

The Patriotic Education Campaign in Xi Jinping's China: The Emergence of a New Generation of Nationalists

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Xi Jinping has intensified his patriotic education campaign to reaffirm the CCP's authoritarian rule and he has nurtured a new generation of nationalists who are intolerant of any criticism of the CCP regime and who are muscularly hostile to the Western powers and to Western values. The campaign has fueled ever-sharper demands for deference to China's wishes by foreigners, making compromise extremely difficult if not impossible on issues China deems to be its core interests. But nationalism has been a double-edged sword. Chinese people have become increasingly disaffected, directing their anger to the regime and to Xi personally. After the collapse of Xi's zero-COVID policy, it has become increasingly difficult for Xi to engage young people through nationalism.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained its legitimacy primarily based on two pillars since the end of the Cold War: economic performance and nationalism. As economic growth slowed down, Xi Jinping intensified his patriotic education campaign to rally the people, particularly the youth, behind the flag. While the earlier patriotic campaign primarily affirmed the positive "us," Xi is now targeting the evil "others."¹ With a vision of returning China to its historical apogee of power, Xi's campaign has reaffirmed the CCP's authoritarian rule and has nurtured a new generation of nationalists who are intolerant of any criticism of the CCP regime and who are muscularly hostile to Western powers and values. The young patriots, aligned with the party-state, have become hypersensitive to any perceived insults to China (辱华) and they are investing in Chinese national pride as well as to any policy that might be considered bowing to foreign pressure or being too solicitous of the US and other foreign powers. This hypersensitivity has hurt China's relations with the US and many other countries.

But nationalism has been a double-edged sword, both a means for the CCP to rally support and a means for the Chinese people to judge the performance of the state. If Chinese leaders cannot deliver on their nationalist promise, they will become vulnerable to nationalist criticism. As Chinese people have become disaffected and have directed their anger toward the regime and toward Xi personally since the collapse of Xi's zero-Covid, it has become increasingly difficult for Xi to engage Chinese youth. Although Xi has continued to fuel nationalist xenophobia, the abrupt U-turn in his zero-Covid policy in December 2022 has become a watershed whereby he has lost the trust of the Chinese people. People now obey him primarily because of their fear of his power. Power without trust is fragile, leaving only violence, punishment, and fear to exercise

¹ Suisheng Zhao, "From Affirmative to Assertive Patriots: Nationalism in Xi Jinping's China," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 141–61.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2021.2018795>

rule. Rebuilding the trust of the Chinese people, particularly the younger generation, presents a serious challenge to Xi. In confronting the mounting social and economic domestic stresses, Xi may take a diversionary strategy by engaging in an aggressive foreign policy, a case that international relations theories predict. But such a venture may be extremely risky and lead to an end to his power and to the collapse CCP regime.

Reaffirmation of CCP Authoritarian Rule

China has a long history of ideological indoctrination campaigns. The patriotic education campaign that was initially systematically rolled out in the early 1990s has been one of the longest such campaigns. Xi has now highlighted the theme of the earlier campaign reaffirming the CCP's authoritarian leadership as the indispensable condition for the rise of China. But Xi has presented a new vision of the "China Dream" for the Chinese people, striding upon the stage of world history and making China great again as an admired global power. Blending resentment over past abuses by foreign powers and warning about their continued malign intentions with references to China's glorious history, growing strength, and future greatness, Xi Jinping's China Dream stakes the CCP's persistence in power on restoring China's greatness.

The China Dream is a collective dream of the Chinese nation to claim its place in the top tier of the international power hierarchy. The personal dreams of the Chinese people must be subsumed into those of the state. The China Dream is thus distinguished from the American dream where one can both pursue personal dreams and contribute to the national dream. The China Dream features the building of a strong military, explicitly rejecting the Japanese model of focusing on economic prosperity. Only one month after taking the helm as CCP general secretary in November 2012, Xi boarded a guided-missile destroyer patrolling the South China Sea and told the sailors that China's Dream for the armed forces is "the dream of a strong military" (强军梦). The "prosperous nation and strong military" (富国和强军) are "two foundational stones" (两大基石) of the China Dream.²

