

Competing Views of Nationalism and Identity in Contemporary China

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Introduction

Since the launch of economic reforms in the 1980s, China's global position has changed significantly, triggering a surge in Chinese nationalism. In the Western media and some scholarly discussions, this new wave of nationalism is often viewed as an attempt by the Chinese state to regain legitimacy by shifting the focus away from failing communist beliefs. This teaching unit takes a broader look at the phenomenon by examining different *types* of nationalism in contemporary China. It aims to help students understand how these nationalisms formed for different political purposes and how the conflicts among them reveal the true nature of nationalist currents and reflect political tensions between the Chinese state, elites, and ordinary citizens.

Audience and Uses

The unit could be useful in a variety of courses including but not limited to:

- Comparative Politics
- East Asian/Chinese Politics
- Comparative Nationalisms
- Modern Chinese History
- Contemporary Chinese Society
- Comparative studies of ethnicity, race and/or identity
- Globalization
- International relations
- Sociology of East Asia
- Social Movements

The unit is designed to be taught over one or two class sessions.

The unit can be used by itself or in combination with the following other units on race, ethnicity, and nationality in East Asia:

- “Chinese” Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation

- <http://www.exeas.org/resources/chinese-perspectives.html>
- Koreans in Japan (Zainichi Koreans) (forthcoming on the ExEAS site)
- Nationalisms, Ethnicity, and Identity in Contemporary China
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/contemporary-china-nationalisms.html>
- Nationalisms in East Asia
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/nationalisms.html>
- Okinawa: Beyond the Ethnic Other
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/okinawa.html>
- Race and Ethnicity in Asian America
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity.html>
- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity: America , Korea , and Biracial Koreans
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/korean-race-ethnicity.html>

For summary information on many of these units, see “Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia” (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity-intro.html>).

Student Reading

ZHAO, Suisheng. Chapter 1 “Rise of Chinese Nationalism: Causes, Content, and International Ramifications,” pp. 8-36 in *Nation-State by Construction*. California: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Zhao’s book explores in great detail the historical origins of nationalism in contemporary China. He argues that by identifying and discussing different types of nationalism, we can see that nationalism is not the sole province of state propaganda and intellectual discourse. Populist sentiment also plays a major role. The different types of nationalism represent the arguments over the content of nationalism. They also illustrate the political conflicts between different ethnic groups and elite groups and between the state and its citizens, all of whom have their own interests and ideological agendas.

In this chapter, Zhao identifies and outlines three major types of nationalism:

1. Liberal nationalism emphasizes popular awareness of and civic participation in national politics, regardless of ethnicity, religion, lineage, or other factors. It also emphasizes the unity of the Chinese people against Western sanctions. Generally speaking, the major proponents of liberal nationalism in contemporary China are a group of leading intellectuals, college students, and other youth groups. To this group of people, Chinese identity is based on the Han majority culture and stands in stark contrast to Western culture.
2. Ethnic nationalism sees the nation as a politicized ethnic group defined by common culture and descent, shared historical experiences, and usually a common language. Ethnic nationalism rejects the state’s attempt to mingle Han people with other minorities through Han migration to minority regions and minority acculturation to Han society. Proponents of

this view are primarily ethnic minorities (for example, Tibetans and Uighurs) who do not consider themselves “Chinese” and may advocate separation from the Chinese nation-state.

3. State nationalism defines the nation as a territorial-political unit and an organizational system to gather citizens of a given territory – voluntarily or not. This is the “official” nationalism of the Chinese Communist Party and the most commonly recognized form of nationalism in China. While liberal nationalism emphasizes “individualistic liberty,” state nationalism stresses “collective authoritarianism.” Under this view, “Chineseness” is determined by international borders. The discourse around this form of nationalism is inclusive, but in reality, views of Chinese identity are very Han-centric.

Discussion Questions

- 1) According to Zhao, how many types of nationalism are there in today’s China? What is the relationship between the different constructions of each kind of nationalism? How do they relate to different notions of “Chineseness” and Chinese identity?
- 2) What are the differences between official nationalism and popular nationalism? Why is it so important to distinguish between them?
- 3) What about the case of China adds to your understanding of nationalism and its construction? Can you find different kinds of nationalism coexisting in the U.S. or elsewhere, historically or in the present?

Further Reading for the Instructor

BROWN, Melissa J. *Is Taiwan Chinese: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

CHUN, Allen. “Fuck Chineseness: on the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture and as Identity.” *Boundary* 23.2 (1996): pp. 111-138.

GRIES, Peter Hays. “Popular Nationalism and State Legitimation in China,” pp.180-194 in *State and Society in 21st-Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*. Peter Hays GRIES and Stanley ROSEN, eds. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

GUO, Yingjie. *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity under Reform*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

MACKERRAS, Colin. “What is China? Who is Chinese? Han-Minority Relations, Legitimacy, and the State,” pp. 216-234, in *State and Society in 21st-Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*. Peter Hays GRIES and Stanley ROSEN, eds. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

WEI, C. X. George and Xiaoyuan LIU, eds. *Exploring Nationalisms of China: Themes and Conflicts*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002.

ZHAO, Dingxin. "An Angle on Nationalism in China Today: Attitudes among Beijing Students after Belgrade 1999." *The China Quarterly* 172 (2002): pp. 885-905.

Additional Classroom Material

The following article and film can be used along with the materials above or taught independently for an additional session or two.

Student Reading

XIAO, Zhiwei. "Nationalism in Chinese Popular Culture: A Case Study of *The Opium War*," pp. 41-54 in *Exploring Nationalisms of China: Themes and Conflicts*. C.X. George WEI and Xiaoyuan LIU, eds. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002.

This short article discusses how popular concepts of nationalism were constructed through feature films on the Opium War. The most interesting part of the article is the comparison between the 1997 film *The Opium War* and another film on the same event, *Lin Zexu* (1959). Xiao compares how British invaders are portrayed differently in the two films and how a historically denounced "traitor" in *Lin Zexu* is treated with a certain degree of sympathy in *The Opium War*. The comparison demonstrates how intellectuals and business elites now define nationalism with a pragmatic approach, rather than basing it strictly on moral principles. The article also reveals how this popular nationalism is actually endorsed by the state, even though *The Opium War* was produced solely with private funds. This reading lends itself to discussions of how Chineseness is defined through the participation of different social actors with different political, economic, and ideological agendas in different historical periods.

Film

XIE, Jin, dir. *The Opium War (Yapian zhanzheng)* (feature film) 1997. 150 minutes. In Mandarin with English subtitles. Unfortunately, this film is not widely available from libraries or for rent. It is available for purchase from:

<http://us.yesasia.com/en/PrdDept.aspx/code-c/section-videos/pid-1001835215/> and <http://www.hkflix.com/xq/asp/filmID.527034/qx/details.htm>.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the type of nationalism presented in the film. How is it related to China's economic development?
2. By portraying both the British invaders and Qing government officials with complexity, what criticisms of older forms of nationalism are being made?

3. Why did the director XIE Jin claim that his story and interpretation are more historically accurate than the 1959 film *Lin Zexu*? What kind of political legitimacy did the Chinese state try to build by granting the film its special endorsement?
4. Referring to the article by Xiao, how did business elites, intellectuals, and government officials collaborate before and during the production of *The Opium War*? What were the common terms? How does the collaboration help us understand the ways in which nationalism is constructed by different actors?