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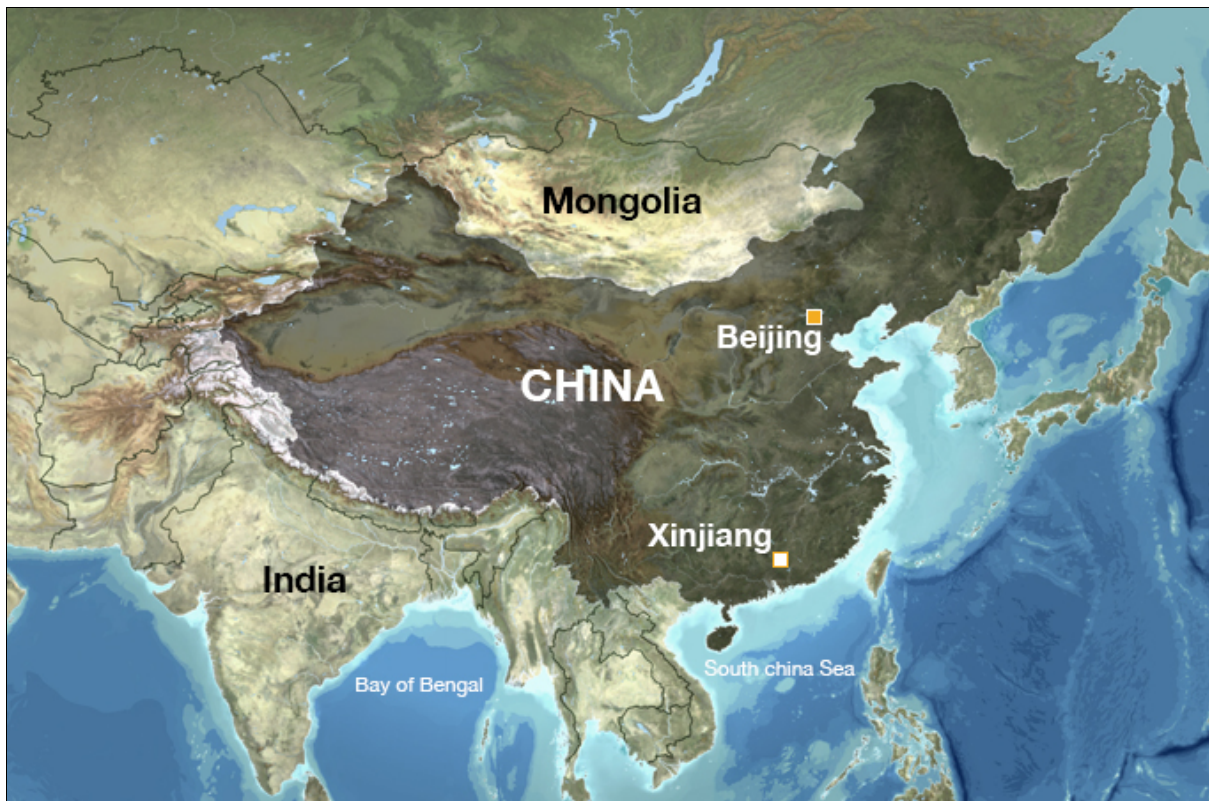
Han Nationalism in China

*Raymond Lee**

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Al Jazeera Center for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies-en@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/>



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Abstract

Great interest has quickly been developing in the international community about the rising Han nationalism in China. Most of the media spotlight was cast on China's latest military adventurism and Beijing's assertive foreign policy against neighbouring countries regarding island disputes in East and South China Sea. More and more attention has also been paid to the escalation of unrest in Xinjiang.

This report illustrates the main aspects of Han nationalism and explains its recent growth. The analysis shows that Beijing intends to promote Han nationalism to resolve problems of political legitimacy during the transition process of power under Xi's new leadership. The rising Han nationalism could be exercised towards developing a stronger China as long as China simultaneously keeps decent economic growth and maintains social stability, and provided that unrest in Xinjiang is successfully pacified and no military conflict breaks out in Pacific Asia.