Nationalist sentiments in the PRC are expressed as 爱国, which in Chinese means "loving the state," always indistinguishable from the leadership of the Communist Party. The Communist state as the embodiment of the nation seeks the loyalty and support of the people to the nation. By identifying the party with the Chinese nation, the regime makes any criticism of the party an unpatriotic act.³ The patriotic campaign thus emphasizes CCP leadership as the key to maintaining its system of stability maintenance (维稳体制), and nipping every element of instability in the bud (萌芽状态) is a pre-condition for economic development. Xi goes even

² 费士廷 (Fei Shiting), 尹航 (Ying Hang), 李宣良 (Li Xuanliang), "党中央、中央军委领导推进国防和军队建设七十年纪实" (Seventy Years of Leadership by the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission in Promoting National Defense and Army Building), *PLA Daily*, September 9, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/70zn/2019-09/28/c_1125052891.htm.

³ Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

further to justify one-party rule as rooted in the historical experience of the century of foreign humiliation and China's 5,000 years of culture. In other words, CCP rule is the natural outcome of China's "cultural legacy" marked by a "long historical origin and a broad cultural basis."⁴

Demonstrating the success of CCP leadership, Xi Jinping has highlighted the superiority of the China model of state capitalism. While his predecessor cautiously avoided endorsing the China model, reflecting a hesitancy to engage in ideological debate, Xi has declared that China's path offers "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence."⁵ Enjoying an inflated sense of empowerment supported by China's new quotient of wealth and military capacities, Xi believes that "China is in the best development period of modern times, and the world is in a state of profound change on a scale unseen in a century."⁶

China's early success in containing the outbreak of Covid-19 provided an opportunity to prove the superiority of the China model. Although the government discouraged an early and transparent recognition of the threat, the state went into crisis mode quickly and took zealous and heavy-handed actions to quarantine the entire country. With the untrammelled state power to mobilize resources and restrict citizens' rights, the zero-Covid strategy was initially very effective in limiting the spread of the virus and it became a nationalist rallying cry. The Chinese government launched a propaganda campaign full of xenophobic and nationalist language that insisted on the superiority of China's political system in contrast to the failure of the Western democracies. Framing the Western countries as threats to the health of the Chinese people, Xi refused to give Chinese people access to Western-made mRNA vaccines even though they had proved to be more effective than China's homegrown vaccines. Raising doubts about the safety of mRNA vaccines, China announced in March 2021 that the Chinese border would only be open to those who had received China's Sinovac vaccination and not to those who had received the Western jab.

Three years into the pandemic, most of the countries that had administered the mRNA vaccinations were gradually returning to normal lives, but China was still struggling with lockdowns. Although many Chinese had used the China-made vaccines, millions of older people remained unvaccinated. Chinese still did not have an opportunity to use the Western mRNA vaccine because of misinformation and Xi's vaccine nationalism, ultimately becoming one of the

⁴ “习近平在十二届全国人大一次会议闭幕会上发表重要讲话,” 新华网, 2013年03月17日, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-03/17/content_2356344.htm.

⁵ “Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th CCP National Congress,” October 18, 2017, Xinhua, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm

⁶ “为什么说现在是百年未有之大变局” (Why This Is a Big Change Unseen in a Century?), CCP Network, August 29, 2019, <http://www.12371.cn/2019/08/29/ARTI1567071473915983.shtml>

many contributors to China's zero-Covid policy catastrophe.⁷ After Beijing ditched its zero-Covid" policy and struggled to contain a mass outbreak of infections, Xi's government still publicly rejects offers from the US and EU of free mRNA vaccines and other Covid support. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson has said that the country does not need foreign vaccines, citing the "strengthening clinical efficacy" of China's "ample" domestic jabs.⁸

Xi also has used Beijing's hosting of the Winter 2022 Olympics against all odds to affirm his leadership in boosting national pride. Amidst the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, Japan postponed the 2020 summer games and in the following year it implemented heavy restrictions as an awkward compromise. Beijing was under pressures from both the pandemic and the diplomatic boycotts by the US and other Western countries over China's human rights abuses. Claiming that "pressure will only make the Chinese people more united, and confrontation will not stop China from becoming stronger" and promising to deliver "simple, safe, and splendid" Games,⁹ Beijing built a tightly sealed, meticulously managed Olympic bubble, with lockdowns, face-mask requirements, rigorous daily mass testing, and contact tracing, thus allowing the Games to proceed largely free of Covid. Hosting the Games on schedule without a Covid flare-up added to the party's narrative about the superiority of its political system.

