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# From Proletariat to Past Glory: Nationalism's Evolution in Modern China

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From Proletariat to Past Glory:  
Nationalism's Evolution in Modern China

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### **Abstract**

Despite the rapid success of its growth over the past four decades, the People's Republic of China is facing new political, economic and societal problems. In these turbulent times of change and upheaval, nationalism has re-emerged as a significant force within China, spearheaded by the new regime under President Xi Jinping. This paper examines how a more offensive-oriented nationalism and several subcategories of nationalism are slowly seeping into the aforementioned aspects of modern China. It argue that unlike the defensive nationalism that China adopted over a century ago, this new wave of offensive nationalism is tied directly to the desire to transform China into a global power reminiscent of the old imperial dynasties.

Keywords: nationalism, China, politics, international relations

## **Introduction**

The years 2012 and 2013 were crucial times for those writing about the Asia-Pacific region, as nearly all eyes lay upon the ongoing South China Sea disputes. The uninhabitable islands of the South China Sea, rumored to be rich in natural resources, sparked a dramatic international spectacle as nearby nations sought to claim the islands for themselves. And no neighboring nation involved in the dispute was nearly as intimidating as the People's Republic of China. With the outbreaks of major disputes in 2013, China flexed its muscles with regards to the South China Sea, taking the world stage in an attempt to lay claim to what the Chinese government believed was its rightful territory, even butting heads with neighboring Southeast Asian countries. And in the East China Sea, another dispute was being waged with Japan over another set of uninhabited islands. Any and all attempts at settling the disputes through

diplomacy grounded to a stalemate for the next three years, even as major international powers such as the United States, the E.U., and Russia sought mediation. In the summer of 2016, a U.N Tribunal was called to solve a particular dispute between China and the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal island chain in the South China Sea. And while the U.N. ruled that China had no historical claims to the Scarborough Shoal and continued to back the smaller nations in the region, China's posture remained intimidating.<sup>1</sup>

In the two years that followed, most of the political and international drama died down. The disputes in the region remain unsolved though, and while there was no longer any active hostility in the region at the moment, talks continued to take place behind closed doors. But by 2018, another major development had occurred in the Asia-Pacific region, once again centered on China. Since coming to power in 2012, President Xi Jinping had initiated several sweeping changes to China, the most prominent of which was his anti-corruption campaign, a campaign designed to weed out corruption within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but what many observers simply saw as a crackdown on Xi's political rivals. And it was under Xi's administration that a new wave of disputes within the South and East China Sea reemerged as a global issue. Most shocking of all, in March of 2018, the CCP announced that the typical term limit of two five-year terms would be abolished, allowing acting President Xi Jinping to serve as president for life, while also giving him and his loyal cabinet members a much wider reach of both power and influence within the CCP.<sup>2</sup> Many observers believed that these "sweeping changes" will

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips, Oliver Homes, and Owen Bowcott, "Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in South China Sea Case," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Westcott and Serenitie Wang, "Xi Jinping is Making Sweeping Changes to How China's Government is Run," *CNN*, March 17, 2018, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/xi-jinping-is-making-sweeping-changes-to-how-chinas-government-is-run/ar-BBKjUVD>

greatly extend the reach of the Chinese state and by extension the CCP, to all levels of government, from the national assembly all the way down to county-level governments, and could “significantly infringe on Chinese citizen’s [basic] human rights.”<sup>3</sup>

To the casual observer of these various events as told through the mainstream news, the majority of the modern disputes within the both the South and East China Sea revolve around the acquisition of potential resources for economic and strategic importance. And the changes to the inner working of the CCP under Xi’s administration may be seen as nothing more than an assertive effort to increase his own power while limiting that of his opponents. There is truth to both these statements. Hidden beneath the surface of both events, however, is the significant role that nationalism and past reclamation play in these drastic changes. Nationalism can both unify a nation against a common enemy and divide people within a state based on who is considered part of a particular nation. It restructures how a nation views itself and the rest of the world and is a cultural force that reshapes how the nation evolves. With these factors in mind, this paper dedicates itself to focusing on the changes within the People’s Republic of China through the multifaceted lens of nationalism.

As China’s economic growth continues to slow down and international pressure mounts regarding disputes such as those in the South China Sea, the Chinese government is shifting from champions of the proletariat to champions of the Chinese nation. The current regime of the CCP under Xi Jinping seeks to remake China into the superpower that it once was, to “Make China Great Again.” The goals of this paper then are to showcase how variations of nationalism

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<sup>3</sup> Westcott and Wang, “Xi Jinping is Making Sweeping Changes to How China’s Government is Run.”

are reshaping the Chinese state at the political, international, and societal level. To formulate these claims, this project asks four important questions:

- 1) What were/are the major variations of nationalism prevalent in modern China?
- 2) How have the variations of nationalism begun to reshape and reconfigure as China became a major world power?
- 3) What major changes has nationalism brought to the inner workings of Chinese society, culture, and the CCP?
- And 4) How has and will Chinese nationalism continue to affect China's foreign policy and the spread of its influence across both the Asia-Pacific region and the world?

