

Superficial, Arrogant Nationalism

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During the past year, the book *Unhappy China* has made a deep impression on Chinese society. It was a topic of discussion on more than 2 million websites within a few weeks of its release, and to date over 1 million copies of the book have been printed. The 44 essays that comprise *Unhappy China* preach a lofty, vainly arrogant and radical form of nationalism, urging the country to take a more aggressive stance against the outside world. The authors portray China as a perpetual victim whose time for revenge and dominance has come. According to one contributor, Huang Jisu, “If the world’s capitalist system is thought of as a boxing arena, our short to mid-term goal is to knock down the champion, while the ultimate goal is to smash the boxing arena itself.” To realize this goal, another author states that “the future tasks of the People’s Liberation Army will definitely not be what is currently called national defense, but should follow China’s core economic interests.” Other essays remind the reader that punishment and retaliation are norms in international exchange and that China should employ “anger-venting diplomacy” because tolerance is not the mentality of a mature and capable power.

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There are many explanations for why this book's influence has been so great, including the eye-catching title and a meticulous marketing campaign. Most importantly though, it strikes at the question many Chinese hold: how do modern China's citizens fit in the new global order? This question has seized people's hearts because the past thirty years of reform and opening have undeniably made China a more powerful actor. After 100 years of humiliation, the Chinese people now face the issue of how to reposition themselves in the world.

MANUFACTURED ENEMIES

Since the onset of the financial crisis, Western countries have been more inclined to ask favors of China, have displayed humbler attitudes, have hoped for friendly relations and have achieved consensus on emphasizing peaceful development. Thus, the nationalist upwelling surrounding *Unhappy China* does not seem to be built on

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the traditional model of reactionary Chinese nationalism, which is periodically activated by reminders of past humiliation and historical grievances. For instance, the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the collision of American and Chinese jets in 2001 both incited waves of nationalist sentiment after the perceived humiliations. Such outbursts of nationalism have generally been short lived, disappearing as soon as the external world's provocations faded away. However, the new nationalism represented by *Unhappy China* is part of a more sustained dissatisfaction with the outside world.

The crucial point with this new nationalism is the belief that China needs an “external enemy”. This is considered a basic condition for China's existence and development. The authors of *Unhappy China* argue that, “A species without external environmental pressures will definitely degenerate.” They also believe that China does not currently have any “pressure to choose,” so “everyone feels good and can muddle along, but this cannot prevent decline.” By extension, if this external pressure is absent, obviously it must be created. It is this logic that is both terrifying and dangerous, as it is not far from the oppression of the weak by the strong inherent in ethnocentrism and chauvinism. This arrogant nationalism diverges from normal, healthy nationalism's most central quality: self-defense. It clearly exceeds the rational boundaries of “don't attack if not attacked,” and calls for actively and vigorously instigating outward challenges, seeing these challenges as premises for the nation's existence and development.

The nation faced far greater external pressures in the first decades of its existence than during the time since reform and opening up. In the former period, the idea of “philosophical struggle” and “boundless joy from human struggle” flooded both the domestic and international political atmosphere. However, China was not prosperous or powerful then. In contrast, China is currently in a sustained period of peaceful development with very low external pressure, and attended by a vigorous

pace of economic growth reaching an average annual rate of 10 percent for the past 20 years. The “new patriots” in China are uncomfortable with the relative ease of the past couple decades and the wealth accrued during this period. They maintain that China will not progress with continued amity with the outside world, but with greater strife and tension.

HEADS HELD HIGH

Chinese people suffered a long 100 years of humiliation at the hands of the great powers. During this time, they were unable to protect the dignity of their country. With China now rising, there is a tendency to react strongly to every perceived injustice, and there are now numerous rallying cries for the Chinese people to “Hold our heads high!” Other countries that have suffered humiliation and then unexpectedly rose up to become great powers, such as India, have also exhibited this kind of social psychology. This kind of atmosphere is fertile ground for the style of nationalism advocated by *Unhappy China*. In these conditions, whoever raises the flag of nationalism higher and brighter will gain a greater audience.