For the Chinese domestic audience, one of the exciting focuses of the Games was the unprecedented number of foreign-born athletes who were competing for China. For decades, China's best and brightest had flocked to the US to pursue the American dream. Now the Chinese public was pleased to see some American-born athletes choosing to represent China in the Games, a resounding affirmation of China's rising power. Freestyle skier Eileen Gu, who was born and raised in California, won two golds and one silver for China, and she was instantly embraced as a national darling and the pride of China. This reveals China's power to attract foreign talent and is emblematic of a perceived victory over America. In contrast to the Eileen Gu craze, figure skater Zhu Yi, another American-born athlete who opted to compete on behalf of China but faltered on the ice during two consecutive competitions, was criticized for not being "Chinese" enough, a disgrace and embarrassment who brought shame upon the country. The hashtag "Zhu Yi has fallen" gained 200 million views by Chinese

⁷ Editorial Board, "China's Failed Covid Vaccine Nationalism," *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-failed-vaccine-nationalism-sinovac-sinopharm-zero-Covid-pfizer-moderna-xi-jinping-11669759952>

⁸ Andy Bounds, "EU Offers Free Covid-19 Vaccines to China to Help Curb Outbreak, Beijing Rejects Brussels' Offer, Citing Full Control of the Situation," *Financial Times*, January 3, 2023, <https://on.ft.com/3WV3dC4>

⁹ Yang Sheng and Liu Caiyu, "Wang Yi Urges US to Stop Interrupting Beijing Games, Respect Russia's Concerns over Ukraine in Phone Call with Blinken," *Global Times*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1248060.shtml>; "Xi Says China Ready to Deliver Simple, Safe, Splendid Winter Olympics," *Xinhua*, January 25, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220125/90e8c25eda614f35ac3c17fee19efe0c/c.html>

netizens in just a few hours. The authorities had to censor these comments to present a more hospitable face as the Olympic host.

Chinese netizens also expressed hatred and scorn of figure skater Nathan Chen who won a gold for Team USA. Chen was called a “traitor” and accused of “insulting China” due to an interview several months earlier in which he appeared to have backed American ice dancer Evan Bates’ criticism of China’s human rights record. Once seen as cultural ambassadors to help build bridges between the two countries, Americans of Chinese descent were subject to heightened scrutiny – left to straddle political fault lines on both sides.¹⁰ They were judged as either with China and bringing honor to the motherland or against China and bringing embarrassment. In this context, one commentator found that “There’s a tight connection between sports and nationalism in many countries, but in China, it has reached very high levels. ... Their success is the nation’s success, their failure is the nation’s failure.”¹¹

Targeting the Evil Others

Going beyond reaffirmation of an exclusive and positive “us,” Xi’s patriotic campaign has adamantly targeted the negative “others,” i.e., “anti-China” foreign forces and Western values. Blaming infiltration by Western hostile forces (敌对势力) for the problems in China, patriotic education holds that the Western countries do not want to witness China’s rise to its rightful place. Against the backdrop of China’s economic rise and growing influence around the world, party propaganda has promoted the idea that a diminishing West, especially the weakening US, does not accept its own decline and is determined to thwart China’s rise. Any criticism of the Chinese government is reflexively backed by anti-China forces.