So why is this paper so important to the development of Asia-Pacific knowledge? We are continuing to see the effect of nationalism on nation-states in the Asia-Pacific region, from renewed Japanese militarism to rising Hindu nationalism in India. In China, both ethnic and civic nationalism are being utilized by the current administration to create a revitalized sense of pride during a period of new security threats and potential conflict for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. This analysis serves not only to educate, but to offer a cautionary tale of the consequences and potential dangers of rising nationalism in China. Asia has already gone down a dark path of ultra-nationalism in the previous century, and those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Will China continue down this path and will the other world powers simply sit back or take action?

### **Nationalism: Building a New Discourse**

The subject of Chinese nationalism is not new to the research about the Asia-Pacific region. Whenever the term "Chinese nationalism" is brought up, particular attention is given to

ethnic nationalism in China, especially among the Han Chinese. Ethnic nationalism was one of the first variations of nationalism that emerged from China at the dawn of the twentieth century; due to the fact that ethnic nationalism is also the most common variant of nationalism, this makes it an easy and reliable source of discourse on nationalism as a whole within China's recent history and present day events. Ethnic nationalism is not limited to just the majority Han Chinese. Sources such as Rong Ma's "A Han vs. Minorities Dual Structure of Chinese Society" and Michael Clarke's "The Impact of Ethnic Minorities on China's Foreign Policy" discuss the rising nationalism within prominent minority ethnic groups in China, particularly the Tibetans and Uyghurs, and how the ethnic nationalism and separatism from these groups contribute to the Chinese government's responses to both internal and external issues. However, existing discourse gives less attention to other variations of nationalism; this project examines several of these variations and how they fit into the context of China and the current administration's vision for the country.

One key question asked in this paper pertains to China's foreign policy and international relations, and how nationalism and its variations are reshaping China's view of the outside world. The South China Sea dispute of the past few years is just one example where nationalism from both China and neighboring countries has played a role in international relations, and, as a result, has become a major focus of academics. The work of political scientist Graham Allison serves as a catalyst to provide an answer to the question of China's foreign policy. His latest book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap* delves into the current tumultuous relationship between the United States and China, as well as the reasoning behind China's recent shift in international relations from one of soft power to one of domineering



physical presence.<sup>4</sup> In his research, he states that China seeks to become a superpower, one to rival the pre-colonial imperial dynasties of old, and something that the CCP can draw upon to inspire pride in their nation.<sup>5</sup> My research into the variants of nationalism affecting China will shed further light on the country's shifting foreign policy making.

Another key question asked pertains to China's internal political structuring and social dynamics. It is no secret that China is facing many internal problems within its society beyond the ethnic nationalism of some minority groups mentioned previously. At the same time, the CCP under Xi Jinping is continuing to undergo massive reforms and restructuring to cement Xi's control over a factionalized party. Jiayu Wang's discourse from the National University of Singapore delves into the internal changes.<sup>6</sup> According to his research, Wang believes that the current wave of Chinese nationalism is part of a top-down approach implemented by Xi's administration in the pursuit of his "China Dream" since the old Marxist principles no longer have the same influence as before.<sup>7</sup> Similar works included in this paper dedicate some time to discuss the internal strife that China is currently afflicted by. These internal troubles will be included in portions of this paper, as these issues and events shape the nationalistic growth within the Chinese state.

Other major sources include Benedict Anderson and the influence his work *Imagined Communities* has had on defining nationalism in the social sciences. This project will analyze Anderson's concept of the nation, elaborate upon its implications, and explore how his theory

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 107-133.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jiayu Wang, "Representing Chinese Nationalism/Patriotism through President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" Discourse," *Journal of Language & Politics* 16, no. 6 (2017): 830-848.

<sup>7</sup> Wang, "Representing Chinese Nationalism/Patriotism," 830.

compares to those of similar works. Ultimately, this paper will expand upon the research on nationalism, China's foreign policy, and internal structuring previously touched upon by various sources to create a new discourse focused on the other variants of nationalism that have emerged within a globalized Chinese state.

### **Communist Rule, the Economic Miracle, and a Shift in the Nation**

To understand why the CCP under Xi is currently shifting away from traditional Marxist principles and towards more nationalistic rhetoric, it is important to briefly discuss the history of the CCP to understand why nationalistic rhetoric has reemerged. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949 at the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong "announced that the Chinese people had finally stood up against repeated foreign invasion" and united the country under one government with one ideology.<sup>8</sup> Over the next few decades, the CCP under Mao launched massive campaigns to bring China up to the standards of western nation in agriculture and industry. While the initial years saw a great deal of success for some levels of society, the failure of the idealistic ambitions of the Great Leap Forward and the millions of death fueled by the resulting famine proved major setbacks for the country. While retaining a small part within Chinese society, Chinese national identity was greatly overshadowed by Maoist ideology; Chinese national identity received a devastating blow during the decade-long Cultural Revolution of the 1960's and 70's, when hordes of students and violent revolutionaries attempted to destroy the history, culture, and identity of the people living within the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Wenfang Tang and Benjamin Darr, "Chinese Nationalism and its Political and Social Origins," *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 813.

The chaos of the Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao in 1976. In the following decades under more moderate leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, China opened itself up to the world, undergoing a radical transformation that left it unrecognizable from the communist state that Mao had envisioned. Despite still being under an authoritarian government, “economic pragmatism” became the primary focus of the government’s agenda;<sup>9</sup> the economy grew rapidly in three decades that followed as once quiet fishing villages morphed into million-resident metropolises in just a few short years. But as the decades passed, as China’s economy continued to grow and new generations of Chinese citizens were maturing, a major shift in ideals was also occurring under the surface.

