

Realpolitik Nationalism

International Sources of Chinese Nationalism

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Conventional understandings of Chinese nationalism often portray it as anti-Western, focusing on Chinese nationalists' obsession with a powerful state and on their ambition to recover the glory of China's historical empire. Such understandings clearly underlie the fear and hostility toward rising Chinese nationalism today. But this view relies too heavily on China's conflictive relations with the West and overemphasizes the impact of China's unique history, culture, and politics, making it hard, if not impossible, to draw on the concept of nationalism in understanding China's relations with its non-Western neighbors. Such a perspective neglects the importance of ideas and ideals from the international system that animate Chinese nationalism. In this article, the author characterizes Chinese nationalism as fusing realpolitik ideas and ideals and a fervent quest for national identity and power. A realpolitik nationalist, as defined here, is someone who frames an external threat to China in terms not of the country's unique culture or history but of a breach of the prevailing norms of the nation-state system, whose key dimensions include sovereignty, territoriality, and international legitimacy. Finally, the author applies this notion in examining China's conflicts with India in 1962 and with the Southeast Asian countries involved in the dispute over the Spratly Islands.

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In recent years, Western interest in Chinese nationalism has increased markedly. Western scholars have used nationalism to frame

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their study of a diverse set of events in China—from anti-American demonstrations in Beijing after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, to cultural trends and the publication of best-sellers in China, to China's territorial disputes with its neighbors and the Chinese government's assertive diplomacy in the postreform period (Barmé, 1995; Downs and Saunders, 1999; Garver, 1992; Gries, 2001; Whiting, 1983, 1995; S. Zhao, 1997). Seasoned American journalists have also weighed in on the topic, writing popular books about the rise of China and its implications for world peace (Bernstein and Munro, 1997b; Kristof and WuDunn, 1994). Their accounts, along with increasingly assertive defenses of China's national interests mounted by their Chinese counterparts, have helped the discussion spread to the general public in China and in many Western countries.

This growing interest in Chinese nationalism did not develop in a vacuum. It accompanied several changes in global geopolitics and the global economy toward the end of the twentieth century. The most important of these is the demise in the early 1990s of the Soviet Union, and with it the collapse of a relatively stable bipolar world order divided along clear-cut ideological lines. Astute observers of international affairs began to turn their attention to potent subterranean forces of change that had long been suppressed by cold war politics. In this context, nationalism—and increasingly now, transnational terrorism—has emerged as a favorite analytical angle on new, hot global issues. A second major change is simply the emergence of China as a world economic, and potentially military, power. Writing in 1993, the longtime *New York Times* China reporter Nicholas Kristof predicted that China's rise “may be the most important trend in the world for the next century” (Kristof, 1993: 59). His feeling is widely shared by scholars and policy makers in the West even though they disagree about the implications of that rise (Metzger and Myers, 1998; Zhu, 2001).

China's greater power is accompanied by a third change that tends to cloud the Western observers' judgment of Chinese worldviews and strategic intentions: China's own downplaying of its communist ideology and its embrace of pragmatism in pursuing its foreign policy. What is filling the vacuum of communism—and what passes as pragmatism, many analysts plausibly conjecture—may simply be old-

fashioned nationalism. “Besides economic performance,” Thomas Christensen notes, “the Chinese communists have little else to bolster their mandate for power than nationalism and the maintenance of national stability and integrity” (Christensen, 1996a: 41).¹

In a rudderless world and faced with a new rising power that is very much an unknown quantity lacking a clear ideological track in its strategic vision, scholars and policy analysts alike have unsurprisingly returned to nationalism as the favorite *explanans* of China’s foreign policy behavior. And obviously the claim that communism has been replaced by nationalism in recent decades has some validity. Yet the dominant understandings of Chinese nationalism suffer from one major shortcoming: they rely too heavily on our observations about China’s antagonistic relations with the West or with Japan, the West’s close ally. The strong Western-centric quality of conceptualizations of nationalism in China may be one reason why adding the prefixes “anti-Japanese,” “anti-American,” or “anti-imperialist” has little serious affect on the meaning of “Chinese nationalism.”

It may well be that for the most part, China’s main obsession has been with the West. As John Garver has recently suggested, the Chinese leaders had always thought “first, longest, and hardest” about their relations with the Western powers rather than with their non-Western neighbors (Garver, 2001: 5). But this emphasis on the Western-directedness of Chinese nationalism, if pushed too far, is problematic in at least two ways. First, it suggests that nationalism does not come into play in China’s relations with non-Western states. Yet we know that historically, the PRC’s territorial disputes with its neighbors have provided powerful occasions for the expression of nationalism. Second, by delving deeply inside Chinese history to uncover the historical, political, and cultural roots of nationalism, we risk a fundamental conceptual error: neglecting the international sources of ideas and ideals animating contemporary Chinese nationalism.

It has long been controversial to apply the concept of nationalism to the study of Chinese politics. This article contributes to the discussion by highlighting the *international* dimension of Chinese nationalism. Specifically, I consider how some of the prevailing norms of the Westphalian international system have been integrated into and thus made part of the Chinese nationalist discourse. My purpose is not to dismiss what we already know about the phenomenon of Chinese

nationalism but to provide an important corrective to its conceptualization that will enable it to be applied more broadly—in particular, to empirical cases in which the West plays little role. I begin by briefly surveying the debate on Chinese nationalism in Western scholarship from the 1950s to the 1990s. I then examine several major assumptions underlying these existing understandings. In the third section, I articulate a different conception of Chinese nationalism, which I argue embodies three important norms of the international system. Finally, I illustrate the usefulness of this new conception by analyzing two instances of China's conflicts with neighboring countries.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE DEBATE ON CHINESE NATIONALISM

The subject of Chinese nationalism has long been much debated. In the 1950s and 1960s, the debate was largely focused on the nature of Chinese revolution: was the revolution truly inspired by Marxism and Leninism or was it simply a nationalistic movement disguised as communism? Chalmers Johnson's study in 1962 convinced many that "the communist rise to power in China should be understood as a species of nationalist movement" (Johnson, 1962: ix). Johnson argued that mass nationalism, based on mobilization of peasants against the Japanese invasion, was an integral part of the communist revolution. This thesis was so influential that Lucien Bianco wrote only five years later in his popular book on the origins of Chinese revolution that "the importance of nationalism to China's communist revolution is by now a commonplace" (Bianco, 1971: 140). More recent scholarship on the revolutionary period, such as John Garver's 1988 book on Chinese-Soviet relations, continues to explore this theme with rich empirical data and analytical rigor. Garver himself focused on the interwoven nature of communism and nationalism in the triangular diplomatic relations among the Soviet Union, the Nationalist government, and the Chinese Communist Party.