Hostile foreign forces have thus become convenient scapegoats for all of China’s problems. Even the tumbling of the Chinese stock market in mid-2015 is claimed to be due to a Western conspiracy, even though foreigners were generally restricted from investing in the Chinese stock exchanges and the structural fault lines in China’s economic and political system were the ultimate culprit. Lin Zuoming, a member of the CCP Central Committee and president of China’s largest aerospace and defense conglomerate, China Aviation Industry Corporation, has accused the US of covertly waging an economic war that first led to China’s stock market crash and the ultimate goal is to directly target the five-starred red flag (冲着五星红旗来的) and topple the CCP regime.¹²

¹⁰ “Fame and Fury: China’s Wildly Different Reactions to US-born Olympians,” CNN, February 11, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/11/china/eileen-gu-zhu-yi-nathan-chen-comparison-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>

¹¹ Amy Gunia, “Why Winter Olympic Athletes Like Eileen Gu Are Getting Caught Up in U.S.-China Tensions,” *Time*, February 11, 2022, <https://time.com/6145687/winter-olympics-athletes-us-china-gu-politics/>

¹² 李淑平(Li Shuping), “中航工业董事长林左鸣谈护盘全过程：敌人是冲五星红旗来的，” 新浪博客, July 19, 2015, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1354200

When the Umbrella Protest Movement erupted against Xi's decision to restrict Hong Kong's electoral system, tantamount to a pre-screening of the candidates by Beijing in late 2014, Beijing accused "external forces" (外部势力) of being the "black hands" behind the unrest. Again blaming foreign forces for being behind the massive 2019 demonstrations against introduction of the fugitive offenders amendment bill on extradition, Beijing bypassed the Hong Kong legislative process and in 2020 imposed its own National Security Law, thus making any criticism of the Chinese government illegal and requiring members of the Legislative Council to demonstrate their allegiance to Beijing.

Using the same tactic, Beijing accused the infiltration and sabotage activities by hostile foreign forces of instigating the November 2022 widespread street protests across the country, known as the White Paper Revolution, by the Chinese people who were fed up with the zero-COVID restrictions. To deter people from participating in and supporting the protests, the propaganda authorities spread conspiracy theories about the presence of foreign influences with evil intentions. They claimed that the symbol of the blank white paper originated with the anti-government protesters in Hong Kong and Russia who sought to stir up chaos in order to bring about regime change. To find evidence that the unrest was instigated by hostile foreign forces, police and paramilitary forces conducted random searches of the mobile devices of people in the streets, looking for foreign apps. The protesters were warned of the presence of foreign forces at the sites, but these claims were immediately rebutted.

Promoting a resentful strain of nationalism that harped on China's century of humiliation to remind the Chinese people of the evil conduct of foreigners, Xi Jinping announced in 2013 the introduction of two new national holidays: Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression on September 3, celebrating the Japanese surrender in 1945, and the December 13 National Memorial Day, commemorating the Nanjing massacre by the Japanese imperial army in 1937. Victory Day in 2014 coincided with the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender. Reviewing the parade from a "Red Flag" limousine in Tiananmen Square, Xi celebrated the "great triumph" that had "crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China and that had put an end to China's national humiliation."

While Chinese leaders have kept the history of the Japanese invasion fresh by constantly replenishing propaganda in schools and in the media, they still regard the United States as the most dangerous and hostile foreign power. The Trump administration's trade war and the Biden administration's continued escalation of Sino-US tensions have made the US an easy target. Portraying the acrimonious trade war as part of an American conspiracy to contain China, the Chinese media are filled with emotional stories about how China is being forced to take tit-for-tat actions and daring to show its sword. Mao Zedong has been celebrated for having boldly gone to war against the Americans in Korea.

Many people accept the government propaganda that argues that the US is driven by fear and envy to contain China in every possible way. The government and public opinion have become surprisingly consistent in their resistance to Western criticism. As the overall distrust and resentment toward the US has reached a level unprecedented since the establishment of

diplomatic relations, tolerance of the US challenges has been greatly reduced.¹³ The propaganda identifies the evil intentions of the anti-China forces even through isolated and accidental events or missteps by the West.