The authors of *Unhappy China* recognize that the peoples’ long-repressed desire to “hold their heads high” is a force that can be mobilized. Thus, they attempt to form a kind of mutual engagement with the Chinese people and work together in the name of radical nationalism. For example, the book points out that “China’s next step in the modernization process is to decide that it will undertake a kind of trade war with the West, propped up by the military,” and that China will break ties with Western countries. All of this suggests that the authors are attempting to unite the people’s simple emotion of pride with a more actively offensive “new nationalism”.

In most instances, the growth of national pride is normal, natural and rational, and can be used as an asset by the nation. However, if it is guided by an erroneous and radical nationalism that is used to seek outside enemies, then the ultimate effect can be quite malign. The essence of nationalist thinking involves strong emotions and passions, and thus can easily be used as kindling for incitement by extremists and twisted to fit their own purposes. It’s exactly for this reason that there is often an intimate bond between superficial, arrogant nationalism and angry youth.

YOUNG AND UNHAPPY

Unhappy China has especially resonated with young people. The rapid rise in living standards since reform and opening has greatly increased the people’s material expectations as they strive to gain the basic status symbols of the modern era. However, a society in transition often faces a basic and unavoidable contradiction; namely that the speed of development for economic and material conditions lags far behind the demands and expectations of society. This is particularly acute among the youth. This is evidenced by that fact that social dissatisfaction has actually grown, despite the great social progress made since reform began. A mass psychology of “relative

frustration” has arisen and diffused throughout the population. At the same time, the corruption, social injustice and expanding income gaps which have accompanied social change have exacerbated social distress. These mass feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction require venting through safe and effective social channels. Unfortunately, nationalism has become a common valve for such expression.

The angry youth culture expressed by radical nationalism is connected to the culture of radical left-wing politics. Although the current generation of youth is far removed from the Cultural Revolution and has absolutely no direct experience with

According to radical nationalists, peaceful coexistence is harmful to China's interests.

the hardships of that time, their mode of thinking is based on a similar ideology, particularly in its emphasis on philosophical struggle between “good” internal influences and “evil” external forces. Yet these angry youth have not consciously recognized this connection. Because the culture of radical politics is so ingrained, the decline of the dominant influence of leftist ways of thinking will be much slower than economic change. The outdated leftist content that remains in our education system and the way the older generations conduct themselves will inadvertently and imperceptibly continue to influence the younger generations.

Some may still ask, why are China's angry youth currently looking at the world in this way? Over the past 30 years, Chinese people have enjoyed the results of global economic development together with the rest of the world, so why do angry youth still deal with international issues in a bigoted and bellicose manner? This stems from the Chinese people's lack of confidence in China's standing and its actual progress. When people distrust their immediate surroundings, they will see the external world in the same way. It is for exactly this reason that China can only move towards true civility by beginning to address China's own problems first.

NATIONALISM GROWS OLDER, NOT WISER

Unhappy China is reminiscent of another best-seller from 13 years ago, *China Can Say No*. In general, it can be said that the positions on nationalism in *China Can Say No* and *Unhappy China* are of the same origin. However, the former is characterized by a more reactionary nationalism, while the latter is distinguished by a more actively offensive style of nationalism. *Unhappy China* seeks to take the simple nationalistic expression of “holding heads high” and apply it to other ends. The book frequently mentions “great objectives” which are based on the idea that the universal law of existence among nation-states is not harmonious coexistence, but survival of the fittest. Harmonious and peaceful coexistence is seen by the new nationalists as a scholarly invention and harmful to the national interest. As for the “great objectives” and how to achieve them, the book states that China should “do business while holding the sword.” In doing so, “we will gain access to more natural resources, we will manage our economy better, offer political guidance to others, and we will lead this world.” As for the means, the book emphasizes a Machiavellian outlook in which the

ends justify the means, and anything can be done in order to achieve its lofty goals.