The old Marxist principles of the Mao era, the very principles that had defined the entire nation and the central government since 1949, no longer had the same power they once had. The younger generations were now living in a world where China was no longer the isolationist communist state that their parents and grandparents had grown up in. As China emerged onto the globalized world stage, opportunities outside of China presented themselves as new and fresh perspectives on economics, politics, and society that people never had in China before. These young and ambitious Chinese men and women were at the least apathetic to and, in some cases, outright opposed to the Marxist principles of old, most prominently demonstrated at Tiananmen Square in 1989. This sudden and dramatic shift in China’s appearance caused what Ruoxi Du calls an “identity crisis among the Chinese people.”<sup>10</sup> Without the strong charisma and personality cult of a leader such as Mao, Chinese citizens of various ethnic

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<sup>9</sup> Tang and Darr, “Chinese Nationalism and its Political and Social Origins,” 813.

<sup>10</sup> Ruoxi Du, “The Patriotic Campaign in China and the Rise of Chinese Nationalism,” United States, North America (2013): 4.

backgrounds had to look elsewhere to find meaning and order in their lives, and they found answers from a variety of both native and foreign influences. Other factors divided Chinese society such as “elite families, different factional groups, [and] regional clustering.”<sup>11</sup>

The nationalism of the past was not immune to this change either; after decades of peace and prosperity, and with no other nation threatening to invade or conquer China, the nationalism that once spurred on revolutionaries to overthrow the imperial dynasty fell out of favor. Despite their attempts to reinvent the party into one that represents the Chinese nation, the central government seemed to solely focus on internal security and economic prosperity. But such rapid economic growth could not last forever. This can be seen in recent years up until now. As the country has emerged onto the globalized world, China currently faces a number of increasingly perilous social challenges, including but not limited to a widening generational gap, aging population, gender imbalance, pollution, ethnic separatism, and transnational security threats.<sup>12</sup> The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> is becoming an increasingly unpredictable and tumultuous. And from the beginning of 2010 to the present, nationalism is on the rise again in China, serving as a unifying force for the people, but of a different sort than before.

### **Offensive Nationalism: Xi Jinping and the Dream of China**

The birth of this new form of nationalism was catalyzed by some key events in recent history. In November of 2012, at the Eighteenth Party Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>13</sup> His goals for the transformation

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<sup>11</sup> Kerry Brown, “The Powers of Xi Jinping,” *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 1 (February, 2017): 18.

<sup>12</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 690-707.

<sup>13</sup> Willy Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Ideology and Statecraft,” *Chinese Law & Government* 48, no. 6 (2016): 409.

of China and the CCP were made evident during his rule through the Four Comprehensives, which centered on four components of China: the prosperity of Chinese society, reform, rule by law, and loyalty to the CCP.<sup>14</sup> As part of his bid to achieve these goals, Xi has wasted no effort in concentrating an increasing amount of power and authority over all aspects of the Chinese state either directly or through his supporters. From this position, Xi and his administration can administer the various reforms that achieve the Four Comprehensives through a centralized top-down approach.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most famous of these reforms are the various anti-corruption campaigns spearheaded by Xi, which not coincidentally targeted those who were not the most supportive of him.<sup>16</sup>

Observers have noted how these action mirror similar actions taken under Mao Zedong; as Willy Lam states in his article dissecting Xi's political ideology, Xi Jinping pictures himself on equal footing with Mao Zedong, centralizing power around him and building what can amount to a personality cult following within China.<sup>17</sup> Since 2012, the authority and status of Xi Jinping has continued to rise within the CCP, and his efforts to increase the centralization of power on reached a climax earlier this year when it was announced that the CCP had abolished the limit of two five-year terms for its presidents.<sup>18</sup> Observers within China are concerned, as Xi is undoing the safeguards put in place to ensure that another Mao figure would not rise again, and has essentially become the de facto Emperor of China.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lam, "Xi Jinping's Ideology and Statecraft," 409.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, "The Powers of Xi Jinping," 17.

<sup>17</sup> Lam, "Ideology and Statecraft," 411.

<sup>18</sup> Charlie Campbell, "China Steps Closer to Despotism as Xi Becomes Leader for Life," *Time* 191, no. 10 (2018): 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

But despite his goal of increasing the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology within China and the personality cult surrounding him, Xi faces challenges to increasing his hold on the rest of China outside the CCP. As stated earlier, since the 1980's, Chinese people were beginning to lose faith in the CCP;<sup>20</sup> and while China's government is certainly authoritarian, no observer today would argue that China's rapid success and growth under capitalist economic principles still classifies it as a communist country anymore. Additionally, rising social and economic challenges as mentioned previously also put Xi in a dangerous position to keep the country together as they head towards an uncertain future.

So what legitimacy does Xi Jinping have in his attempt to grab and maintain his power over the rest of the country? With the decline of Marxist principles and an increasing uncertainty about the future of the country, Xi and his administration are turning to an old ideology that once served China in a similar time of rapid change and uncertainty: nationalism.<sup>21</sup> But this variant of nationalism is not the same one that revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen proposed over a century ago to unify the Chinese nation in defense of foreign threats to Chinese soil. The focus has shifted. Now, nationalism in China under Xi is no longer content with simply preserving the Chinese nation. Xi's nationalism proposes that the best defense is a good offense. It now seeks to expand beyond its existing borders and carve out a place for China on the world stage. This metamorphosis into offensive nationalism is displayed through three aspects of Xi's evolving China: the "Chinese Dream," mass education programs, and a more aggressive foreign policy.