When some US Congress members demanded compensation from China for Covid-related damages in 2020, a *gengzi* (庚子) year in the Chinese lunar calendar cycle of sixty years, Chinese propaganda quickly linked this demand to the Boxer Rebellion and the Boxer Indemnity that had occurred 120 years earlier. These historical events are still a living memory, partially because Chinese propaganda portrays the Eight-Nation Alliance invasion of China as the cause of the Boxer Rebellion and it deliberately ignores the violence of the Boxers and their goal of exterminating the foreigners. The Boxer Rebellion is thus portrayed as a patriotic movement against foreign imperialism. Accusing the Western countries of continuing to bash, coerce, and make derogatory remarks to humiliate China and claiming that “China today is not the Qing dynasty and Xi is not Cixi,” Chinese propaganda warns that “When push comes to shove, China will punch back with more force than that from a band of Boxers armed with swords, spears, shields, prayers, and magic rituals.”¹⁴ Reducing this complicated historical event to a black-and-white opposition between the inherently “good” Chinese and the “evil” foreigners, the CCP has successfully proposed a paradigm to interpret any criticism of China through the lens of the Western countries’ historical wrongdoings and it has turned the conflict into a patriotic battle.

A New Generation of Chinese Nationalists

Xi’s patriotic campaign has inoculated Chinese youth with a seed of nationalism deep in their hearts, while they seek to maintain their composure in the face of external temptations. A directive from the Ministry of Education in 2016 orders across-the-board patriotic education at each stage and in every aspect of schooling. Proselytizing beyond China’s borders, the document demands that Chinese students studying abroad become immersed in classes and textbooks that promote loyalty to the Communist Party.¹⁵ Chinese students studying overseas on government-backed scholarships are now required to sign contracts before departure, pledging loyalty to the party, to demonstrate a sense of responsibility in serving their country, and not to engage in any activities that might harm China’s interests or national security while overseas. The Outline on Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era, adopted by the CCP Politburo

¹³ 王缉思 (Wang Jisi), “新冠疫情下的中美关系” (Sino-US Relations During the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic), *Aisixiang*, April 8, 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/120783.html>

¹⁴ Editorial, “West’s Pandemic Falsehoods Debunked,” *Global Times*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185819.shtml>

¹⁵ Mimi Lau, “Class Ideology: China’s Education Chiefs Order Schools to Roll Out Patriotic Campaign on New Media,” *South China Morning Post*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1911336/class-ideology-chinas-education-chiefs-order-schools>

in September 2019, even insists on beginning such patriotic education with babies, “focusing on consolidating the roots and concentrating on the soul.”¹⁶

Prior to the suffering caused by Xi’s mishandling of Covid in 2022, this patriotic campaign had created a new generation of nationalists who are more fiercely patriotic and loyal to the party than those of the older generations. Witnessing China’s decades of high economic growth and rising living standards, they had grown up with no memory of anything other than steady growth and increasing opportunities. They began their secondary school and college educations with a heavy dose of patriotic education that taught a version of history that highlights the century of humiliation and the accomplishments of the CCP in making China prosper and strong, but it omits the CCP-produced disasters, including the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen protests. This twisted history was further protected after Beijing implemented its Law on the Protection of Heroes and Martyrs in 2018, which seeks to stop people from questioning the Communist heroes in the name of academic freedom.

The regime’s overwhelming control of information has enhanced the effects of patriotic education. Tightening the firewall and expanding censorship and surveillance to ruthlessly suppress any dissenting voices, Xi has blocked channels through which people might gain perspectives different from the official narratives. Most young people have grown up without access to international platforms such as Twitter and Google. The huge Internet police army assists the state in censoring and filtering all news and commentaries, advancing CCP narratives, and producing a bizarre uniformity of discourse, thus making government propaganda even more believable. Full of often sensational nationalist information about the CCP leadership in defense of China’s national interests, the internet has become a powerful instrument used in Xi’s patriotic education.¹⁷

Proclaiming they represent a deep public well of national pride and loyalty to the party, these patriots provide a ready audience for many internet celebrities (网红) who, in the highly controlled environment, thrive as party darlings, such as Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the *Global Times*, Jin Canrong, Renmin University’s hawkish professor, and Sima Nan, who is well-known for his anti-US views. Becoming immersed in China’s information bubble about the country’s power and popularity, these patriots are overly sanguine and even complacent about the country’s global standing.

