

Nationalist Narrative and China's Foreign Relations

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Shortly after US-China trade talks deadlocked in May 2018, *Jiefang Daily*, a Chinese official newspaper, ran an article with a poignant title "Hah! the US proposed an unequal treaty as if it is still 1840!" What is invoked here are Chinese grievances about the Opium War that marks the beginning of the nation's subjugation by imperialist powers in modern history. By whipping up nationalistic indignation against foreign aggressors, Beijing tries to mask the domestic economic crisis and political tensions that are sharply aggravated by the trade disputes. To stoke fears and hatred of foreign nations to serve internal needs, as seen in recent events, is a recurring pattern in Chinese politics.

My research in a broad sense is concerned with the construction and propagation of nationalist ideology through elite "cultural engineering" (Breuilly). I am particularly interested in the formation of the image of foreign others in Chinese nationalism, which can act as either an impediment to or impetus for China's engagement with the world. Nationalist expression is commonly believed to be a product of shared memories of past encounters with the outside world; hence its bitter experiences of imperialist oppression render the centrality of anti-foreignism in China's national psyche (Liao; Shambaugh 1988). But instead of being constantly antagonistic toward foreign imperialism, China since the late 19th century has undergone cycles of seeking cooperation with foreigners and demonizing them. Even the nearly universally believed "myth of National Humiliation" (Garver) is not always salient in its nationalist mobilization. Realists contend that states' attitude to one another symptomizes the severity of their conflict of interest; hence external threat, not historical grievances, should account for the degree of China's foreign animosity. Yet more often than not since the modern times, surging tides of Chinese anti-foreignism is not correlated with or solely determined by the presence of a clear, imminent security threat.

More recent scholarship recognizes the instrumental use of external tensions by Chinese leaders to bolster not only China's national security and international standing but also their ambitious domestic programs (Chen; Christensen). Endorsing this emphasis on internal-external interaction, my research aims at exploring how outside stimulus and domestic politics are mediated through nationalist narrative – as language, symbols, and performance – in affecting China's foreign relations. The assumption is that nationalist ideas are not merely auxiliary to material interests but can generate psychological and perceptual effects capable of exerting independent influence on international relations.

My first book, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*, reveals how politicization of history motivated by political agenda, international and/or domestic, can significantly impact post-conflict interstate reconciliation. The book formulates a national mythmaking theory arguing that ruling elites who harbor certain political-ideological goals tend to create historical myths that glorify the actions of their own nation in past conflict while blaming others for causing the tragedy. National myths can cause divergent historical memories between former enemy countries, which in turn produce negative emotions

and perceptions of hostile mutual intention that hinder their reconciliation process. While mythmaking in Japan has been relatively consistent after WWII – to buttress the ruling power of the conservative elites by downplaying Japan’s war responsibility – manipulation of the war history in China varied considerably over time to suit changing political needs. Before the 1980s, Beijing deliberately set aside the history issue in order to first win Japanese diplomatic recognition and then, after diplomatic normalization, to ensure their strategic alignment against the common Soviet threat. But from the mid-1980s, when pressed by the exacerbation of domestic socio-economic problems, Beijing began to promote patriotism as a powerful supplement to, if not a complete replacement of, communism as the new ideological foundation for its regime legitimacy. Much of the official discourse since then has centered on a new theme highlighting Chinese suffering from the depredations of imperialism, especially Japan. The prevailing sense of victimhood in China as a result of the patriotic history propaganda led to a sharp clash with Japan’s war narrative. This not only has generated widespread anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment in China but also provoked increasing backlash among the Japanese people who view themselves as the victims of the war and who wish to be disentangled from the thorny history problem.

While that book focuses on the treatment of Japan in postwar Chinese nationalism, my second-book project expands the scope of research to China’s elite discourse on all imperialist powers from the 1890s till the 2010s. Employing a self/other nexus grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel; Turner; Brewer) and nationalism literature on othering and ethnocentrism (Barth; Bartov; Kinder & Kam; Neumann), I want to understand why the discursive framework on national identity shifts over time and in what ways the framework links the perceived external adversaries to internal enemies. The project addresses four empirical cases – the identity reorientation from anti-Manchism to anti-imperialism between the 1890s and 1920s, the all-out demonization of “American imperialism” in the Korean War, the anti-Soviet propaganda campaign in the 1960s, and the ideological repudiation of the West since the 2000s. These cases show that, like in “nationalizing states” (Brubaker; Marx) elsewhere, modern Chinese nationalist elites facing severe political challenges have frequently excited internally exclusionary nationalism for social mobilization and power consolidation. But when targeting domestic others alone is unable to meet the objective, elites tend to promote antiforeign identity to reinforce internal battles, oftentimes by resuscitating national memories of past trauma. Doing so could tar domestic foes with the brush of foreign collaboration and, if needed, divert popular discontent with the elites themselves.

