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A state-led nationalism: The patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China

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Abstract

The decline of Communism after the end of the post-Cold War has seen the rise of nationalism in many parts of the former Communist world. In countries such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, nationalism was pursued largely from the bottom up as ethnic and separatist movements. Some observers also take this bottom-up approach to find the major cause of Chinese nationalism and believe that “the nationalist wave in China is a spontaneous public reaction to a series of international events, not a government propaganda.” (Zhang, M. (1997) The new thinking of Sino-US relations. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 6(14), 117–123). They see Chinese nationalism as “a belated response to the talk of containing China among journalists and politicians” in the United States and “a public protest against the mistreatment from the US in the last several years.” (Li, H. (1997) China talks back:

anti-Americanism or nationalism? *Journal of Contemporary China*, **6**(14), 153–160). This position concurs with the authors of nationalistic books in China, such as *The China That Can Say No: Political and Sentimental Choice in the Post-Cold War Era* (Song, Q., Zhang Z., Qiao B. (1996) *Zhongguo Keyi Shuo Bu (The China That Can Say No)*. Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe. Beijing), which called upon Chinese political elites to say no to the US, and argue that the rise of nationalism was not a result of the official propaganda but a reflection of the state of mind of a new generation of Chinese intelligentsia in response to the foreign pressures in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, Chinese nationalism was mainly reactive sentiments to foreign suppressions in modern history, and this new wave of nationalist sentiment also harbored a sense of wounded national pride and an anti-foreign (particularly the US and Japan) resentment. Many Chinese intellectuals gave voice to a rising nationalistic discourse in the 1990s (Zhao, S. (1997) Chinese intellectuals' quest for national greatness and nationalistic writing in the 1990s. *The China Quarterly*, **152**, 725–745). However, Chinese nationalism in the 1990s was also constructed and enacted from the top by the Communist state. There were no major military threats to China's security after the end of the Cold War. Instead, the internal legitimacy crisis became a grave concern of the Chinese Communist regime because of the rapid decay of Communist ideology. In response, the Communist regime substituted performance legitimacy provided by surging economic development and nationalist legitimacy provided by invocation of the distinctive characteristics of Chinese culture in place of Marxist–Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. As one of the most important maneuvers to enact Chinese nationalism, the Communist government launched an extensive propaganda campaign of patriotic education after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. The patriotic education campaign was well-engineered and appealed to nationalism in the name of patriotism to ensure loyalty in a population that was otherwise subject to many domestic discontents. The Communist regime, striving to maintain authoritarian control while Communist ideology was becoming obsolete in the post-Cold War era, warned of the existence of hostile international forces in the world perpetuating imperialist insult to Chinese pride. The patriotic education campaign was a state-led nationalist movement, which redefined the legitimacy of the post-Tiananmen leadership in a way that would permit the Communist Party's rule to continue on the basis of a non-Communist ideology. Patriotism was thus used to bolster CCP power in a country that was portrayed as besieged and embattled. The dependence on patriotism to build support for the government and the patriotic education campaign by the Communist propagandists were directly responsible for the nationalistic sentiment of the Chinese

propagandists were directly responsible for the nationalistic sentiment of the Chinese people in the mid-1990s. This paper focuses on the Communist state as the architect of nationalism in China and seeks to understand the rise of Chinese nationalism by examining the patriotic education campaign. It begins with an analysis of how nationalism took the place of the official ideology as the coalescing force in the post-Tiananmen years. It then goes on to examine the process, contents, methods and effectiveness of the patriotic education campaign. The conclusion offers a perspective on the instrumental aspect of state-led nationalism.



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Keywords

the communist party of China; Chinese nationalism; patriotism; propaganda; communist ideology

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