the torch itself.

In retaliation to this snub, Chinese patriots rallied around the flag both metaphorically and literally. They organized counter-protests, jumped on critics online, and briefly [boycotted](#) the Carrefour chain after protests in France. Rao Jin, a 23-year-old engineering and physics graduate from Beijing's elite Tsinghua University, even founded the website [Anti-cnn.com](#) in order to [harangue](#) CNN and other Western media outlets for biased or mistaken reporting. His goal, he said, was to "break the perception that the West is all good and China is all bad."

As with most Chinese nationalism back then, there was a quality of thin-skinned defiance to it all — a prickly defensiveness almost immature in its contrarianism. What a difference a decade makes. [Anti-cnn.com](#), for instance, transitioned into a sophisticated media company

called April Media, which hosts video talks about geopolitics, Western colonial history and how to “resist spiritual colonization.” When I sat down with Rao Jin, now 35 years old, for a hotpot dinner in Beijing, he told me that Chinese nationalism had grown up since those heady days while he was still an undergraduate.

“China has won,” he said bluntly. “We saw the direction the world was going in, and we were right. Before, Chinese were too humble, too self-abasing. Now we’re more objective.”



Left: Front page of Tsinghua University graduate Rao Jin’s anti-cnn.com, July 2nd, 2008. In 2009, Rao renamed anti-cnn.com to April Media in an attempt to soften its image. Right: Front page of The 4th Media, April Media’s English language outlet, November 23rd, 2016. Credit: [Internet Archive](#)

The word Rao used for self-abasing — 自卑 *zibe* — was a popular self-descriptor for Chinese youth in the 2000s. It could also be translated as “inferiority mindset,” and it cropped up a lot when I was researching my [book](#) about the generation of Chinese born in the 1980s — a generation whose pressures to get ahead, buy property and find a partner in an über-competitive environment led to a sense of being on the back foot.

The next youth generation, born after 1990, are a different order entirely. Rao calls them “self-confident” — 自信, or *zixin*. Their nationalism is more confident too, cocky even, to reflect the clout that China has achieved since the 2008 Olympics.

“Chinese patriotism used to be defensive,” Rao said, as he plucked a beef roll from the spicy side of the yin-yang hotpot. “Now the post-90s have climbed the wall of courage. In 20 years, China will return to being the center of the world.”

NEW YOUTH, NEW PATRIOTS

National confidence is a familiar attitude among educated, urban young Chinese, including the “returning turtles” (海龟 *haigui*) who come back to the homeland after studying in the West. These young people often use VPNs to access foreign news, and while state-led narratives do influence them, theirs are not ‘brainwashed’ opinions but considered standpoints. Indeed, foreign media contributes just as much to their nationalism: a sense of China being demonized abroad, combined with a pride in China’s ascendancy and the rival model it provides to a perceived Western decline.

This new nationalism represents a generational shift, born of young Chinese who grew up knowing China only as a rich and powerful nation. Those born in the 80s, after all, still remember the nation emerging from poverty, and many of the generation before that felt the human cost of control during the Tiananmen massacre. The new generation also grew up with the Campaign for Patriotic Education, which was [instituted](#) in 1990 as a direct reaction to the 1989 protests, mandating politics lessons at school and reminders of historical humiliations. For these domestic students, the campaign’s steady osmosis of national pride led to a knee-jerk conflation of Party and nation.

In addition to being more confident, the new nationalism has a strong performative aspect,

where self-interest coexists with sentiment. This was on stark display as the Party celebrated its 100th anniversary on July 1. At Dali University in southern China, for instance, I sat in on a singing competition of red songs, including video messages recorded by model students extolling the virtues of the Party while images of CCP history and modern-day achievements — from spaceship launches to the containment of Covid-19 — played on a big screen.

Peng Shanghong, a 19-year-old student of electrical engineering, won the competition for poetry composition and sang a song titled “Give All Your Contributions to the Party.” Her winning poem ends with the line “Hold hands and advance together, build the dream of China’s new chapter.” After the event, however, when I asked Peng what the occasion meant to her and why she had joined the competition, she said simply, “I hope it can help me get a good job after I graduate.”

Nationalism as a posture for personal advancement is now ubiquitous — the golden carrot dangled over the nose of Chinese society. Even the pugilism of the [‘wolf warrior’](#) diplomats serves their own career tracks as much as any national policy. And crackdowns on liberty in Hong Kong and Xinjiang can be attributed as much to over-eager civil servants proving their worth as to decisions made in Zhongnanhai.

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The corporate world also rewards political conformism, with private firms subject to the monopolies or regulation that the state throws their way. Consumer or ‘market nationalism,’ as [termed](#) by academic Chenchen Zhang, is painfully familiar to foreign brands that fall afoul of public opinion in China — as H&M and Nike, who issued statements about not using Xinjiang cotton last fall, have freshly [discovered](#). And in an advertising market where sex is censored heavily, patriotism sells almost as well. It is a rising trend to buy Huawei phones over Apple’s iPhone, “[proudly made in China](#)” clothes, “China chic” ([国超](#)) [cosmetics](#) or even [Chicecream](#). The athletic apparel brand Li Ning [cashed in](#) on this trend with a new line of hoodies emblazoned simply with the characters for the Middle Kingdom.

