THE DIPLOMAT

CHINA POWER | SOCIETY | EAST ASIA

The Complex Nationalism of China's Gen-Z

China's youngest generation is often associated with hyper-nationalism. That oversimplifies their complex, individualized relationships with their country.

By Brian Wong
June 19, 2022

Students from Huaibei Normal University watch the live broadcast of Chinese President Xi Jinping delivering a report during the opening session for the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in Huaibei city, Anhui province, October 18, 2017.
Credit: Depositphotos

China's Gen-Z (defined loosely as individuals born after 1996) tends to be associated with images of ferocious, vocal, and unyieldingly nationalistic supporters of the country and regime.

In his incisive ethnography of China's youth in the aftermath of the late 1980s era of brief political liberalization and contentious politics, Alec Ash remarks that "the newest Chinese youth, born in the 2000s, are also different, formed by a stronger and more nationalistic China" – though Ash caveats that "the diversity is still there." Renowned IR expert and intellectual Yan Xuetong suggests that "post-millennial students usually have a strong sense of superiority and confidence, and they tend to look at other countries from a condescending perspective."

In order to understand how Chinese Gen-Zs may think, however, it behooves us to put

ourselves in their shoes. A Gen-Z individual born at the cusp of the new millennium would have been slightly over a year old when China joined the World Trade Organization. At age 3, they witnessed China's first in-space astronaut, Yang Liwei, man the successful Shenzhou 5 voyage. At age 8, they would come to experience both the Sichuan Earthquake and Beijing Olympics – vicariously, perhaps, yet these events were still transformative in the invoking of a Chinese nation. By the time they are 10 years old, China's GDP had quintupled since their birth – from $1.2 trillion in 2000 to over $6 trillion in 2010.

Then, when they were 12, they would see a new political leadership, one that touted the "China Dream" and "national rejuvenation" – abstract slogans perhaps, yet also rhetorically emphatic propositions that remained plausible to a generation who had never seen China struggle. The anti-corruption purge would coalesce with their early adolescence years, paired with a shift toward high-tech-driven domestic growth and palpable improvements to living standards in most rural areas (and perhaps some cities, too). When they were

17, the first Belt and Road Summit Forum was held, heralding a new era to Chinese diplomacy. At age 19, those in the mainland would observe the events unfolding in Hong Kong – and be convinced by state and social media that the "struggle" against neo-colonialist forces inimical to Chinese interests remained ubiquitous. Their country's handling of the first two years of the pandemic would come to reassure them of their government's competence and relative desirability to the "Western model."

With this particular trajectory of events and perceptions, it is only understandable, perhaps, that many Chinese youth feel a genuine sense of triumphalist, resolute pride in their country. Some of them may view the country's rise as both empirically inevitable and normatively an imperative (as a means of thwarting the West-led global order); others may be less ideologically dogged, yet nevertheless perceive the material improvements in living standards as a sign that the country works, and works for them.

Yet to equate the above story with the stories of all Chinese youth would be

erroneous. Doing so neglects the many who are compelled into "involution" and self-defeating pursuits of wealth and stability amid a precipitously precarious economy, or whose self-identification and identities do not coalesce around "politically correct" lines (e.g. queer or politically liberal individuals), or, indeed, who have found themselves left behind by the ambitiously touted efforts of redistribution and empowerment of the grassroots.

In a recent article, writer Peter Hessler recalled a particular assignment he had set his students at Sichuan University, "asking freshmen to write about the public figure, living or dead, Chinese or foreign, whom they admired." During his first stint teaching in China in the 1990s, Hessler had posed the same question. "In the old days, Mao had been the most popular choice, but my Sichuan University students were much more likely to write about scientists or entrepreneurs." For many in China's latest generation, the source of nationalistic pride is neither political nor state-oriented – it is instead the innovation and enduring tenacity of civil entrepreneurs and researchers who have come to transform

China.

Chinese Nationalism as a Multi-faceted, Fragmented Discourse

When analyzing Chinese youth nationalism, there exist both similarities and differences between their nationalism and the nationalism that is more broadly seen across all generations. Chinese nationalism is a multi-faceted, fragmented, and politically contested discourse, whose level of heterogeneity varies in accordance with both top-down and bottom-up forces. The nation may be cursorily homogenous, but the nationalistic sentiments framed around it are most certainly not.

The bottom-up element in Chinese nationalisms – the plural here denotes the fragmentation at work – cannot be overstated. In a recent interview I conducted with historian Rana Mitter at Oxford, Mitter noted that "China is a plural noun" – a diverse spectrum of individuals comprise its civil society, administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, and there is vast space between families on one end and the national government on the other. Such heterogeneity manifests itself in the

crafting and (re)imagining of the Chinese nation.

For some, the nation is a historical relic steeped in culturalist imaginaries and tropes that stretch throughout "millennia"; for others, the nation denotes an affluence- and stability-oriented collective, one that would ensure the flourishing and comfortable lives of denizens, and no more. Still, for many others, their engagement with the nation is constricted to the immediate surroundings that come to typify their *fujin* – their nearby spaces (see anthropologist Xiang Biao's excellent work on spatial and urban politics).

Not only does the archetype of the Chinese nation vary from person to person, but their sentiments are also widely disparate: different communities draw upon their bases of identifications and cleavages in relation to oppositional communities, in creating bottom-up modifications to the anodyne default. As Cheng Li argues in "Middle Class Shanghai," nationalism in the cosmopolitan mega-city tends to be more intertwined with internationalist orientations and the view that the Chinese

nation-state is no different than, say, that of America or Britain, in its pursuit of performance legitimacy. On the other hand, rural areas and inland provinces' conceptions of the nation are more likely to be grounded in thicker traditionalist and culturalist tropes, drawing parallels between the modern Chinese nation and ritualistic heritage inherited through generations of oral and textual transmission. Nascent technological advances and the rise of grassroots social media have come to consolidate what Peter Gries describes as the "popular nationalism" that undermines the ruling party's monopoly on nationalistic discourse.