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, "The Powers of Xi Jinping," 21.

<sup>21</sup> Lam, "Ideology and Statecraft," 413-14.

What exactly is the “China Dream” that Xi espouses to the nation? Xi describes it as “the great revival of China” to become a country that can truly stand on equal terms with the developed countries of the western world.<sup>22</sup> Author Jiayu Wang describes the “Chinese Dream” as China under Xi “striving to regain its past glories during its long history of civilization.”<sup>23</sup> With over 5000 years of history to draw from, Xi uses this history to point out the moments when China stood as the apex of civilized nations and the center of the enlightened world. Unlike the nationalism espoused by intellectuals of Sun Yat-sen’s era and the Maoist principles of the CCP, which ranged from apathetic to outright hostile towards China’s imperial and cultural past, the variant of nationalism in Xi’s “Chinese Dream” is “communicated through the symbolic representation of national history;” it speaks of a “shared past based on the common past of the [Chinese] community,” with the CCP as the watchful guardians against any who would oppose the dreams of the nation.<sup>24</sup> For Xi and the current CCP administration, the offensive nationalism that forms the basis of the “Chinese Dream” acts as the modern-day mandate of heaven, a reference to the old Chinese imperial dynastic system in determining if a ruler was legitimate.

Despite the millennial generation of Chinese citizens not being easily persuaded by the CCP’s rhetoric, Xi is fully aware of the influence that his administration can still have on the current Generation Z and those who come after. Within the first few years of coming to power, Xi initiated reforms that helped him push certain educational campaigns. Officially, this education reform campaign is designed to reinforce the Marxist principles that Xi and the party

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<sup>22</sup> Wang, “Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’ Discourse,” 831.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 832.

<sup>24</sup> Ning Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory: Chinese Nationalism as Constraint on Beijing’s Foreign Policy Making,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 5, no. 4 (2013): 546-47.

officially espouse. But tying these education reforms back to the “China Dream” rhetoric of the CCP, the new education materials glorify China’s imperial past when the country served as the hegemon of the East Asian sphere.<sup>25</sup> But the influence Xi’s nationalism has on the newer members of Chinese society does not stop there. Author Ning Liao states that in the wake of the “belief crisis” that affected China after Tiananmen Square in 1989, the common past of the nation served as a unifying force for the Chinese people.<sup>26</sup>

And while most millennials are not as easily swayed by the Marxist rhetoric of the CCP, some are more supportive of their government than others, especially on the worldwide web. Using the internet as a staging ground, young Chinese nationalists in the recent years under Xi Jinping have taken to their keyboard in defense of their country. These digital warriors are called “Little Pink” within China, and can often be found ardently defending China on the internet against any and all criticism.<sup>27</sup> Watch any video on YouTube or other social media platforms criticizing any aspect of mainland China, and you are guaranteed to see these “Little Pink” leaving angry comments and smashing the down-vote buttons. Though there is no connection between the “Little Pink” users and any CCP government organization, the young activists are having praise heaped on them by state-run media

In addition, the newer educational material under Xi’s reforms, including revised school textbooks, go to great lengths to portray China as the victim of past oppression by foreign powers and invaders.<sup>28</sup> Its goal is to remind the Chinese that they are and continue to be victims of oppression by foreign powers that seek to keep China weak and contained, a fear

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<sup>25</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 546.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Zhuang Pinghui, “The Rise of Little Pink: China’s Angry Yung Digital Warriors,” *South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 547.



that Xi and the CCP use to great effect during various disputes with other countries. The Second Sino-Japanese War during the 1930's and 40's is a major focal point of this victimization narrative in both the newer state-sponsored education and propaganda. There is an overt amount of anti-Japanese propaganda laced into the material, and the memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War is still carried by the old leaders of the CCP;<sup>29</sup> in addition, the role of the communist party during the war is greatly exaggerated within the material. The purpose of this exaggerated material ties into the main goal of Xi's nationalism: to preserve the authority of the CCP by portraying them as the saviors of China who defeated the foreign invaders and destroyed the corrupt enemies from within.

The combined influence of Xi's "China Dream," mass education campaigns, and victimization all contribute to the rise of a more offensive-oriented nationalism that has replaced the old Marxist thought that attempted to unify the Chinese nation in order to stand on par with the rest of the world.

### **The Dawn of Nationalism**

Nationalism is certainly on the rise within Xi's China, and it is changing many aspects of the country internally in order to both cement the rule of Xi Jinping and expand his vision for the future of the Chinese nation. But before examining how this new wave of Chinese nationalism under Xi is currently reshaping the country's foreign policy, it is crucial to first establish firm definitions of nationalism, the nation, and what the properties of these variations are along with an understanding of how these ideologies came to dominate much of the China

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<sup>29</sup> Javier Hernandez, "To Inspire Young Communists, China Turns to 'Red Army' Schools," *New York Times*, October 15, 2017.

in both the past and present. This section will be followed by a historical section on how nationalism first made its impact on Chinese history prior to the rise of the CCP to power; it will ties in past events of Chinese nationalism to Xi's present image for China before shifting to a final section discussing China's changing foreign policy and more aggressive posturing.