Yan Xuetong, a prominent international relations scholar in Beijing, has criticized the post-2000 (millennium) generation of college students for their strong sense of superiority and self-confidence and their “condescending” mentality vis-à-vis other countries. Yan claims that they often view the world as a dichotomy between China and the foreign countries, treating all foreign countries in the same way, regarding universal human values such as peace, morality, fairness, and justice as unique to China, and believing that only China is righteous and innocent, while all

¹⁶ Mo Jingxi, “Top Party Leadership Highlights Patriotic Education,” *China Daily*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/25/WS5d8a7e4ca310cf3e3556d425.html>

¹⁷ Suisheng Zhao, “Xi Jinping’s Maoist Revival,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 83–97.

other countries, especially those in the West, are “evil” and possess a natural hatred (天然仇恨) of China. Moreover, these college students accept the views of netizens, such as those of economic determinism, conspiracy theories, and debt weapons.¹⁸ Because of such comments, Yan faced heavy fire in China’s social media. Netizens claiming that “the Yan Xuetongs cannot keep up with the times,” China’s netizens questioned “who was paying these people.”

The “little pinks” (小粉红) has become a popular term referring to the new generation pro-authoritarian nationalists who patrol cyberspace, ready to pounce on perceived slights and to defend the CCP regime. This began in November 2015 when Chinese netizens flooded social media platforms and swarmed the Instagram account of Chou Tzu-yu, a 16-year-old Taiwan-born pop singer who waved Taiwan’s national flag on a television show. Known as Internet Red Guards (网络红卫兵), an analogy to the youth who destroyed people’s homes at the start of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s to show their allegiance to Chinese leader Mao Zedong, the “little pinks” back China’s aggressive wolf warrior diplomats and monitor every move, word, and deed, and even retrospectively check, the past speech records of many Taiwanese artists and companies on the mainland for failing to affirm Beijing’s one-China principle. Publicly whipping up on the Internet their opposition to Taiwan independence, the “little pinks” often force these Taiwanese to apologize for their support of the one-China principle.

The “little pinks” support the coercive policies of the state, including its use of force to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity. A 2018 survey reveals that a large portion of the Chinese people endorse greater reliance on military strength, supporting greater spending on national defense and expressing approval of sending troops to reclaim the disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. Respondents who have grown up with a patriotic education (those born after 1978) are more hawkish than their elders, and the post-1980s’ generation is more hawkish than those born in the 1970s, who in turn are more hawkish than those born prior to the 1970s.¹⁹

Amid the outbreak of Covid-19, the “little pinks” launched a personal attack on Fang Fang, a Chinese writer who published her *Wuhan Diary*, a daily chronicle of life and death in her home city during the early days of the quarantine. Attracting a large number of followers, she instantly became a target of the “little pinks” when she was about to publish her diary in English and German. She was harshly condemned for empowering Western critics of China and “giving a knife to Western anti-China forces,” and she was denounced as a “traitor” who defamed the

¹⁸ “阎学通：00后大学生常以‘居高临下’的心态看待其他国家” (Yan Xuetong: Post-00 College Students Often Look at Other Countries with a “Condescending” Mentality), January 12, 2022, <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=675124>

¹⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss, “How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at ‘Rising Nationalism’ and Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (September 2019): 679–95.

heroic image of Wuhan.²⁰ Critics accused “the West for smearing ... and wanting ... to demand sky-high compensation. Fang Fang is passing to them the hilt of a sword to attack the nation.”²¹

The “little pinks” have used the term *ruhua* (辱华), or “an insult to China,” as a popular expression denoting actions with the evil intention of humiliating China. The first surge in use of the term *ruhua* appeared on Weibo – China’s heavily censored Twitter equivalent – in late 2013 in criticism of US comedian/broadcaster Jimmy Kimmel for a conversation with a group of young children about reducing US government debt, much of which is held by China. When a child suggested that “killing every Chinese” might be a way to solve the debt problem, Kimmel responded that the proposal was an “interesting idea.” *Ruhua* geared up again in mid-2014 over a video clip of a Chinese person being turned away from a club in Spain after a sign saying “Chinese and dogs prohibited” was aired on Spanish television. The “little pinks” then launched an online campaign accusing the Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana of *ruhua* after the appearance of an advertisement featuring a Chinese model struggling to eat Italian cuisine with chopsticks. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, when an illustration in a Danish newspaper depicted the distinctive yellow stars on the Chinese flag as viruses, there was yet another surge of *ruhua* on social media.²²