From the late 1960s to the 1970s, nationalism receded from public attention as China was convulsed in ideologically motivated factional struggles over its internal politics. Chinese foreign policy underwent what some have called a process of "ideologization," whereby the guiding principle of "national" interest was displaced by class-based

communist ideology. Scholars tried to discern its direction by examining either Mao's Three World theory (*sange shijie lilun*), which posited a tripartite world system within which China sided with the postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America against imperial powers of the United States and the USSR; Mao's ideas on the "permanent revolution"; or simply the infighting among the factions at the top of the foreign policy echelon (Deng, 1999: 50-51; Friedman, 1979; Tsou and Halperin, 1965; B. Yu, 1994; G. Yu, 1977). But such ideological interpretations gave way to a realist paradigm in the late 1970s and 1980s, the era of China's skillful triangular diplomacy vis-à-vis the two superpowers. Their study of Chinese foreign policy behavior during this period led some scholars to believe that China had ceased to base its foreign policy on questions of "social systems and ideologies." Instead, Chinese leaders began to adopt "a balance-of-power approach to protect Chinese interests" (J. Wang, 1994: 487; see also Segal, 1982; B. Yu, 1994: 239-40).

National interests, so central to the realist framework, became a concern of those analyzing the PRC's foreign policy behavior in the 1980s and 1990s. Chinese analysts themselves began to explore the notion of national interest systematically. In an important essay on the subject, Yan Xuetong distinguished the "national" interest from the interests of the state or the ruling class, and proposed a set of hierarchically ordered criteria (national survival, political recognition, economic benefits, etc.) that should guide the practice of Chinese foreign policy (Yan, 1997). Because of the close affinity between national interest and nationalism, in the 1990s the latter rode on the back of realism to once again become a focal concept for analyzing Chinese politics.

Around the same time, international relations scholars working on China began to emphasize the cultural dimension of its foreign policy. The cultural approach, as Alistair Johnston has pointed out, was developed to counter the "ahistorical, non-cultural neorealist framework for analyzing strategic choices" (Johnston, 1995b: 35). For example, authors such as Shu Guang Zhang, Jonathan Adelman, and Chih-yu Shih argue for the importance of culturally bound perceptions and of national self-identity in the shaping of China's foreign policy (Adelman and Shih, 1993; Johnston, 1995a, 1996; Zhang, 1992). In a rigorous study of classical Chinese military texts and the

strategy of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) against the Mongols, Johnston demonstrates the existence of consistent and pervasive cultural norms in China about grand strategies and war making (Johnston, 1995a, 1996). Somewhat ironically, in Johnston's analysis, China's strategic culture ultimately converges with Western notions of *realpolitik*. But the cultural realists view China's hard-edged realism as now derived from a historically based *national* strategic culture rather than from the structural dynamics of relations between modern states. The turn to a historically informed and culturally sensitive analysis has given us a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese foreign policy process. But in less deft hands, a cultural approach may lend itself to an essentialist interpretation of the Chinese national culture and its proclivity for certain strategic behaviors.²

Against this historical background, scholarly debate on Chinese nationalism in the West reached a fever pitch in the 1990s. A flood of publications on the phenomenon appeared, as scholars from various disciplines addressed a multiplicity of themes and concerns. Some focused on the uniqueness of Chinese nationalism, especially on the blatant statism that set it apart from ethnically based nationalist aspirations (Fitzgerald, 1995; Friedman, 1995; Townsend, 1992; S. Zhao, 1997; Zheng, 1999). Others tried to discern important historical changes in Chinese nationalism first from the Maoist era to the reform period (Whiting, 1983) and then, during the latter period, from state-guided nationalism to popular nationalism (Barmé, 1995; Gries, 2001; Harris, 1997) and from an affirmative, we-oriented form of nationalism to an assertive nationalism negatively directed against outsiders (Whiting, 1983, 1995). Still others analyzed the implications of nationalism for China's relations with the outside world (Metzger and Myers, 1998; Nathan and Ross, 1997; Zhao Weiwen, 2000). In this burgeoning literature, Chinese nationalism acquired a long list of qualifying adjectives: confident, muscular, affirmative, assertive or aggressive, incoherent, nativistic and antitraditional, pragmatic, cultural, state-led, popular, "face," and so on. With the appearance of several best-sellers in the United States (Bernstein and Munro, 1997b; Gries, 1999; Kristof and WuDunn, 1994; Metzger and Myers, 1998; Mosher, 2000), this scholarly debate has been taken up by the general public.

*KEY ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING
THE DEBATE ON CHINESE NATIONALISM*

Underlying the contemporary debate on Chinese nationalism are three widely shared assumptions about the phenomenon: its anti-Western orientation, its statist character, and its cultural-historical ambitions. The first assumption is that nationalism in China is characterized by a form of “anti-ism” targeting the West (including Japan). In a seminal essay on the subject, James Townsend criticized the view, then prevalent, that modern Chinese nationalism was the negation of a traditional culturalism that was destroyed at the hands of the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Townsend, 1992). According to this thesis, Western domination was both the catalyst for the culturalism-to-nationalism transition and the object that fervent Chinese nationalists were resisting. Thus, from its beginnings, modern Chinese nationalism took on a basic anti-Western orientation, which was reinforced by subsequent conflicts between China and the West.