Benedict Anderson provides insight into how the foundational idea of the nation and nationalism first arose.<sup>30</sup> And while his work was first published back in 1983, when China was first starting to open up under Deng Xiaoping, his examination of nationalism presented in Asia is crucial for understanding what is happening in China under Xi Jinping today. Anderson describes the nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>31</sup> In layman's terms, the nation is an artificial invention born of the imagination of a people who share similar linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> These shared backgrounds are compiled to form a national identity; and nationalism in turn is the force that invents and advocates for said nations and national identities.<sup>33</sup>

What differentiates the nation from other cultural groups such as ethnicities and religions is that nations are, by their nature, more political and rooted in concepts such as sovereignty and legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> A nation is not the same as a state however, the latter of which is merely an organized political entity that rules over a territory under its control. And yet, this relationship between nations and states has become synonymous with the current political world. There are states that have a predominant nation living within them (nation-states),

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<sup>30</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

states comprised of multiple nations living within them (multinational states), and even nations without states to call their own. China is a good example of a multinational state; despite the majority percentage that the Han Chinese composes of the state's population, millions of people within the state identify themselves as distinct from the majority Han Chinese.

The concepts of the nation and nationalism are relatively new in a broad historical context, yet their impacts have been profound to say the least. Prior to the invention of the nation, states were the primary political entities for most of human history. Anderson suggests that the primary systems that drove the function of these pre-national states were the *religious community* (including the sacredness of language and the church) and the *dynastic realm* (ideas such as the divine right of kings).<sup>35</sup> This system was present in China too through imperial dynastic succession and the role that traditional Chinese language had in the government. But a little over 250 years ago, starting in Western Europe, these two cultural systems that had for so long formed the bedrock of traditional states began to erode. Movements such as the Reformation and Scientific Revolution weakened the influence of religious communities on European societies; inventions such as the printing press meant that access to language and knowledge was no longer reserved for a select few. And the Enlightenment brought with it the idea that the sovereignty of a state no longer had to rely on the divine right of its ruler, but on the consent of the people living within the state.<sup>36</sup>

Anderson and others are correct in stating that the nation and national identity are, by their very nature, social constructs. But what makes the idea of nationalism and national

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<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

identity so powerful to both individuals and collective groups ties back to one of humankind's most basic instincts: the desire to belong. Human beings are, by their own nature, social creatures. The decline of both traditional state and religious institutions, as well as the greater access to knowledge afforded to individuals, were the primary driving forces behind the creation of the nation, national identity, and nationalism. With the traditional elements that previously united the European states cut out of the equation, the more educated masses within these states began to look at what united them as a whole. Elements such as language, symbols, literature, and traditions became unifiers of particular groups of people in the thousands and millions that had never existed before, no longer confined to just a single tribe, village, or region according to Anderson.<sup>37</sup> A similar phenomenon occurred in China both after the fall of the Qing in 1912 and in the years following the rejection of traditional Marxist principles post-1980 mentioned by Ruoxi Du previously.<sup>38</sup> And thus, the nation and national identity were born into fruition, and nationalism emerged to ensure that the identity would not become lost.

Despite the negative aura that surrounds it today and its link to the tragedies of the past, nationalism is not inherently evil or malicious in its intentions or values. There are examples throughout history that showcase how nationalism and the creation of national identities acted as forces of good. It was nationalism that united dozens of divided states in Europe into the modern nation-states of France, Germany, and Italy that are well known today. It was nationalism that enabled the previously subjugated peoples of old empires to throw off their shackles and carve out a place for themselves in the modern world. It is also important to note

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Du, "The Patriotic Campaign in China," 4.

that nationalism does not exist in a vacuum; it does not solely evolve in one particular direction, a theme that is vital for understanding the purpose of this paper. From its origins in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe, the concept of the nation and nationalism was exported across the world during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries during the age of imperialism. And it is here that this story returns to China and the origins of a national identity.

### **Defensive Nationalism: The Birth of the Chinese Nation**

Understanding how nationalism first emerged in China can help in understanding the similarities and differences between nationalism in past and present China. By doing so, we can better understand the causes that shape the formation of nationalism, the purpose nationalism serves in given historical moments, and its strengths and/or limitations. Referencing back to the victimization narrative noted in the new education material, the 19<sup>th</sup> century began what the CCP refer to today as China's "century of humiliation." The glory and prestige of Chinese imperial dynasty, one that had lasted for centuries before, was swept away as the modern world forcefully made its introduction. Following its defeat at the hands of the British in the First Opium War of 1839, 19<sup>th</sup>-century China soon found itself increasingly encroached upon by foreign powers. Any serious attempts at reform or resistance were blocked by corrupt officials or destroyed outright by modern European armies. War, rebellions, and famines plagued the country; the ruling elite of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, seen as a foreign dynasty by many native Chinese, was unable to reverse the damage already done.

At the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism and the national identity known today first emerged within China. The Chinese people were not blind to the chaos gripping their

country. For those who had travelled abroad and seen what the rest of the world had to offer, nationalism represented “a new, urgent awareness of their relationship to foreign forces and to the Manchus,” describing the Chinese as “a unit that must be mobilized for its own survival.”<sup>39</sup> As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close in China, these earliest variations and subcategories of Chinese nationalism were ones centered on a set of defensive principles. Any variant of nationalism mentioned in pre-21<sup>st</sup> century China will be classified as defensive nationalism. The reasoning behind this label is linked to the primary purpose of such nationalism: to unite what was considered the Chinese nation against encroachment by forces from outside the nation and to protect what the Chinese nation saw as their homeland.