The “little pinks” project their paranoia and sensibilities onto the aesthetic expressions and intentions of companies that feature “squinty or slanted eyes” (眯眯眼) in advertisements as *ruhua* because such ads invoke stereotypes associated historically with Western racism against Asians, such as the fictional character Fu Manchu, a personification of the threat of the “yellow peril” to Western society. Social media users often invoke *ruhua* to attack perceived cultural slights. The reputation of any person accused of *ruhua* will immediately be hurt. Conversely, a “little pink” who leads the humiliation of the alleged offender has a good chance of gaining many fans and making much money. For example, many big foreign brands have learned of the power of the “little pinks” to ruin their reputations. The “little pinks” called out Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey for supporting the Hong Kong protesters, prompting the Chinese

²⁰ 胡锡进 (Hu Xijin), “方方日记在美国出版，公众对她的态度会变得更快” (Fang Fang’s Diary is Published in the United States, and the Public’s Attitude Toward Her Will Grow More Quickly), *Global Times*, April 9, 2020, <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/3xktVL9JRkI>

²¹ Kristin Huang, “China’s Nationalism Might Work at Home, But It’s Causing Upset on the World Stage,” *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3081546/chinas-nationalism-might-work-home-its-causing-upset-world>; Yaqui Wang, “In China, the ‘Great Firewall’ Is Changing a Generation,” *Politico*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/01/china-great-firewall-generation-405385>

²² Kenji Asada, Aiko Munakata, Marrian Zhou, Cissy Zhou, and Grace Li, “China’s Online Nationalist Army,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 29, 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/static/vdata/infographics/china-social-media/?utm_source=China+Leadership+Monitor+new+issue+alert&utm_campaign=b07e2cffc5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_09_05_04_36_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_4ca9bcd56f-b07e2cffc5-72539901

state broadcaster to drop NBA games. The “little pinks” pressed for a boycott of big international consumer companies, including H&M, Adidas, and Nike, for refusing to use Xinjiang cotton in their garments due to allegations of forced labor in the region.

Although Western companies and brands are targeted and forced to apologize, Chinese companies and brands have also come under siege. In December 2021, the maker of Three Squirrels, a Chinese snack, was accused of stereotyping the Chinese people and playing to Western prejudices for featuring a model with small, narrow eyes. The Chinese animated film *I Am What I Am*, a story about a boy and his friends chasing their dreams and becoming lion dancers, came under attack because of the size and the shape of the eyes of the main characters. Both the Three Squirrels brand and the makers of the film had to apologize for underscoring the cultural and aesthetic hegemony of the West.

Whither the New Generation of Nationalists?

The rise of a new generation of Chinese nationalists demonstrates the success of patriotic education in winning over the Chinese people, especially the youth. Targeting their negativism toward others, the young patriots often take even more aggressive stances than the state and encourage an exaggeration of the hostility and the threats from the others, particularly the US, and they put pressure on the government to take proactive or even preemptive actions.²³ The pandemic, the Ukraine conflict, and the tensions between Washington and Beijing have all escalated Chinese antagonism toward the West, with the “little pinks” fanning the flames.

Nationalism thus carries risks for the state if it cannot fulfil its patriotic rhetoric. When US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, Beijing’s propaganda created great expectations among the young nationalists, many of whom were fully convinced that the Chinese military would shoot down Pelosi’s aircraft or attack Taiwan as soon as Pelosi landed in Taipei. They were disappointed when the PLA did not shoot down Pelosi’s aircraft, and Pelosi’s safe touchdown prompted a wave of criticism of the Chinese government for its cowardness. Such criticism can be dangerous if these sentiments escalate and run out of control, leading to moves that Beijing may not be willing to tolerate.