Virtually all commentators on Chinese nationalism touch on this anti-Western feature, implicitly or explicitly. Wang Gungwu writes that “nationalism was tied to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as the key to almost all of the political struggles of the 20th century” (G. Wang, 1995: 48), and Wang Jisi observes that Chinese nationalism stemmed from “a long-standing pride that was frustrated by Western and Japanese conquering of China in modern history” (J. Wang, 1994). Bruce Cumings bluntly asserts: “To be . . . a Chinese nationalist was to be anti-Japanese” (Cumings, 1999: 46). For Allen Whiting, nationalism in its “affirmative” form does not necessarily entail “a negative out-group referent,” but he points out that the events of 1989 catalyzed a brief period of assertive nationalism in China against the West (Whiting, 1995: 295). As abundant reports on the recent controversies over the embassy bombing in Yugoslavia and the disabled U.S. spy plane make clear, anti-Americanism has not been far below the surface of nationalistic uproars in China (Gries, 1999, 2001). In short, Chinese nationalism is constructed by many authors as a set of ideas, sentiments, and practices directed against the West.

A second assumption behind the debate on Chinese nationalism is its statist character—what some would simply call “state nationalism”

(Townsend, 1992; S. Zhao, 1997). The idea is that China is not, and has never been, a typical nation-state: that is, a nation made up of one ethnic group, which is governed politically by one state.³ In John Fitzgerald's words, "The state which *is* China has . . . no given nation. Instead the Chinese nation has been created and recreated in the struggle for state power, and it has ultimately been defined by the state as a reward of victory." Thus, the modern Chinese state itself "identified" the nation and "summoned" it into being (Fitzgerald, 1995: 76, 77).⁴ Professing to be a multinational state, the PRC engaged in myriad practices aimed at creating "a new Chinese nation that incorporates all of its nationalities" while at the same time focusing "political loyalty on the state" (Townsend, 1992: 117). The outcome might be called the Chinese "state-nation."

Given that the Chinese nation is derived from the state, nationalism in the Chinese context has logically been equated with the quest for state power. As Zheng Yongnian puts it, "Throughout modern Chinese history, building a strong state was a consistent theme of Chinese nationalism, and waves of nationalistic movements led to the formation of a 'strong State complex' among social and political groups" (Zheng, 1999: 17). The problem with this view is not that it intertwines the Chinese state and nationalism but that it assumes the former to be on a self-aggrandizing course for historical reasons. If the Chinese state seeks to restore its former empire, and if it then creates and manipulates nationalism to serve that goal, we of course should find the rise of Chinese nationalism alarming; it is easy to see why some authors would link Chinese nationalism to possible international aggression (S. Zhao, 2000: 1). But as I will suggest later, the first order of business for a non-Western state like China is usually less to amass power than to secure and affirm an identity as a nation-state within the framework of the Westphalian state system. Before the international community, such a nascent state must defend and legitimate its sovereign claim over a fixed territory.

Finally, a third assumption is that Chinese nationalism is built on powerful sentiments generated by the "century of shame and humiliation" (*bainian chiru*). "Every nationalism is unique," Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross have observed. "In contrast to the self-confident American nationalism of manifest destiny, Chinese nationalism is powered by feelings of national humiliation and pride" (Nathan and

Ross, 1997: 34).⁵ Another eminent scholar of China has asserted that the Chinese are unique among the former colonial or semicolonial peoples in that they “continue to dwell on the idea that they were years ago grossly and cruelly mistreated by others, and consequently they have a huge burden of humiliation that they feel they can live down by being aggressively self-righteous” (Pye, 1996: 12).

From these undoubtedly valid insights, some analysts extrapolate China’s ambition to restore its historical greatness (Mosher, 2000; Terrill, 2003). For Nathan and Ross, this preoccupation with the past leads to questions “about why China is weak and how it can be strong, about lost territory, and about reclaiming a leading position in the world” (Nathan and Ross, 1997: 34). Others have concluded that “its eagerness to redeem centuries of humiliating weakness are propelling it toward Asian hegemony” (Bernstein and Munro, 1997a: 19). Here Chinese nationalism is taken to represent a backward-looking ideology or strategy, keeping an eye on the past and obsessed with China’s historical empire and cultural superiority.

A standard Western narrative on Chinese nationalism today can therefore be summarized as follows: China prides itself as a historically powerful country with a distinguished civilization. Its decline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the face of Western and Japanese incursions indelibly etched shame in the Chinese people and triggered their widespread attempts to reform their political system. Key to this endeavor is the quest for a strong state. Over the past century and a half, various reform and revolutionary movements sought to build up the power of the state with the objective of retrieving China’s past glory. Chinese nationalism is thus state-led, anti-Western, and steeped in an acute sense of national humiliation; in a quest for world eminence, it seeks to restore China’s historical grandeur.

This narrative does indeed capture many aspects of Chinese nationalism, especially in the context of China’s troubled relationship with the West. But its focus on that context is also its main weakness. The problem is essentially twofold. First, an explication of Chinese nationalism based solely on China’s encounter with the West makes the concept less useful when China’s relationship with the non-Western countries is being considered. And second, looking inward for Chinese nationalism’s origins or motivations neglects important external sources of claims around which the state is able to mobilize

nationalistic sentiments. In the next section, I offer an alternative conception of Chinese nationalism that incorporates the international dimension.