If the carrot is bigger, so too is the stick. It is wielded both by the state — as in the recent [jailing](#) of Sun Dawu, an outspoken business tycoon accused of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” — but also by the court of social media, where online nationalists have recently jumped on [feminists](#), LGBT [activists](#) and even a [science blogger](#), accusing them of collusion with foreigners or of just being [libtards](#) (白左 *baizuo*).

These incentives and disincentives, alongside genuine patriotic fervor, have resulted in a nationalist monopoly of public opinion. One netizen on the Quora-like platform Zhihu [bemoaned](#) that public displays of patriotic fervor are so common that “Over time, I’ve lost the will to resist them, and I don’t care to roll around in the mud with them, either. The only option is getting used to keeping quiet.”

“It’s such a force that it’s almost invisible,” says Professor David Ownby, who has been translating the work of nationalist and other intellectuals at [Reading the China Dream](#). “You can’t not be nationalist in China ... [and] if you ever question anything about nationalism you get raked over the coals.”

Of course, a key element in this public nationalism is the shrinking space for other opinions. Once liberal-dominated web platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu have been significantly

denuded of that demographic, due in part to state crackdowns on outspoken bloggers — such as a [purge](#) in 2013 of ‘big Vs,’ the verified accounts on Weibo of liberals such as Xue Manzi and Ren Zhiqiang — as well as the voluntary retirement of other voices such as Han Han who saw which way the wind was blowing. In their place have risen the ‘red Vs,’ filling this lacuna with patriotic pabulum that used to be just one of a hundred opinions.

“ [They are] trying to show that my voice, my values, have a legitimate background. It is less about encroachments on Chinese culture than a value debate between China and the West. In other words, it is no longer about ‘how you are wronging us’ but ‘what we have to say to you.’ ”

— *Ma Tianjie, a liberal Chinese blogger*

“The new era of nationalism is coinciding with a tightening of the public square,” says Jude Blanchette, author of [China’s New Red Guards](#), combined with the fact that “Beijing has created a bigger microphone.”

But even if there still exists what the iconic writer Wang Xiaobo would call China’s [silent majority](#), silence is not enough at times. A decade ago, it was sufficient for citizens to not publicly voice dissidence. In the Xi era, vocal patriotism is expected.

Ma Tianjie, a liberal Chinese blogger who translated netizen voices into English, says this trend is because the new nationalists have something new to say — they are not just reacting defensively to slights on China. Instead, they are “trying to show that my voice, my values, have a legitimate background. It is less about encroachments on Chinese culture than a value debate between China and the West. In other words, it is no longer about ‘how you are wronging us’ but ‘what we have to say to you.’”

What they have to say, in short, is that China offers a successful model of a polity, so stop hating on it and you might learn a thing or two. The blogger [Zhou Xiaoping](#), for example, in his essay “Please Do Not Fail This Era!”, traces his journey from a young man who “stupidly felt our country had systemic problems and no free economy” to a champion of “oriental culture’s ultimate counterattack against Western hegemony.” (Xi Jinping has personally praised Zhou as a paragon of “positive energy.”)

This self-assurance has been supercharged by China’s success in containing the Covid pandemic, bringing the infection rate to close to zero within months and locking down whole cities to prevent imported cases from spreading. The authoritarianism that enabled this is contrasted, in the public imagination, to the democracies of the West that failed to enforce preventative measures due to what one Chinese friend termed “too much freedom.” Even the liberal intellectual Qin Hui recently [wrote](#) of the double-edged sword of China’s “low human rights advantage” in imposing effective lockdowns while the West “continues to stumble.”

All of these vectors have spread a confident Chinese nationalism that mirrors — and is fed by — Xi Jinping’s assertive foreign policy and Party messaging. In the past, for instance, whenever a foreign entity offended Beijing, Foreign Ministry pronouncements would include the mild and [oft-mocked](#) phrase “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.” Now, they [include](#) the more truculent articulation “triggers the anger of the Chinese people.”

There is, of course, nothing new about the political use of nationalism in China. As with any empire, China has a storied history of those in power using patriotic signalling to legitimize their reigns — and of those out of power using it to justify takeovers. The CCP’s

codependent relationship with popular nationalism dates back to the [student marches](#) of May 4th, 1919, protesting China's losses to Japan in the Versailles treaty after World War I, out of which [new youth](#) the Party was born.

Yet while the Party clears space for protests that benefit its legitimacy and state narrative — from anti-Japanese [protests](#) in 2005 and 2012, to anti-U.S. [slogan-shouting](#) outside KFC and Apple in 2016, or [vitriol](#) aimed at South Korea in 2017 — it is wary of how that anger can get out of hand, or turn on leadership itself. In 1996, for instance, the bestselling book [China Can Say No](#) argued for less worship of foreign culture only to be censored by Beijing for stirring up high emotions. As Kaiser Kuo [puts it](#), Beijing looks at nationalism with “a fan in one hand and a fire hose in the other.”