Introduction

Over the past several years, great interest has quickly been developing in the international community about the rising Han nationalism in China. (1) Most of the media spotlight was cast on China's latest military adventurism and Beijing's assertive foreign policy against neighbouring countries regarding island disputes in East and South

China Sea. (2) More and more attention has also been paid to the escalation of unrest in Xinjiang, which demonstrates severe conflicts between Beijing's scale-up stability measures and the Uyghur resistance to Han rule. (3) The two news topics nicely delineates the essential feature of Han nationalism: there is a growing sentiment of Chinese nationalism in the PRC's leadership, which leads to their application of tougher measures to defend national interest in international and domestic arenas, regardless of international criticisms. (4)

Under these ostensible signs, there are deeper reasons that exist for rising Han nationalism in China. While China is largely able to maintain political and social stability under fast modernisation, top leaders face three arduous problems. First, how can they justify the huge developmental gap as well as the many socioeconomic problems in the current capitalist economy that runs counter to the official communist ideology? Second, how can they justify the one-party authoritarian regime and maintain CCP's political legitimacy? Third, how can they successfully achieve transition of power the first time round without Deng Xiaoping's political arrangement in the post-Deng era? (5) The answers to all these three questions all converge on a single solution: promoting Chinese nationalism to regain the nation's glory by achieving great power status that gives utmost legitimacy to the new CCP leadership whilst quieting any dissident voice under the supreme nationalistic goal.

The Main Aspects of Han Nationalism

Mao Zedong had publicly criticised Han chauvinism and claimed that Chinese nationalism denotes a multi-ethnic nation which includes Han majority and other 55 ethnic minorities on an equal basis. (6) However, the terms "Chinese nationalism" and "Han nationalism" are often used interchangeably, (7) for the fact that most of the minority people have been highly sinicised except Uyghur, Tibetan, and a few minorities in the Northwest China. In reality, the main discourse of Chinese nationalism is established on the history of Han people and most cultural elements are directly linked to the Han identity, including the language, customs, moral codes, Confucianism, and shared memory. Therefore, Han nationalism is often applied to a political ideology by which people not only identify themselves as Chinese but also advocate the unity and prosperity of the Chinese people, though the definition of the Chinese is subject to change.

The recent growth of Han nationalism is manifested with the following four categories of political events:

First, China launched a series of military adventurism, including commissioning the first aircraft carrier "Liaoning", (8) successfully landing an unmanned probe on the Moon, (9) and enhancing its deterrent credibility by displaying the first nuclear ballistic-missile submarine. (10) All these moves show the world that China has significantly narrowed the gap with other major powers by its ascending military capability.

Second, Beijing made its unyielding position for protecting territorial integrity through any means, including military actions very clear. (11) This proclamation applies to all of the territorial disputes with its neighbouring countries, such as Diaoyu Islands dispute (with Japan), South China Sea dispute (mainly Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia), and Sino-India border dispute, as well as what Beijing viewed as domestic national security problems, such as Xinjiang unrest, Tibet Problem, and Taiwan Problem. Many observers view Beijing's initiative of the East China Sea ADIZ (Air Defence Identification Zone) that counters Japan's ADIZ as an evident example. (12)

Third, to prevent anything like a "Jasmine Revolution" happening in China, Beijing invigorated patriotic campaigns and educational movements, (13) such as "Love Our Party, Love Our Motherland, Love Our People", (14) to consolidate CCP's political legitimacy. Meanwhile, Beijing also tightened political control through enforcing the grid management system and intensifying national security measures. (15) This is exemplified in the fact that President Xi Jinping personally chairs the newly founded "State Security Committee" and heads a new panel on internet security. (16)

Fourth, while China has gone through a dramatic power transition at the CCP's 18th National Congress in March 2013, President Xi is still under the process of fully consolidating his power. On the one hand, Xi vigorously carries out a series of anti-corruption policies and launches large-scale criminal investigation against corrupted high-ranking cadres. (17) On the other hand, Xi attempts to propose his own political ideal that aims to pursue "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by achieving the "Chinese Dream". (18) While the substantial content of the "Chinese Dream" is not very clear, Xi emphasised "national rejuvenation, improvement of people's livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening", (19) which exhibits strong nationalistic orientation.

Apparently, the advancement of military capability targets to achieve great power status and justify CCP's one-party regime. Assertive foreign policies and tightened security measures are both aiming to maintain domestic stability and prevent any political challenges against the new leadership. Finally, fierce corruption crackdown and the

stirring “Chinese Dream” campaign are geared towards achieving complete power transition and consolidating Xi's political authority.

Domestic Effects

The rise of Han-nationalism has brought multiple consequences to Chinese domestic politics. From Beijing's point of view, many of them are welcomed, but some are not. Among them, the most salient effect is the social construction of Xi's political legitimacy in the power transition process. For the past two years, Xi deliberately showed the world that China under his leadership has prepared well to engage in international affairs, and most importantly, China has great confidence to become a responsible stakeholder in the international society with its own political system and CCP's one-party rule. (20) As a matter of fact, such constructed image is more targeted at the domestic audience, thus quickly building up Xi's political credibility and secures China's internal stability.

Another beneficial effect to Beijing is the diversion of popular discontent towards governance problems through instigation of nationalism. While China still managed to maintain decent economic growth, many socioeconomic problems, such as soaring housing price, unemployment issues, income inequality, and corruption, greatly eroded people's political trust, particularly towards local governments. Knowing the potential risk of governance crisis, Beijing initiated a series of corruption campaigns but also directed the media spotlight to recent geopolitical disputes and great national achievements. This political strategy not only successfully mitigates the popular discontent but also reshuffles the issue on the agenda that prioritises national aggrandisement.