*REALPOLITIK NATIONALISM?
A REINTERPRETATION OF CHINESE NATIONALISM*

Lucian Pye once declared that nationalism “was formed by people’s reactions to their own state and to the state system as a whole” (Pye, 1993: 109). His point was that nationalism refers to a set of sentiments and attitudes pertaining to the nation-state and should therefore be kept distinct from tribalism, ethnicity, shared cultural norms, and other kinds of primordial identities. Because of the problematic nature of China’s self-identity as a modern nation-state—Pye (1990: 58) has elsewhere called China a civilization pretending to be a state—he argues that the Chinese people not only had difficulties “adapting to the institutional norms and standards of the modern nation-state system” but also were unable to articulate a “clear and firm sense of the unique values and ideals that their nation should stand for in the world” (Pye, 1996: 12). Hence, he views modern Chinese nationalism as “confused,” “contentless,” and “incoherent.”

Some political scientists have begun to question this characterization, however. They suggest that China has perhaps adapted too well to the Westphalian norms of state sovereignty and adhered to too strict a notion of territorial integrity and international legitimacy in conducting its foreign relations. For example, Samuel Kim observes that “some wayward stranger from another planet, doing a content analysis of the annual UN debate on the state of the world, could easily take sovereignty as a quintessentially Chinese idea” (Kim, 1994: 428). In an influential article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, Thomas Christensen points out that “China may well be the high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world,” as its leaders and analysts think more like traditional balance-of-power theorists than do their Western counterparts (Christensen, 1996a: 37). More recently, Bates Gill and James Reilly claim to have detected some shifts in China’s position toward limited flexibility on the question of humanitarian intervention after the mid-1990s, but they are quick to add that China

continues to guard its sovereign prerogatives carefully (Gill and Reilly, 2000).

To be sure, China's adherence to such international principles as sovereignty may simply be instrumental and self-serving. Rhetoric is cheap. And it is really all that China *can* do in a world dominated by much stronger states. Besides, publicly espousing sovereignty makes China look good in the eyes of the numerous small countries whose legitimate and autonomous self-rule over a fixed national space remains precarious. But astute observers of Chinese politics have also noticed that this cheap rhetoric—a seemingly facile commitment to the Westphalian norms of the modern state system—may have seeped more deeply into the Chinese worldview than is commonly thought. It is plausible that the Chinese leadership has so internalized these norms that they have become part of the modern state's self-identity, around which nationalist ideas, sentiments, and practices can be mobilized.

Consider several recent episodes when nationalistic passions flared up in China. In 2001, the emergency landing on China's Hainan Island by a damaged American EP-3 reconnaissance plane generated an outcry among the Chinese because of the perceived violation of China's territorial sovereignty by the intrusive American spy plane. Two years earlier, when the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the anger felt by the Chinese was heightened because embassies are widely considered to be quintessential symbols of national sovereignty. And the spontaneous demonstrations that took place in the streets of Beijing to celebrate China's successful bid for the Olympics and its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 attest to an intense nationalistic pride over international recognition and acceptance.

Such events highlight the importance of external sources of Chinese nationalism: the Chinese people have internalized some of the prevailing ideas and norms in international politics, however selectively, which then become possible grounds of nationalistic mobilization by China's political leaders and intellectual elites. These ideas increasingly give content and thus coherence to Chinese nationalism. Take as another example a Chinese best-seller in the mid-1990s, *Zhongguo keyi shuobu*, or *China Can Say No* (Song, Zhang, and Qiao, 1996). It is widely regarded, by both its critics and enthusiasts, as

evinced a reactionary and emotive form of nationalism. What is most striking about the book is not so much its emphasis on past Chinese glory or on the historical and present-day injustices perpetrated by the West as its trenchant insistence on China's sovereign right to raise territorial claims with other countries, to take back Taiwan, to resist Western human rights campaigns, and to break out of the containment by the United States. Rather than falling back on some grandiose notions of Chinese cultural superiority, the authors suggest that China pursue a geopolitical alliance with Russia and other Asian countries to counterbalance the Americans and their ally in Asia, the Japanese.

We can detect hard-edged realist ideals and ideas about state power and geopolitics clothed in the garb of nationalism in such writings. I call this fusion of political realism and nationalistic aspirations "realpolitik nationalism." The German term *realpolitik* was first coined by Bismarck in the nineteenth century to refer to the stratagems of practical politics. Over time, it has acquired a number of related yet distinctive meanings—power politics among the nations, expansionist state policies for advancing the national interest, politics based on practical or material rather than on normative or moral considerations, and so on. Here, I define "realpolitik" broadly as a nation-state's engagement in power politics in the international arena; its practices range from defending the national interests (territorial integrity, sovereign independence, military prowess, etc.) against other nation-states to striving for dominance or relative gains over its adversaries.

Realpolitik and nationalism are often taken to represent two distinct kinds of historical forces shaping the destinies of nations: the former is characterized by level-headed and steadfast attention to national *interests*; the latter is evocative of powerful normative, and often irrational, *beliefs*. Conventional understandings of nationalism stress its ties to emotions, messianism, and collective identity-making. By contrast, realpolitik is reputed to exert pressure on the modern nation-states from the outside, compelling national leaders to pursue power and their interests in a rational and thus predictable manner. It is perhaps with this distinction in mind that Christensen welcomed the Chinese leaders' realpolitik policies as an improvement over outbursts of nationalism. After reviewing China's distrust of international norms and multilateral agreements, he concluded that "the Chinese elites' current *realpolitik* tendencies are infinitely preferable to the

messianic versions of Chinese nationalism that might come to the fore” (Christensen, 1996a: 52).

Paradoxical as the term “realpolitik nationalism” may sound, given the above discussion, it aptly fuses the seemingly separate forces of nationalism and power politics in contemporary Chinese politics. At its core, realpolitik nationalism stresses the importance of adhering to the reigning realist principles underlying the Westphalian interstate system. It is on the basis of these principles that Chinese nationalists mount their defense of the state’s sovereign rule over well-demarcated national space. Realpolitik nationalism is thus composed of a set of nationalist beliefs built around a fundamental set of realist ideas of power politics. In other words, it is an ideology that elevates realist considerations of power, articulated expressly in the ideas of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and international legitimacy, to the level of a national imperative for the country and thereby makes these very ideas the constitutive elements of a modern Chinese national identity. In this sense, realpolitik nationalists are the people who frame external threats in terms not of their country’s unique history, culture, ethnicity, or religion but of a breach of the prevailing norms in international society.