Xi’s patriotic campaign suffered a backlash when many Chinese youth protested his draconian zero-Covid policy, badly damaging Xi’s credibility and turning a serious public health danger into a serious political challenge to the CCP regime. Street protests erupted after the deaths of at least ten people in a fire on November 24, 2022, in the city of Urumqi, prompting angry questions about whether the firefighters or the victims attempting to escape were blocked by the zero-Covid lockdown. These protests made global headlines as the largest public act of anti-government resistance since the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989. Most protesters focused their ire on the zero-Covid policy. Yet some demonstrators held up blank sheets of white paper

²³ Suisheng Zhao, “The US-China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World:

Hostility, Realignment, and Power Balance,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2002); 169–85.

to demonstrate their lack of free speech; even bolder voices directed their anger on Xi Jinping himself and called for him to step down.

University students were at the forefront of the protests, beginning on college campuses, which have always been hotbeds of activism and then spreading to many Chinese cities, even sparking support among Chinese students abroad. Seven weeks before this round of demonstrations, Peng Lifa, a lone young protester had hung banners at Beijing's Sitong Bridge, directly criticizing Xi's zero-Covid policies and calling for him to step down. Although Peng was quickly arrested and few in China heard about the incident in detail, overseas students on college campuses put up flyers inspired by Peng's banner. For many Chinese students overseas, the protests against Beijing's Covid-control measures represented a fight for freedom. Their rallies were critical of both the CCP regime and Xi Jinping, sowing seeds of discontent among the Chinese people and distrust of Xi Jinping and his regime.

The protests were not short of the former "little pinks." Xi's Covid policy had changed the lives of many people, especially the younger generation. After three years of lockdowns, testing, economic hardships, and isolation, China's Generation Z – born between 1995 and 2010 – has become the most pessimistic of all age groups in China because they face a near-record level of the unemployment – a rate of about 20 percent – and the slowest rate of economic growth in nearly half a century. As the road ahead for them has become narrower and tougher and their interests have been seriously breached, their hopes for the future have evaporated. Some of the younger generations, who have begun to reflect and fight back for their own survival, have found a new political voice, repudiating the stereotypical images of them as either nationalist wolf warriors or as apolitical loafers.²⁴

Now having to explain the poorly planned U-turn in his zero-Covid policy, Xi continues to fan the flames of nationalist sentiments. Just when hundreds of millions of people were infected by Covid, Xi was holding a virtual meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin to reaffirm their strategic relationship against the US. China's military proceeded to conduct naval war games with Russia, to launch China's third-largest air-force incursion around Taiwan, and to fly a fighter jet within meters of US military aircraft in the South China Sea. In his 2022 annual New Year's eve address to the nation, Xi touted his achievements and claimed that the country had reached a new phase in Covid control by following a science-based and targeted approach and prevailing "over unprecedented difficulties and challenges."

But Xi's campaign to portray China's handling of the pandemic as a personal and systemic triumph collapsed after the dramatic reversal of the zero-Covid restrictions without any forewarning or time to prepare by China's thinly resourced healthcare system or a roadmap for a gradual transition, eroding both the trust and the loyalty of the Chinese people. Although Xi has not come close to a Chernobyl moment in terms of losing power, his image has been severely damaged within the party and among the public. In his 2023 New Year's speech, Xi acknowledged the tough challenges ahead, the divisions in society, and the need to improve

²⁴ Casey Hall, Josh Horwitz, and Yew Lun Tian, "China's Pessimistic Gen Z Poses Challenge for Xi Post-COVID," Reuters, January 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-pessimistic-gen-z-poses-challenge-xi-post-covid-2023-01-18/>

prospects for China's youth. Without elaborating on possible policies to ensure that China's young people thrive economically, like those of their parents' generation who accepted limited freedoms in exchange for promised prosperity, Xi called for unity and for young people to “step forward and take on their responsibilities.”²⁵ Whether the new generation will answer his call will depend primarily on whether, despite the slowing economy, Xi can meet their expectations of increased job opportunities and improvements in their living standards. If Xi is unsuccessful, he may resort to undertaking risky international ventures, such as armed unification of Taiwan, to rally nationalist support. China has thus entered an uncharted path of uncertainty.

About the Contributor

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²⁵ “2022 New Year Address by President Xi Jinping,” December 31, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202112/t20211231_10478096.html