The first major event that espoused defensive nationalistic values was the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, a movement that was distinctly anti-foreigner in its ideology. Emerging as a religious and spiritual movement in 1898, the secretive society known as Boxers United in Righteousness sought to protect themselves from what they saw as an encroachment of foreign missionaries onto their lands during a time of chaos.<sup>40</sup> Comprised mostly of young men from the poorer rural classes, the Boxers first unleashed their anger on Chinese Christian converts and their foreign missionaries before setting their sights on bigger targets. In Beijing, now with the support of certain Qing officials, the Boxers laid siege to the foreign embassies and their inhabitants. The siege lasted for over a month before a joint expeditionary force of 20,000 men relieved the siege at Beijing.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of the rebellion, harsh punishments were doled out upon the Qing, further weakening their hold upon the fragile country. But as the Boxers

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 222.

<sup>40</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 222.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

were out of the picture, more ambitious revolutionaries were beginning to make significant moves.

In Shanghai, A young revolutionary student named Zou Rong who had studied in and been inspired by the westernization that Japan had undergone published his work *The Revolutionary Army* in 1903.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the Boxers, who had directed their hatred solely at foreigners and Chinese Christian converts, Zou specifically targeted the Manchus and the ruling Qing government as the ones to blame for China's problems. He strongly attacked the Qing in his work, dissecting how the Manchu Qing had shown great weakness in the face of foreign incursion into China while continuing to treat the Han Chinese as nothing more than "a race of slaves" as he puts it.<sup>43</sup> He urged the Chinese to adopt the same westernization as Japan had and completely dissolve the authority of the imperial dynasty.<sup>44</sup> Zou would not live to see the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, as he died in prison while on his way to being executed.<sup>45</sup>

Both the Boxer Rebellion and Zou Fang's revolutionary publication can be interpreted as forms of ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is the most common subcategory of nationalism that is described, and is considered to be the default variation of nationalism. It supports the idea that particular ethnicities (the Han Chinese in this case) are singular nations that share common ancestry and heritage. In the cases of the Boxer Rebellion and Zou Fang, ethnic nationalism is using defensive principles of repelling foreign invaders and defending a nation's land. And in the present day, ethnic nationalism is also empowering certain ethnic groups within China that seek to break away from the state and safeguard their lands. But under Xi

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<sup>42</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 226.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Jinping, however, several aspects of ethnic nationalism are included in his more offensive variation, including the idea of shared cultural memories that Ning Rou mentions in regard to the “China Dream.”<sup>46</sup>

The simplicity of ethnic nationalism makes this particular subcategory of nationalism quite exclusionary, however, as only those with both sufficient heritage and cultural ties could ever be considered part of the nation, and not even cultural assimilation is enough to grant other people membership. And while this variant of nationalism works well for states with ethnically homogenous populations (such as Japan and Korea), China has never been and will never be an ethnically homogenous state.

Throughout its entire 5000-year history, various peoples outside of the Han majority would come to call China their home, including the very Manchus that ruled from Beijing. But through its influence over the centuries, through a process called sincization, both Chinese culture and the Chinese state gradually incorporated these ethnic minorities into the Chinese nation. A revolution that sought to unite all of China could not solely rely on the Han ethnicity.<sup>47</sup> Zhou might not have understood this, but his revolutionary work and radical modernization philosophy would inspire one particular individual to see China’s revolution through.

Sun Yat-sen and his broad coalition of forces named the Revolutionary Alliance had slowly grown in numbers and strength during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Then, in 1911, an accidental bomb explosion in the city of Hankou sent the dominos falling, and soon revolution engulfed the entirety of China. Pushing up from their power base in the south, the

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<sup>46</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 546-47.

<sup>47</sup> James Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang, “Nazionalfascismo and the Revolutionary Nationalism of Sun Yat-sen,” 24.

<sup>48</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 248.



Revolutionary Army managed to hold off Qing loyalist forces as support grew from the populace for the revolutionaries. At the beginning of January of 1912, Sun had been nominated as president of the emerging Chinese Republic; by the end of the month, the child emperor Puyi had abdicated the throne, ending over two thousand years of imperial dynastic rule in China.<sup>49</sup>

With the old systems of state abolished, the Chinese people now had to craft their own destiny through other means of government, as well as define what it still meant to be Chinese. The decade following the overthrow of the Qing was one of chaos and confusion. Central authority broke down, and individual warlords began to assert their control over provinces, carving up the state into spheres of influence. In the southern province of Guangdong, Sun and his political allies held onto their vision of a Revolutionary China. To aid in their grand vision for the new Republic of China, Sun and his new political party the Guomindang (GMD, Nationalists) put forth their official doctrine: the Three Principles of the People.<sup>50</sup> The very first of the Three Principles, *mínzú* (民族), is often translated directly as “nationalism.”<sup>51</sup> However, Sun Yat-sen and the GMD’s variation of government-spouted nationalism would take a far different approach to unifying the country than that what had been proposed by ones such as Zou Fang.