Realpolitik nationalism relies for its content on but it is not reducible to the power politics of realpolitik, because the “nationalism” half of the compound comes into play in two ways. First, it may prevent the logic of realpolitik—relentless pursuit of material power and interests unencumbered by ideational factors—from always playing out completely. In the case of territorial negotiations, for example, the symbolic status of national boundaries may appear more important to the Chinese nationalists than their actual on-the-ground demarcations. As I will suggest below, this was very much the case when the Chinese negotiated with the Burmese over the British-defined boundary in the early 1960s.

Second, conventional realpolitik encompasses elements of *strategic* power play that do not arouse nationalistic passions. For example, even though the Indian nuclear tests of 1998 dramatically altered regional power balance in Asia, they elicited a relatively mild reaction from China: they were perceived as a *security* challenge but not a major threat to the core Chinese identity as a sovereign state. To counterbalance India, China could conceivably pursue traditional strategies of

either augmenting its own nuclear arsenal or pursuing a closer alliance with India's known enemies in the region. But one would hardly expect a nationalistic backlash against the tipping of strategic balance (Guang, 2004: 302).

Animating China's realpolitik nationalism are three interlinked core ideas that organize the existing system among states: the territorial organization of the state, sovereignty (the exclusion of external authority), and international recognition or legitimacy (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; Krasner, 1999). States exist in bounded territories; within these territories, they set themselves up as the ultimate legitimate power to the exclusion of other authorities, domestic or international; they recognize each other to help ease international transactions and to further legitimate their domestic authority. These principles form the baseline expectations of national leaders as they organize and manage a modern state. In turn, these leaders also inculcate in the citizenry a similar set of values about territory, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Violations of one or more of these principles would then become grounds for collective grievances or backlash against the perceived perpetrators. The process of modern state-building guarantees that Chinese nationalism is infused with the ideas and ideals embedded in the modern state system.⁶ Lucian Pye was right when he characterized nationalism as made up of "people's reactions to the state and the *state-system*" (Pye, 1993: 109; emphasis mine). In an important way, Chinese nationalism is structured by ideas emanating from the international system.

First, China's national identity is rooted in a strong territorial imagination of the state. Chiang Kai-Shek, arguably China's most ardent nationalist, once declared: "With regard to her geographical configuration, China's mountain ranges and river basins form a self-contained unit. . . . The Chinese nation has lived and developed within these river basins, and there is no area that can be split up or separated from the rest, and therefore, no areas that can become an independent unit" (Chiang, 1947: 35). Chiang, like the Communists after him, could not conceive of China independent of these territorial features.⁷ A spatial construction has several advantages for a multiethnic and internally differentiated state: It avoids an obviously ethnocultural reference (which was at one time the basis for China's anti-Manchu nationalist

revolution).⁸ It constructs a we-ness that transcends regional and class differences. Best of all, it accords with the prevailing norm of territoriality (e.g., territorial integrity) at the heart of the modern state system.⁹ It is thus not surprising that territorial disputes become potent occasions for the outpourings of nationalistic rhetoric and emotions even when Western countries are not the main adversaries.

Second, sovereign control is an important leitmotif of Chinese nationalism. Samuel Kim finds that China “has remained compulsively sovereignty-bound on most basic global issues and problems,” to such an extent that he regards sovereignty as “the lingua franca of its international comportment” (Kim, 1994: 428). Over the years, the Chinese leaders have come to embrace an absolutist notion of sovereignty, with watertight boundaries and internal control far more complete than what had ever existed before or appear likely to be present anytime soon (Krasner, 1999). Viewed in this light, China’s sovereignty-conscious nationalism seems to be inspired more by a futuristic vision of what a fully sovereign Chinese state *ought* to be like than by a nostalgia for the country’s grandiose past. In other words, Chinese nationalism is driven as much if not more by the desire to conform to highly idealized global norms as by feelings of national humiliation and pride issuing from over a century ago.

Finally, modern Chinese nationalists desire international legitimacy.¹⁰ They clamor to increase China’s power in the United Nations. They undertake costly foreign aid programs to other countries to improve China’s image and strengthen its international position (Zhu, 2001: 10-14). They take pride in Chinese sports teams winning international honors, and they cheer for China’s successful bid to host the Olympics. They question why China has not produced a novelist or scientist worthy of the Nobel Prize, which many see as the pinnacle of global legitimation. Although divided among themselves on the implications of WTO membership, they press for more concessions from the West rather than advocating a complete withdrawal from the international trade system. They feel slighted when China is not treated as an equal in important international matters. They take offense when they perceive external pressure to control China’s domestic policies. They yearn for “getting on track with the world” (*yu shijie jiegui*), albeit often more on China’s terms than on others’.

In short, their quest is for a China that can “stand up as an independent power in the forest of nations” (*zili yu shijie minzu zhi lin*).¹¹

*CHINESE NATIONALISM IN THE ABSENCE OF THE WEST:
TERRITORY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY*

To illustrate the usefulness of this notion of Chinese nationalism guided by realpolitik ideas and ideals, I turn now to two conflicts that did not involve a direct confrontation between China and a Western power or Japan, but nevertheless sparked an upsurge of Chinese nationalism. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the notion of realpolitik nationalism has the advantage of weaning us from a Western-centric approach that emphasizes the impact of China’s historical experience, and thus makes it possible for us to consider Chinese nationalism in non-Western contexts. Realpolitik nationalism also enables us to explore the international sources of ideas and ideals that are then pressed into the service of nationalistic causes. Since my main interest in this essay is conceptual, my empirical discussion here will necessarily be brief and illustrative.