Specifically, in late Qing, mobilization of anti-foreign national identity was unnecessary because the anti-Manchu discourse purveyed by the revolutionaries, evoking ancient hatred and racial contempt for a “barbarian” ethnic minority, proved so appealing to the Han Chinese that it propelled a succession of uprisings that eventually overthrew the imperial court. But when vilifying domestic adversaries was either emotionally unappealing or politically inconvenient, Chinese elites would combine it with a nationalist crusade against foreign countries to construct a legitimacy narrative for securing power. After his Constitution Protection Movement against the northern warlords suffered repeated setbacks, Sun Yat-sen from the 1920s discovered a new national other from without that captured the imagination of the nation: foreign imperialism. Fomenting anti-imperialism proved tremendously successful in boosting the KMT’s political influence and justifying the Northern Expedition, a military campaign against the warlords who

were now condemned as the lackeys of foreign powers. Likewise, Mao Zedong orchestrated propaganda offensives in the 1950s-1960s, first against “American imperialism” and then “Soviet revisionism.” The massive scale and radical, abrasive tone of these campaigns were not so much the result of external security pressure on China or resentment about past sufferings as of Mao’s utopian vision of a “continuous revolution,” which required ruthless elimination of “traitorous” domestic adversaries. Hence during the Korean War, class enemies like counterrevolutionaries, landlords, capitalists and bourgeois intellectuals were accused of conspiring with American imperialists to sabotage the new Communist state and harm Chinese People’s Volunteers in Korea. From the early 1960s through the peak of the Cultural Revolution, an even wider net was cast in search of a whole array of internal enemies, including Mao’s opponents within the CCP, likening them to Soviet revisionists and reactionaries. Such prominent party leaders as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were even labeled as “China’s Khrushchev.”

In the recent decade, the party-state has similarly sought to denigrate Western democracy and defame “Western hostile forces” for its alleged intent of subversion. Such othering of the West in the official discourse is to a large extent designed to redirect the blame for domestic troubles to inimical external influences and their “agents” within China, namely the liberal and ethnic dissidents. Meanwhile, the emerging material conflict with the West has often energized nationalist mobilization, which in turn magnified perception of the Western menace and fed back to the ethnocentric identity.

Overall, how China is treated externally, both in the past and present, is by itself a rather poor predictor for elite discursive representation of foreign others and their relationship with the national self. One must unravel the complex interplay between international environment, domestic motivations, and historical legacy in shaping China’s external attitude. This finding shades light on the ongoing academic and policy debates about China’s international assertiveness, which is widely seen as fueled by its fast-growing power and eagerness to redeem past humiliation. Today’s Chinese leader Xi Jinping is indeed using history to arouse nationalist passion among the populace to pursue a “great rejuvenation of the nation.” But what motivates this narrative is not just China’s external ambition or memories of historical trauma but also, and more fundamentally, the Communist state’s grave sense of domestic insecurity. Indeed, the “hard authoritarianism” of the Xi Jinping regime (Shambaugh 2016) has continued to repress liberal and ethnic activists on the grounds of their “foreign connections” while deflecting public resentment about its own policy failures. Hence regardless of whether it takes on an approach of engagement, disengagement, or even renewed containment to China, the image of the West will be defined and redefined largely through a logic best serving the interest of the party-state, not the Chinese nation.

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This narrative allows China's government and people to interpret contemporary successes through the lens of earlier failures.⁵ The scholar Peter Hays Gries, analyzing the popular and official outcry that resulted after the accidental 1999 US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, provides one example when he quotes a People's Daily article that makes explicit reference to the Century of Humiliation. The Century of Humiliation exposed Chinese intellectuals to a different way of thinking about international relations. By examining their own situation alongside the theoretical writings of Western historians and social scientists, these figures developed some key areas of consensus about the nature of interstate relations. These included (but were not limited to) the following propositions: Wang visits China's primary schools and memory sites and reads its history textbooks, arguing that China's rise should not be viewed through a single lens, such as economics or military growth, but from a more comprehensive perspective that takes national identity and domestic discourse into account. From this vantage point, Wang tracks the CCP's use of history education to glorify the party, reestablish its legitimacy, consolidate national identity, and justify one-party rule in the post-Tiananmen and post-Cold War era. The institutionalization of this manipulated historical consciousness now directs political discourse and foreign policy, and Wang demonstrates its important role in China's rise. ISBN: 978-0-231-52016-4. Subjects: Political Science, History. Since 1949, U.S.-China relations have evolved from tense standoffs to a complex mix of intensifying diplomacy, growing international rivalry, and increasingly intertwined economies. Timeline by CFR.org Editors April 15, 2020. Conference Call: Escalations in the U.S.-China Trade War. Please join our speakers as they discuss what's at stake in the current U.S.-China trade negotiations, motivating factors for both the United States and China, and the prospects for a reasonable solution to the trade impasse. The risk of a confrontation between China and Taiwan is growing. Domestic politics in China, political trends in Taiwan, and changing U.S. policy toward Taiwan are increasing the risk of a cross-strait crisis in the coming months.