None of this is to say that Chinese nationalism is wholly organic. The party-state goes to painstaking lengths to lampoon rhetoric that it dismisses as unpatriotic – as a means both of signifying the ideological salience and weightiness of devotion to the country, but also of conveniently dismissing non-conformist discourses that it perceives to be antithetical toward the continued stability of the regime. State propaganda, state-

sanctioned media outlets, and the provision of material benefits to "independent" actors – Gen-Z influencers, no less – for their patriotic speech-acts, also play a pivotal role in amplifying the nationalistic voices that best fit the state's agenda. Finally, China's nationally and thoroughly installed patriotic education enables the party to frame both the public understanding of where Chinese interests lie, as well as their affective self-identification when it comes to the substance and limits of Chinese nationhood.

While the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the top-down approach to nation-building lag behind the exponentially spiraling richness of grassroots narratives, the shift toward "networked authoritarianism" (see Rebecca MacKinnon) has enabled the ruling regime to co-opt moderate oppositional discourses and curate the online blogosphere. Meanwhile, the consolidation and streamlining of bureaucratic and national security apparatus offline has enabled the state to weave public sentiments into its latest offerings concerning the nation.

Complexity Within Youth Nationalism in China

The above has laid the theoretical groundwork for us to make sense of youth nationalism in China today. These are indeed unprecedented times – the COVID-19-induced lockdowns have been vastly disruptive; living costs in cities are surging in ways that render childrearing prohibitively expensive, and there is a palpable sense of socioeconomic stagnation, with terms such as "lying flat" (*tangping*) and "letting-rot" (*bailan*) emerging in Chinese youth lexicon. There are three ways in which youth nationalisms (again, a plural) in China vary.

The first constitutes the extent to which the individual is capable of differentiating between the empirical and the aspirational. There certainly are voices that authentically vocalize the belief that China is currently great and destined for greatness – that its resounding successes in poverty alleviation and economic development have paved the way for the country's "inevitable ascent." Such voices are in turn selectively amplified by social

and state media outlets as exemplars of ideal patriotism. For these individuals, the aspirational *is* the empirical.

Yet for others among the younger generation, who must grapple with the downsides of China's rapid urbanization, vast rural-urban inequalities, the gender and ethnic divides within the country, they would harbor no illusions about the status quo. In face of such adversity, some turn to performative resilience, given the mechanisms above concerning dissemination and maintenance of nationalistic sentiments: that as members of the collective, they must come together to overcome these long-standing "obstacles." In state discourse, the phrase "struggle" (*douzheng*) is oft-invoked to make the case for grinding away at predicaments – both internal and external – with defiance. A recent article by Zhang Jingyi makes the case that the 'lying flat' of Chinese youth is best interpreted not as a wholesale rebuking of the Chinese nation, but as a distinctive kind of cynicism in face of overwhelming obstacles to social progress and mobility.

The second dimension concerns the level of individualization. The standard account of nationalist youths in China tends to pigeonhole them through derogatory labels such as "Little Pinks" or "Red Army." Such characterizations are unfortunately – albeit unsurprisingly – increasingly popular in critical media discourses, which imbue their critiques of the Chinese state with thinly veiled essentialisms concerning the youth from the country.

Yet such sweeping generalizations would do no justice to what Yan Yunxiang terms the "increasing individualization" of Chinese society. From the institutionalization of individual responsibilities through mechanisms ranging from the social credit and hukou systems at the top, to the rise of fandom-centric and LGBTQ+-centric sub-cultures among the youth from the bottom, it is clear that the Chinese civil society has – even despite the past decade of political centralization – become progressively individualized.

Such strands of individual identities and expressions in turn intersect with the nation in complex ways. On one hand,

there exist virulently homophobic and transphobic Chinese nationalists who frame heterogeneity as the default sexual orientation of a "strong and enduring Chinese state." On the other hand, many within queer spaces often operate under the auspices of members within said spaces with connections to the administrative and bureaucratic systems. Some may even be serving party cadres who nevertheless strain to square their identities with the cisheteronormativity that remains dominant in China today. It would thus be premature to conclude that all who are nationalists in China must thereby embrace exactly the same personal and political outlooks.

A final question is this – how political, if at all, are the Chinese youth of today? One view is that in stark contrast to those who came of age in the 1980s, who bore witness to China's brief flirtation with Western liberal democratization, the younger generations of today remain firmly wedded to a nation-state that fused authoritarian, technocratic, bureaucratic, and centralizing tendencies. The claim is that Chinese youth are apolitical; they have no choice but to be.

Yet this view ignores the vast terrain between total submission and systemic contentious politics, and this middle ground is traversed by many in China's Gen-Z – ranging from social entrepreneurs, environmental activists, NGO founders, and executives, to journalists who seek to engage in critical enquiry within constricted boundaries. Indeed, many in turn couch their work and mission in the language of "the nation": to them, the best means of serving China is to seek to change the country for the better, as opposed to *bailan* – letting it rot.

It would be foolish to conclude that all Chinese youth are alike.

AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Brian Wong

Brian Wong is an assistant professor in philosophy at the University of Hong Kong.

VIEW PROFILE

TAGS

China Power | Society | East Asia | China | China nationalism | China youth | China youth culture | Gen Z in China