My two test cases are China’s confrontation with India in the 1962 border war and its territorial dispute with Southeast Asian countries over the Spratly Islands. Both touch on all issues mentioned above that anchor Chinese nationalism, but I will use the former to examine the role of sovereignty and legitimacy in China’s reaction, and the latter to discuss the Chinese territorial imagination of the nation.

First, the Sino-Indian border conflict. In 1962, the PRC fought a brief but bitter war with India in what was the first violent border clash in its history. The war ended in a lopsided victory for China, but it did great damage to the country’s international standing and sent bilateral relations into a deep freeze for the next few decades. One of China’s ostensible objectives in the conflict, as many analysts quoting Mao would put it, was to “keep the border peaceful for at least thirty years to come” (Wang Hongwei, 1998: 230). It is questionable whether China accomplished that goal, given that skirmishes on the border continued in the 1960s and 1970s, and a major confrontation between the two sides was averted only at the last minute in the mid-1980s (Wang

Hongwei, 1998: 266-73; Zhao Weiwen, 2000: 290-95). However, the Chinese government did achieve two other purposes by the war: consolidating China's sovereign control over Tibet and de-legitimizing India's claim of the McMahon Line as the borderline.

The causes of the 1962 war are complex and should not detain us here.¹² I am interested instead in illuminating the importance of underlying notions of sovereignty and legitimacy as constitutive elements of Chinese nationalism. As the dispute with India over the border unfolded in the late 1950s and early 1960s, two factors besides its growing sensitivity to territorial loss appear to have led to a hardening of China's position. One was the Tibet question, and the other was India's refusal to negotiate on the McMahon Line.

As many analysts have pointed out, the Tibetan rebellion in 1959 and its subsequent suppression by China was a turning point in Sino-Indian relations (Bianxiezu, 1994, chap. 1; Maxwell, 1970; Norbu, 1997). The PRC government staked out its sovereignty claims on Tibet early in the 1950s: "Tibet is an integral part of Chinese territory . . . [and] the regional autonomy . . . is an autonomy within the confines of Chinese sovereignty" ("Sino-Indian Exchange," 1950: 9). From the beginning, it was wary of Jawaharlal Nehru's proposal for a "special" relationship between India and Tibet, because no such relationship was permissible under the modern nation-state system. It was greatly disturbed by Nehru's occasional assertion that China had *suzerainty* rather than sovereignty over the territory. Toward the end of the 1950s, the Chinese came to interpret Nehru's intentions increasingly through the lens of imperialism. As Premier Zhou Enlai put it to a foreign delegation in 1959:

Here is a strange phenomenon: Tibet is Chinese territory. But they [the Indians] set out against reform in Tibet, which makes the whole issue one of interference in our domestic affairs and a violation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. They hope to keep Tibet in a permanently backward condition and make it a "buffer state." This is what guides their action, and this is also at the core of Sino-Indian dispute. [Zhou, 1990: 268-69]

From the viewpoint of Zhou and his fellow leaders, India's challenge to China's sovereignty over Tibet had backed them into a corner; to

escape it, they felt they had to exact a strike commensurate with the gravity of the situation.

Another Indian stance that drew a nationalistic response from China was its hard-line attitude toward the McMahon Line. Drawn by the British in a tripartite conference involving British India, China, and Tibet in 1914, the line was intended to mark the eastern border between China and India, but its international legal status was somewhat ambiguous, to say the least. In the years leading up to 1962, India insisted that the McMahon Line was the valid boundary between the two countries, while China disputed its legitimacy on the grounds that no Chinese central government had ever acceded to it. Zhou Enlai made this point in one of his letters to Nehru in 1959: "The so-called McMahon Line was a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet region of China and has never been recognized by any Chinese central government and is therefore decidedly illegal" (Zhou, 1959: 7). The irony of the whole matter was that China's categorical rejection of the McMahon Line may have been motivated less by a desire to revise the physical boundary it represented than by a determination to alter its symbolic status. The Chinese rhetoric at the time strongly suggested that the legitimacy of the treaty that produced the McMahon Line was the main point of contention. Under such circumstances, a process of renegotiation might well have satisfied China by conferring legitimacy to a new border, even if that border was not in fact significantly altered from the existing line.

This is speculation; no one can ever be sure if India's simple consent to renegotiating the border would have appeased China and thus averted the war in 1962. But the example of the successful Sino-Burmese renegotiation of Burma's McMahon Line, which was similarly contested in the 1950s, is instructive. Here China protested openly and loudly about the old border's illegitimacy, but emerged from negotiations with Burma essentially affirming the existing demarcation. However, by publicly repudiating the "old" border and entering a process of renegotiation, China could declare that the new boundary was the result of an agreement between two sovereign countries rather than the validation of a historically unjust British fiat. The renegotiation itself might be likened to a form of ritual cleansing—a process that somehow managed to restore China's control even though its

newly negotiated border was physically indistinguishable from the old.¹³ Nehru's hard-line stance on negotiation denied China the possibility of such ritual cleansing, thereby challenging a pillar of Chinese nationalism—its quest for legitimation.

The scholarly literature on the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962 has paid ample attention to the role of Indian nationalism but has made little mention of Chinese nationalism (Hoffmann, 1990; Whiting, 1975). This omission is somewhat understandable, given that the dominant notions of Chinese nationalism were developed to explain China's reaction against the West. As the episodes of EP-3 spy plane and embassy bombing decades later demonstrate, China's protest against the United States was readily cast as a nationalistic backlash, whereas its action against India was not interpreted through the same lens. Yet in the negotiations and events leading up to the war in 1962, Chinese leaders made repeated use of such terms as "national pride" (*minzu zihao gan*), "national dignity" (*minzu zi zunxin*), and "national feelings" (*minzu ganqing*).