If one likens the nationalism in *China Can Say No* to a primary student inexperienced in the ways of the world and susceptible to change, then today's *Unhappy China* is a middle school student who has just grown a bit of muscle and wants to find someone to spar with. It is more dangerous than the nationalism of 13 years ago and also more challenging because though it is only an adolescent, it is full of outdated poetic dreams. It is inexperienced in the ways of the world, but is full of fight. It always wants to make trouble in the neighborhood, and it differs with a young child in that it really can cause trouble for the parents (the government) and its neighbors (the international community). Problems can be created unnecessarily in the most accident-prone stretches of China's long road to transformation. If the nationalism in *Unhappy China* prevails, small incidents in international negotiations could easily become big issues and harmonious coexistence may transform into a zero sum game.

This nationalism's irrational enthusiasm is a double-edged sword. From the perspective of those in power, on the one hand, it is a political resource that can be used to mobilize the masses in support of a national cause. This is especially true when a country faces an external threat or in situations in which the nation lacks ideological resources. On the other hand, once lofty sounding nationalism gains a hold over the discourse within society, radicals may distort any moderate government positions as yielding, capitulating or even treasonous—even though they are objectively in the interest of the people. This could pose a great challenge to the government's authority and threaten the legitimacy of its rule.

Looking at China's current history, one can see the disconnect that was created as the long-term humiliation of China ended and the nation began to strengthen. The former attitude remains prevalent yet the latter has given the people increased confidence to express themselves more assertively. This is exacerbated by the fact that people of large countries often harbor illusions of grandeur, interpreting the nation's vast land area and population as signs of superior strength. But China has been weak for a long period, and its national strength is still a long way from becoming truly formidable in a comprehensive sense. The contradiction created between insufficient national strength and an abnormally high level of self-confidence can lead a country towards disastrous pitfalls. Generally speaking, citizens of small countries have a more modest state of mind and are more practical due to their limited power and influence. This phenomenon is fertile ground for the radical nationalists of large countries as they create the national expectations that often exceed actual abilities. Thus, whenever China is in crisis, lofty nationalism has an especially strong influence among the people.

MITIGATING FACTORS

Even though radical nationalism exists in today's China, it is unlikely to dominate mainstream thinking in the future. In fact, the great trend in China's nationalism

is a move towards rationality and moderation. The first reason for this is the rise of China's middle class. The middle class has already become the main current and nucleus of Chinese society. It is a steadying force that dislikes extremes and holds moderate political views. Compared to the nationalism of the 1990s, the great majority of China's middle class has made obvious progress in their ability to reflect on things rationally. Of course, the possibility still exists that segments of the middle class could be swept up by radical nationalism due to economic crises or social instability. However, the likelihood of this is reduced by the growing maturity of China's government and its experience with the double-edged nature of nationalism. It has recognized that as soon as radical nationalism envelops society, rationality and harmony are often at risk. If it spirals out of control, nationalism can lead to a chain of reactionary events, threatening the leadership's ability to govern. Thus those in power have made a conscious effort to encourage moderate and rational attitudes.

A further mitigating factor is the international community's growing respect toward China. Since joining the World Trade Organization, China has become more deeply enmeshed in the global system. As for international relations, the cooperative attitude displayed by the West has weakened some of China's past feelings of opposition and conflict towards the outside world. It can be seen that communication and understanding among countries has already had a positive effect on China. An open environment helps the Chinese increase their understanding of the outside world and mitigates foreign criticism as well.

Finally, the increase in China's national power has also raised the nation's confidence. As this process continues, its national mentality will become more and more moderate, its ideology of grievances reduced and the reactions to perceived wrongs not so excessive. People will realize that there is no need to rely on historically aggrieved nationalism for China's source of strength. Moreover, truly mature great powers do not flaunt their strength, but are generous and dignified. As China goes forward, it must remember that moderation, not radical nationalism, is the essence of being a responsible great power. Though *Unhappy China* is enjoying popularity at the moment, its message is too shallow to withstand the tide of history and its words will soon be washed from the pages and forgotten. 🇨🇳