From top left, clockwise: Anti-Japanese protestors in Beijing, 2012; Anti-U.S. protestors outside a KFC in China, 2016; Recent verbal abuse on Lady Gaga's Instagram account, after she met with the Dalai Lama in 2016; A viral video on Weibo showing someone burning their Nike shoes to protest the company's refusal to use forced labor in Xinjiang, 2021.

Credit: Dong Fang/[Wikipedia](#), [aboluowang.com](#), [Instagram](#), [Weibo](#)

In this respect, Chinese nationalism has always been a pressure vent — for the state in allowing an outlet for social discontent, and for participants in letting off that steam. In the aughts, young nationalists were dubbed the ‘angry youth’ (愤青 *fèngqīng*), and were born of opportunity disenfranchisement as much as any thought-through ideology. By 2016, the new buzzword was the ‘little pinks’ (小粉红 *xiǎo fēnhóng*) — supposedly female [netizens](#) who flooded the Facebook page of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, called for a boycott of Lancôme for its connection with Hong Kong protest supporter Denise Ho, and descended on Lady Gaga's Instagram account after she met with the Dalai Lama. (Academic Fang Kecheng later discovered the little pinks were after all [mostly male](#).)

Today, Party patriotism in China and its popular expressions show more striking similarities to Trumpism — an ideology that Steve Bannon explicitly called a “kind of nationalist movement.” Indeed, it is only a code switch between China's “[alt-left](#)” nationalism and that of alt-right America. Both have co-opted social dissatisfaction, especially in young men, into a glorious promise of national rejuvenation. Both are formed by environment, but comprise more thoughtfully held views than critics give them credit for. And both are to be dismissed or underestimated at our peril.

GREENGROCCERS OF CHINA, UNITE!

In Vaclav Havel's 1978 [essay](#), “The Power of the Powerless,” the Czech dissident opens by pastiching the Communist Manifesto. “A specter is haunting Eastern Europe,” he wrote, “the specter of what in the West is called ‘dissent.’”

But before giving examples of dissidence, he lays out one of conformity. The greengrocer who displays at his window the socialist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” does so, Havel posits, not out of ideological passion but survivalist instinct. The real message of the slogan is “I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace.”

China’s new nationalism is full of greengrocer’s signs. National flags and posters with the face of Xi Jinping adorn business exteriors and private homes. Netizens jump on foreign brands for perceived slights to China, and consumers boycott them. Patriotic films and songs top charts, while celebrities and bloggers exude “positive energy.” Editors are pressured to run articles countering ‘Western rumors’ about Xinjiang, and viral hashtags include “I support Xinjiang cotton.” Where it was once enough to not defy the state, it is now advisable to vocally support it.

A specter is indeed haunting China: the specter of what in the West is called ‘nationalism.’ We could of course call it patriotism instead — and its forms are reminiscent of American jingoism (the flag on the driveway, the ‘number one’ foam glove). To Havel, socialism was the safe façade for the greengrocer’s performative conformism, the “veil behind which human beings can hide ... their adaptation to the status quo.”

In China, the veil of patriotism is an even more appealing front. Why not signal support for a strong, successful state when your life is both better off for its policies (true for the majority) and may likely get worse if you do not? Why not display a greengrocer’s sign, if it sells the pak choi?¹

Performative signalling aside, it is abundantly clear to anyone living in China, as I have since that Olympic summer of 2008, that support for the state runs deep and sincere across many sectors of society. A recent Harvard-backed [survey](#) found that 93 percent of Chinese citizens approved of their government (up from 82 percent a decade ago), compared to an average of around 50 percent for most Western leaders. Not all of that can be dissembled opinion (one academic cited a 8–10 percent margin for it) — and if you say something often and loudly enough, it is easier to believe it than act against it.

This only serves to show how imperfect a historical analogy the Cold War is to today’s U.S.-China relations. For just as fears of [Cold War II](#) ignore China’s incentives to remain in step with the global system it got rich off, the Soviet-era idea that China is populated by grey automatons aping a Party line also neglects how genuinely proud the majority of China’s citizens are of their nation’s power and status, and how multi-faceted its nationalisms are — including that kind where the signal becomes the belief.

Next February, Beijing will once again host the Olympics — the winter ones. Once again, there is backlash against human rights abuses and calls to [boycott](#). And once again young Chinese nationalists are pushing back, saying the West is just trying to keep China down, even turning their anger on their [own athletes](#) in Tokyo. Except this time they represent not the loud minority but the cultural mainstream. They speak from a confidence in their nation’s ascendancy that is born of a decade of changing power balance, and they display their greengrocer’s signs not just for their own benefit, but for all the world to see.



Above: a man stands in front of the portraits of Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong in his home, October 2020. Below: shop owners hang portraits of Xi and Mao ahead of the 2018 Lunar New Year.

Credit: Sheldon Cooper/[AP Photo](#), Bei piao – [Imaginechina/AP Photo](#)



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● COVER STORY



Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMAN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

● THE BIG PICTURE



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BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

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● Q & A



Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

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