At the time, there was also limited but targeted mobilization of the Chinese domestic public opinion in support of the government's position. The Nationalist government in Taiwan even set aside its anti-Communist ideology to support mainland China on the border question. My favorite example is a letter to the *New York Times* written by two former Nationalist government officials, one of whom was Li Zongren, the former acting president. They declared of the border war: "The Chinese, including those not on the mainland, feel that the issue has transcended mere ideological differences: it has become something involving their territorial sovereignty as well as their national integrity and honor. . . . [T]his boundary question is not one of political ideology: it is one of territorial sovereignty for the entire Chinese people" (Li and Chang, 1962: E10). Here, realpolitik nationalism transcended the cold war division.

My second example showcasing a territorial dispute is the ongoing disagreement over the Spratly Islands (which the Chinese call the Nansha Islands). The archipelago consists of hundreds of small islands and coral reefs in the South China Sea, claimed or occupied in varying degrees by China (and Taiwan), Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. Covering a vast area, it controls important

shipping routes and contains rich oil and gas reserves. In the 1970s and 1980s, China's main quarrel was with Vietnam, and it escalated to an open military clash in March 1988 (Garver, 1992). Since then, China has taken two new tacks: on the one hand, it has directly engaged the sovereignty claims of other disputants besides Vietnam (mainly the Philippines); on the other, it has emphasized joint development opportunities with other littoral countries (Chen, 1994). But it continues to affirm its public position that the Spratly Islands have always been, and are still, China's rightful territory (*guyou lingtu*).

China's dispute with Vietnam and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands has yet to produce a widespread popular backlash on the streets, in part because little has been reported on these conflicts. Instead, much of the action has occurred on the diplomatic front, with occasional armed skirmishes punctuating the diplomatic process. Scholarly books have also been produced to validate China's nationalistic claims (Zhongguo kexueyuan, 1991; Wang Huijun and Yang Shirong, 1996). In the 1990s, the nationalist dynamic inside China manifested itself mainly in legislative activities such as its 1996 declaration establishing baselines for measuring the width of the territorial sea and the 1998 adoption of a legal framework to claim rights over a 200-mile-wide exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf. In pressing its sovereignty claims, China used arguments relying both on history (e.g., the Nansha Islands historically have belonged to China) and on international law (e.g., the Chinese claim is widely accepted by other nations and is in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) (Renmin ribao pinglunyan, 1988: 6; "Waijiaobu fayanren fabiao tanhua," 2000: 4). Throughout this process of claim and counterclaim, territorial integrity was held to be of paramount importance.

Taiwan has largely supported the PRC's claims regarding the Spratly Islands (Wang Huijun and Yang Shirong, 1996). We saw much the same behavior during the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962. Such a united front presented by the adversaries again suggests that territory (*lingtu*) transcends political differences once it is linked to perceived national interests. One mainland author exhorted his Taiwanese counterparts: "Both the mainland and Taiwan are parties to the dispute on Spratly Islands. [We] thus have the responsibility to coordinate [strategies] and to unite against the foreign claimants in order to

protect our sovereignty and national interests” (Wang Huijun and Yang Shirong, 1996: 587). Scholars from the Chinese Academy of Science echoed this sentiment: “The Spratly Islands belong not only to the mainland Chinese, but to all the Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao” (Zhongguo kexueyuan, 1991: 36).

In the 1990s, China became increasingly conscious of the importance of oceanic resources, but the nationalist imagination continued to subordinate the islands’ material utility to a kind of territorial fascination. A lengthy article in *Renmin ribao* (Liang, 1999), for example, called China a “great oceanic nation” whose boundaries should be marked by the baselines of the territorial sea rather than by its continental border. Thus, according to the author, China’s “national territory should really be 12.6 million square kilometers. And this is the new meaning assigned to ‘territory’ by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea” (Liang, 1999: 8).¹⁴ An influential textbook on the geography of China’s national security agrees with this definition: “A country’s sovereign territory consists of its primary land area, but also its oceanic territory (*haiyang guotu*). . . . [China’s oceanic territories] cover areas in the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. They are no doubt at the core of China’s national security interests” (Shen and Lu, 2001: 80). The authors develop a concentric model of China’s national interests: its sovereign territory (including its oceanic interests) is at the core, and its “inner” and “outer” layers of interests radiate outward to China’s relations with neighboring countries and beyond (Shen and Lu, 2001: 79-83).

These examples suggest that Chinese nationalism is a potent force even in the absence of any collision with the West. They also illustrate the argument that nationalism in China emanates from many different sources, including the realpolitik ideas of territory, sovereignty, and legitimacy acquired and internalized in the process of building a modern nation-state. This is not to say that realpolitik nationalism is unrelated to China’s experience with the West. Modern Chinese nationalism originated in an age when Western powers repeatedly seized China’s territory and compromised its sovereignty. Given this historical context, it is not surprising that “the development of Chinese nationalism . . . has given sovereignty and territorial integrity intense symbolic value” (Downs and Saunders, 1999: 114). But the concept

of realpolitik nationalism enables us to look beyond the historically formed cultural and political attitudes inside China for plausible explanations of behavior that we call nationalistic.

CHINESE NATIONALISM, REALPOLITIK-STYLE

Conventional understandings of Chinese nationalism often portray it as anti-Western. They focus on Chinese nationalists' obsession with a powerful state and on their ambition to recover the past glory of China's historical empire. Such understandings clearly underlie the antipathy and fear in the West toward the rise of nationalism in China in recent years. As China's economic power grows, Chinese nationalism is believed to have acquired a material base from which it could wreak havoc on the existing international order. At its most benign, the conventional wisdom goes, the rise of nationalism could mean an unruly China unwilling to subject itself to prevailing international norms; at its worst, it could turn China into an expansionist power fixated on restoring its historical empire.