A major negative impact, however, is the aggravation of ethnic conflicts between Uyghurs and Han people. The resultant conflicts continue to aggravate and have already developed into bloodshed retaliation between Uyghur jihadists and the police force. (21) Since the Uyghur population does not assimilate to the majority Han people, Han nationalism has no appeal to them, nor does it divert their attention away from governance problems and coercive rule. On the contrary, the pervasive Han nationalistic sentiment amplifies the sense of relative deprivation associated with those who are seriously underprivileged in socioeconomic, cultural, and religious aspects. The failure to improve Uyghur's livelihood and the negligence to fully accommodate Islamic identity further exacerbates the ethnic conflict, which has been evolved into nationwide terrorist attacks that seriously threatens China's internal stability.

International Effects

Neighbouring countries have different reactions to the rise of Han nationalism. In general, they are aware of China's growing influence and its tougher position, especially when interest conflict is in question. However, different countries have varying reactions to this phenomenon. The most noteworthy cases are those neighbouring countries in the Pacific Rim, because territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea seem to be gradually escalating. If we rank the adversarial level of bilateral relationship from high to low, we can categorize those neighbouring countries into following groups: Japan, United States, Southeast Asian countries, and Taiwan and South Korea.

Japan is the focal point to watch given the more and more intense Sino-Japanese relationship, which could continue deteriorating if no sign of improvement appears over the following three issues. First, the surging nationalistic sentiment sporadically causes large-scale anti-Japanese protests in China. (22) These incidents remind Japan that the inherent rivalry between the two countries have not been fully resolved, particularly with regard to the conflicting understanding of World War II and the earlier invasions. Second, Beijing's hardliner policy in the disputes of Diaoyu Islands and ADIZ issues has been extended from diplomatic rhetoric to military action. Chinese naval force regularly enter in the disputed sea areas and signals to Japan that China does not rule out using military means to protect its territorial integrity. (23) Third, Beijing has already issued its serious concern regarding Abe's rearmament policy and the recent rightist turn against China in the Pacific Asia. (24)

While not totally agreeing with Japan's rearmament policy, Washington keeps a close eye on Chinese military development and gives strong support to Japan in balancing China. (25) However, factors that decide US attitude are not simply bound within regional consideration; rather, it is part of US global strategic policy and the nature of the issue, which is about greater power politics. Despite Beijing's reiteration of China's peaceful rise policy, the stake is too high for Washington to accept the unlikely promise that a rising China will not seek the hegemonic status and challenge the existing order. From a US perspective, it is necessary to contain the potential threat associated with China's speed-up military build-up and Beijing's pursuit of the great power status. (26) Washington has no reason to be optimistic about the growth of Han nationalism in China.

The same worry also exists in those Southeast Asian Countries which have territorial disputes with China, including Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. The nuclear issue is about the sovereignty of South China Sea and numerous islands and the ownership of the vast oil and mineral resources. (27) Beijing has already taken hard measures to domesticize the disputed islands and sea areas by establishing a new administrative unit

called "Sansha City", as a prefecture of the Hainan Province. (28) Despite the seriousness as it sounds, this move did not change the status quo about the de facto control of those disputed islands. Along with the close Sino-ASEAN economic partnership and strong US political support, the political tension was much ameliorated than it was supposed to be.

Taiwan and South Korea have conflicting security relationships with China, but simultaneously the level of economic interdependence in both countries is very high. The two countries for a long time have been caught into a dilemma how to trade-off between security hazard and economic interest given their economic dependence on China. (29) However, comparing to the inherent rivalry both countries had with China, the rising Han nationalism is not a particular problematic since that they are apparently not the targeted enemy of Chinese nationalistic sentiment. The impact of the rising Han nationalism is much milder towards Taiwan and South Korea.

Future Expectations

Before Xi fully consolidates his power and feels comfortable in resolving governance issues, Beijing is expected to opt for the nationalistic route to secure political legitimacy. So long as China can keep decent economic growth and maintain social stability, the rising Han nationalism could be exercised towards developing a stronger China. However, great uncertainty still remains in domestic and international arenas if Beijing cannot successfully pacify the Xinjiang unrest or significant military conflict breaks out between China and any neighbouring country in Pacific Asia. The best case scenario for Beijing is to manipulate Chinese nationalism sophisticatedly to achieve frog-leap overall aggrandizement and become a credible global power, within the shortest time span and without being countervailed by other great powers.

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***Raymond Lee** is a specialist in Chinese affairs.

Endnotes

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