Similar to Zou, the nationalism espoused by the GMD was defensive and anti-imperialist in its foundations, designed to strengthen the Chinese and put forth the resolve to defend their country from external threats. But while the ethnic nationalism of Zou focused most of his anger on the Manchus and spoke to the Han Chinese almost exclusively, Sun and the GMD “held that [their] goals included the full integration and sovereignty of all the Chinese people,”

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<sup>49</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 254.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>51</sup> Jiayu Wang, “Representing Chinese Nationalism/Patriotism Through President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’ Discourse,” 837.

even those outside of the Han Chinese demographic.<sup>52</sup> This was civic nationalism at work, focusing on ideals instead of ethnicities; it sought to unify the nations of people living within China under a singular ideal and a unified cultural identity that was distinctly Chinese to forge a modern state that could stand on equal terms with the West and Japan. The rise in civic nationalism within China can also be attributed to a rise in major literature and scholarly works during the 1920's that were very critical of China's past and were harnessed by GMD in creating a more modern image of China.

This defensive civic nationalism was most prominently detailed in the first official flag of the Republic of China. Unlike the familiar red flag with a blue box and white sun that most people today associate with the Republic of China and Taiwan, the original flag featured a much more unique design. It was a series of five horizontal stripes of different colors that represented the major ethnicities within the Chinese nation: red for the Han Chinese, yellow for the Manchus, blue for the Mongols, white for the Tibetans, and black for the Hui Muslims. In addition, Sun embarked upon an economic and industrial modernization program by 1920 under a centralization plan.<sup>53</sup> But unlike the communists, Sun and the GMD wanted to prevent conflict erupting between the social classes, as this "could only impair the unity [Sun] considered necessary for national survival and national development."<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately for Sun and his vision for a unified China, disunity plagued the country after his death in 1925 as nationalists and communists battled in the streets and villages for dominion over China.

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<sup>52</sup> Gregor and Chang, "Nazionalfascismo," 24.

<sup>53</sup> Gregor and Chang, "Nazionalfascismo," 26.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

While both factions were battling for the very soul of China, Japan watched with keen eyes from a short distance. Sensing weakness, Japan expanded its imperial ambitions and seized the province of Manchuria while the GMD were distracted fighting the CCP.<sup>55</sup> Six years later, Japan declared all-out war against China, kicking off the beginning of a global conflict that would merge with other wars to become the Second World War. The defensive nationalism espoused by Sun and his successor Chiang Kai-shek in the GMD now faced the ultimate test; the CCP under the new leadership of Mao Zedong also were influenced by defensive nationalism for the sake of survival, but obviously intertwined with Marxist thought. Both factions realized that ideological differences meant nothing if the Chinese nation that Sun built would be destroyed by foreign invaders. From 1937 to 1945 both the GMD and CCP held out against the Japanese invasion, spurred on by the national unity of the Chinese people.<sup>56</sup>

So what correlation does the old form of defensive nationalism under Sun Yat-sen have with the more offensive variation that Xi Jinping espouses? In terms of similarities, both nationalisms emerged in times of confusion and lack of direction. This was seen during the collapse of China's old imperial government in 1912 and was slowly building up in the decades following the abandonment of traditional Marxist principles in the 1980's to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both also see their respective governments as the guardians of the Chinese nation, as successors to the old imperial governments and as a unifying force to unify the country against threats to its integrity.<sup>57</sup> This last statement explains much of why the current CCP government is harsh on its crackdowns of internal dissent among its various peoples. But the primary fuel

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<sup>55</sup> Spence, *Modern China*, 351.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>57</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 121-22.

that drove defensive nationalism in the past was very real threats to national sovereignty by foreign powers such as Japan. Today there is no longer a nation that actively threatens China's sovereignty, so what can Chinese nationalism of the past still achieve? Thus, while the defensive nationalism of old sought only to maintain the integrity of the Chinese nation, the offensive variation seen today seeks to expand the influence of the Chinese nation outside of its borders through a mix of both hard and soft power, inevitably coming into conflict with other states.

### **Foreign Policy Shift: China's Return to Prominence**

As stated earlier, the current CCP regime under Xi Jinping utilize both the concept of collective memory and the feeling of victimhood built upon by past decades of foreign dominion over China to unify the Chinese people through the form of offensive nationalism that leans towards the goal of the "China Dream."<sup>58</sup> For internal stability and restructuring of the Chinese state, Xi's administration has promised a reformed CCP, a sense of pride in being Chinese, and an economic revival to increase China's growth again.<sup>59</sup> All of these factors contribute to the dream of returning China to the glory of the old imperial dynasties when China stood as the hegemon of Eastern world. To ensure that China stands out upon the world stage, drastic changes are being made through a combination of hard and soft power.

One of the most prominent examples of China's soft power grab is the increased and important role that the country has regarding global economy and trade. Back in 2013, Xi's administration announced a massive infrastructure project along the Eurasian continent

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<sup>58</sup> Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory," 551.

<sup>59</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 116-17.

officially titled “One Belt, One Road”, more commonly referred to today simply the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>60</sup> The initiative is heavily inspired by the Silk Road, an old system of trade across the Eurasian continent. China was always the major power positioned at the eastern end of the Silk Road, providing silk, porcelain, tea, and other goods to traders that would carry these goods back west and inspire awe in foreigners. But with the rise in cheaper and faster international sea trade, the old land-based Silk Road began to fade into obscurity. For Xi, this historical trade route offers a myriad of possibilities.