Analysts of Chinese nationalism often derive their observations about the phenomenon from studying China's interaction with the West. In this sense, their account tends to be overly Western-centric. Intensely interested in nationalism's historical origin, they also tend to look only inside China for ideas, practices, and motivations structuring Chinese nationalism, be these the experience of "the century of humiliation," China's glorious cultural reign in the past, or the pursuit of wealth and power at home. I have focused instead on the international or external sources of ideas and ideals that have informed the Chinese nationalist thinking, emphasizing three sets of ideas emanating from the modern interstate system: territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and international legitimacy. To be sure, what I call here realpolitik nationalism—Chinese nationalism that is informed by and structured around such ideas—and the emotive nationalism based on culture and history that other scholars discuss are by no means mutually exclusive. In approaching the phenomenon of nationalism, we must be attentive not only to the rhetoric but also to the practice of key nationalist figures and their supporters.

Realpolitik nationalism is not necessarily directed against the West, although it certainly may be mobilized by the state elites to counter Western pressures. Its power derives not from citizens' depth of feelings about their nation's history or their ethnic identity, but from the key ideas in the international society. It focuses on preserving the nation-state and the nation-state system, rather than on engaging in aggrandizement aimed at recapturing past glories. Contrary to the view that they are a menace to the existing international order, the Chinese nationalists espouse an ideology that may well be in sync with the prevailing norms of international politics. This may be why many international relations scholars increasingly recognize China as among the most orthodox defenders of the Westphalian system and "as perhaps the most unabashed practitioner of power politics in the post-Cold War setting" (Kim, 1996: 22). On this account, the challenge that Chinese nationalism presents to the world is not its historical or cultural orientation but its relentless pursuit of power politics according to an idealized construction of the very organizing principles of the modern interstate system.

NOTES

1. China's shift in rhetoric may also explain why many people see the rise of nationalism as a *new* phenomenon for China in the 1990s. A statement by Wu Jiexiang, a former senior official in Beijing quoted by Kristof, supports this interpretation: "Chinese nationalism is something that the Communist Party started after Tiananmen. They use nationalism to replace communism. They invented it. There was some in the 1980s, but it has become much stronger since the 1990s" (Kristof, 2001: 41). In another column, Kristof writes that "the latest surge in nationalism is the result in particular of 'patriotic' campaigns planned by President Jiang since 1990 as a way of knitting together the country, of providing a new 'glue' for China to replace the discredited ideology of Communism" (Kristof, 2002: A23).

2. Johnston carefully avoids the Orientalist discourse that frames other "cultures" as necessarily implying a "difference" from the West. He shows, for example, that historically derived and culturally based realism, or what he calls "cultural realism," may well exhibit the same rank-ordered strategic preferences across national or cultural contexts.

3. With respect to the fundamental incongruity between national composition (nation) and political constitution (the state), China is the norm rather than the exception. Dittmer and Kim (1993) observe that practically no countries today conform strictly to the model of a nation-state in its purest form.

4. The process that Fitzgerald describes may not be unique to China. It is useful to recall Hobsbawm's observation that "nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round" (Hobsbawm, 1990: 10).

5. For a more recent popular statement of this assumption, see Nicholas Kristof's January 2002 column in the *New York Times* where he laments the country's "booming, aggrieved, chip-on-the-shoulder nationalism" and claims that it "has deep roots in China and results in part from the battering that the country suffered at foreign hands over the last 200 years" (Kristof, 2002: A23).

6. On the diffusion of ideas regarding the nation-state as a general phenomenon, see Meyer et al., 1997.

7. According to the historian Michael Hunt, the Chinese Communist leaders skirted the question of territorial claims in the 1930s but later asserted them more strongly, especially in private (Hunt, 1996: 222-23).

8. In this context, it is interesting to note a recent debate inside China as to whether to name as "national heroes" (*minzu yingxiong*) some of the historical Han figures who fought other ethnicities in China. According to reports, revised history textbooks for high school students will no longer list Yue Fei (1103-1142) and Wen Tianqiang (1236-1283) as national heroes, because they fought against Jurchens and Mongolians, both minority nationalities in China today. But Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and Zheng Chenggong (1624-1662), who fought the Japanese and the Dutch, respectively, would retain the title (see Kuhn, 2003).

9. John Vasquez has argued that "it is territoriality, the tendency for humans to occupy and, if necessary, defend territoriality, rather than the struggle for power, that is the key to understanding interstate wars" (Vasquez, 1993: 124).

10. Most discussions of nationalism relate it to domestic legitimacy, arguing that political elites mobilize it to distract the masses from domestic problems and to shore up their control of the society (see Downs and Saunders, 1999).

11. To be sure, the themes of victimhood and xenophobia (especially with American and Japanese targets) can be found in numerous publications that may be considered as belonging in the nationalist tradition. In the 1990s, a series of articles on nationalism appeared in such Chinese magazines and journals as *Dushu (Reading)*, *Zhongguo wenhua (Chinese Culture)*, *Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management)*, and Hong Kong-based *Ershiyi shiji (Twenty-first Century)*. For a sample of books in this genre, see Fang, Wang, and Song, 1999; He, 1996; Song, Zhang, and Qiao, 1996. On the changing attitudes of the middle-class Chinese toward international institutions, see Johnston, 2004.

12. This section draws on Guang (2004), which examines in detail the reasons behind China's divergent reactions to India during the border conflict in 1962 and during the latter's nuclear tests in 1998.

13. Daphne Whittam, who studied the Sino-Burmese border negotiation, described this process: "Once the Burmese raised the issue of boundary violation, it would appear that the Chinese became determined first, to establish China's righteousness in the eyes of the world, second, to teach the Burmese that China was a great power that could not be called to account and, finally, to demonstrate that despite everything, China could be magnanimous, especially to a small neighbor who followed the 'right' path" (Whittam, 1961: 182). Dawa Norbu has made a similar point (Norbu, 1997: 1087-88).

14. The commonly cited official figure for the area of China's territory is 9.6 million square kilometers (Liang, 1999).

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