With the construction business in China beginning to stagnate, the development of infrastructure in the various Eurasian countries along the old Silk Road provides China’s cement, steel, and construction industries an outlet to ship their goods and services.<sup>61</sup> In addition, these infrastructure projects will increase China’s influence over various countries and their governments, who will now be indebted to China for building their infrastructure. The countries that benefit the most will more than likely have regimes that are very outspoken and supportive of China and its initiatives. If the Belt and Road Initiative is successful, Allison certainly believes that the geopolitical scale will shift in China favor.<sup>62</sup>

But for Allison and other academics such as Ning Liao, the economic growth and expansion of its influence to neighboring countries is just the beginning for China under Xi Jinping. In order for China to obtain the very “China Dream” that seeks to return the country to its former prestige as a regional hegemon, it will inevitably have to ascertain its position with the

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<sup>60</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 125.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 126.

United States, a country that for the past several decades has been the global peacekeeper.<sup>63</sup> In an ironic twist, the role of the United States as peacekeeper in the Asia-Pacific region is what enabled China to experience the same years of peace and prosperity that resulted in massive economic growth and technological modernization.<sup>64</sup> But Xi and his administration have decided that America is no longer needed in the Asia-Pacific region to maintain stability and peace, and that “it is time for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.”<sup>65</sup>

The conflicting interests of China desiring to expand their influence and the United States wanting to keep their foothold in the region spilled over in more than one part of the Asia-Pacific Theater. As highlighted in the introduction to this paper, the attention surrounding this conflict over the past several years centered on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. And it is here that China demonstrates the second component of its new foreign policy focus: the use of hard power, particularly military strength. The most obvious example of this can be seen in the number of island reclamation projects that China has undergone over the past few years. According to official statistics, by June of 2015, China reclaimed 2,900 acres of land in the disputed island chains, which then serve as bases for military ships and aircraft to maintain direct control of the seas.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, these island bases allow China to project its power throughout the entirety of the South China Sea, a vital shipping passage that fuels the world economy.

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<sup>63</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 126.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 127.

To assert its position, China has not been afraid of using both its hard and soft power to intimidate other countries in the region like Vietnam and the Philippines. But Japan is a particular Asian country in this regard. It continues to have disputes with China over the islands in the East China Sea, but also carries much historical baggage with it.<sup>67</sup> Japan is not unaware of this historical baggage; in fact, to the Japanese, it appears as if history is beginning to repeat itself. For the policy makers of Tokyo reacting to the aggressive posturing of Xi's China, there are stark similarities between Xi's China and Japan of the 1930's, especially in regards to China's military interventions and seizure of territory.<sup>68</sup> And as mentioned before, that troubled history is something that the current Chinese administration is all too willing to use in flaring up nationalistic support for their country. In their article discussing the comparisons to 1930's Japan by both China and modern Japan, authors Chung-in Moon and Seung-won Suh label two versions of nationalism that are reemerging in Asia: proactive and reactive nationalism.<sup>69</sup> The concept of proactive nationalism that Chung-in and Seung-won suggest aligns closest with this paper's definition of China's offensive nationalism. Compared to the reactive, defensive nationalism that emerged in China previously and is currently emerging in other Asian countries, proactive, offensive nationalism is a directed movement implemented from the top-down in order to advance the desires of the state through the unified support of the people within the nation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chung-in Moon and Seung-won Suh, "Historical Analogy and Demonization of Others: Memory of 1930's Japanese Militarism and its Contemporary Implications," *Korea Observer* 46, no. 3 (2015): 425.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

A new form of nationalism is certainly on the rise in China, and it is important to identify the variations of nationalism that have been integrated into current movements in order to better understand what is happening and why. Apart from communism, nationalism has had the largest impact on Chinese history in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and in defining what is known today as the Chinese nation. From its defensive conception as a purveyor of traditions, the rejection of a foreign dynasty, and the founding principle of a modern state, to its current offensive evolution as a reemerging force for identity in the confusion of the globalized world, Chinese nationalism has taken on several forms throughout its brief yet influential history.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, observers are rightly seeing a comeback of Chinese nationalism. But this nationalism is not the same as the one that unified the nation one hundred years ago. The old principles are being abandoned as China seeks rebirth as powerful nation on par with the distant empires of old. The globalized world has left many confused as to their identity and lacking a sense of belonging to a particular group. For a multi-ethnic nation such as China, this lack of direction has created many of the problems that the country faces today, but it has also allowed for strong men such as Xi Jinping to rise into positions of power with promises of restoring glory to the nation in confusing times. Perhaps this movement will inspire millions of Chinese to be proud of their Chinese heritage, and perhaps it could unify the country to tackle the various problems that plague it internally. But it could also spiral out of control and awaken the desire for war that has for decades laid dormant in the Asia-Pacific Theater.

As of the writing of this paper, the exact direction that China will take with its new nationalistic approach has not been revealed yet. The current political and societal scenes



remain on a knife's edge. Now in a position of lifetime power, Xi will likely continue to pass measures that will increase his already existing power; other countries will likely continue to look on at China with increasing fear and suspicion, or some might end up joining China in its efforts to establish influence in the region. The role that nationalism will play in future Chinese politics and society remains a mystery. But if nationalism is allowed to continue its rhetoric and promote a continued sense of ever-lasting victimhood with an increasingly aggressive posturing to nations outside China's borders, the Asia-Pacific region will head down a dark path that has not been seen in over eighty years.

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