Nationalisms, Ethnicity, and Identity in Contemporary China

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Introduction

This unit explores the struggles through which political and social actors define and create a nation or nations by using historical and cultural ideas, beliefs, and practices for political purposes. Understanding the political and cultural processes that shape the modern nation-state in East Asia offers insight into how nation-states function in our contemporary global system. Furthermore, nationalisms, ethnicity, and national identity influence both the domestic and international political experiences of the East Asian geopolitical region.

This unit focuses on the People's Republic of China as a case-study to understand issues of nationalism, ethnicity and national identity in East Asia. Nationalism in contemporary China is explored through comparative theoretical frameworks such as "the invention of tradition," "imagined communities," popular nationalism, cultural nationalism, ethnic nationalism, and national identity.

The unit could be useful in a variety of courses including but not limited to:

- Comparative Politics
- East Asian Politics
- Chinese Politics
- Comparative Nationalisms
- International Relations – East Asia
- Modern East Asia
- Modern Chinese History
- Comparative studies of ethnicity and/or identity
- Sociology of East Asia
- Anthropology of East Asia

The unit is designed to be taught over three class sessions in order to cover the creation of and changes in national identity in 20th-century China. The first class session is best delivered as a

lecture. The second and third sessions lend themselves to a combination of lecture, discussion, and small group work.

The unit can be used by itself or in combination with the following other units on race, ethnicity, and nationality in East Asia:

- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Contemporary China: Redefining "Chineseness" (forthcoming on the ExEAS website)
- "Chinese" Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation http://www.exeas.org/resources/chinese-perspectives.html
- Race and Ethnicity in Asian America http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity.html
- Multiethnic Japan: Nation-building and National Identity http://www.exeas.org/resources/multiethnic-japan.html
- Okinawa: Beyond the Ethnic Other http://www.exeas.org/resources/okinawa.html
- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity: America, Korea, and Biracial Koreans http://www.exeas.org/resources/korean-race-ethnicity.html

For summary information on each of these units, see "Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia. (http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity-intro.html)

Background Information for the Instructor

Historical Events

The following historical events are particularly important to discussions of Chinese nationalism and China's search for a modern identity throughout the twentieth century.

- The Republican Revolution (1911), which overthrew the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China
- The New Culture/May Fourth Movement (1915-1926), which urged a radical break from "traditional" Chinese culture
- The Chinese Revolution (1949) which established the People's Republic of China and brought the Communist Party to power
- The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which proclaimed the destruction of old ideas and culture
- The rise of Deng Xiaoping and the "Four Modernizations" (1979-1982) which launched massive economic reform

All of these events were not simply periods of political and social upheaval, but involved complex changes in the ways in which Chinese intellectuals and ruling regimes came to regard China as a nation, a state, and a civilization.

Ethnicity in China

China is a non-homogeneous, multi-ethnic nation. Ethnic "minorities" officially include fifty-five identified groups such as the Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, and Hakka that are located in different provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities.

Throughout the twentieth century, government policies toward these groups can be seen as fluctuating between "accommodationist" and "assimilationist" approaches. In the early 20th century, Sun Yat-sen adopted the Han Dynasty (206 BCE — 220 CE) "ethnonym" (*Hanzu*) to classify the dominant ethnic group in China. (This term continues to be used today.) The campaign for the Republican Revolution (1911) explicitly appealed to ethnic nationalism and urged the Han Chinese majority to expel the ruling Manchu. (The Manchus founded the Qing Dynasty and ruled China from 1644-1911.)

Ironically, one of the most urgent issues that faced the newly founded Chinese Republic was how to forge a nation out of the multi-ethnic empire it inherited from the Qing dynasty. The new Republican government pursued a policy of Han-centered assimilation, suppressing the languages and customs of minority groups. After seizing political control in 1949, the Chinese Communist party employed similar policies of assimilation, with some variations. They also embarked on an ambitious project to systematically identify and classify China's ethnic groups based on a Stalin-era Soviet definition of ethnicity, which resulted in the list of fifty-five ethnic minorities that China still uses today.

Despite a history of government intervention, China's ethnic minorities have never became fully assimilated into Han culture, and ethnic groups have resisted cultural and political intrusions to varying degrees. The best-known examples of ethnic nationalisms within the People's Republic of China are those of the Tibetan and Uyghur people.

Background Reading for the Instructor: Theoretical Literature on the Nation-state

*** Most important
** Recommended
* Optional

***ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

***CONNOR, Walker. *Ethnonationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

**GELLNER, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.

**HOBSBAWM, Eric and Terrance RANGER. *The Invention of Tradition*. Revised edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992

*SMITH, Anthony D. *National Identity (Ethnonationalism in Comparative Perspective)*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1993.

Student Readings

*** Most important
** Recommended
* Optional

Class Session One: Historical Perspectives Concerning National Identity

***CONNOR, Walker. *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. pp. 67-92 and 322-329.

***GLADNEY, Dru. *Muslim Chinese*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. pp. 1-36.

> Connor's book describes the creation of the nationalities scheme for the Soviet Union under Stalin that was then adopted by Mao for the newly established People's Republic of China. An important focus is how the "nationalities question" emerged in political discourse for both countries. While showing the importance of Soviet Communism on Chinese Communism, the book also serves as a good background for parts of the Gladney book, especially pages 81-98 which detail the political process by which the contemporary state in China produced its classification schema of fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities (*xiaoshu minzu*) that make up between 5-10% of the PRCs current 1.3 billion people.

Class Session Two: Changing Representations of National Identity from the Republican to the post-Maro Eras

***WALDRON, Arthur. "Representing China: The Great Wall and Cultural Nationalism in the Twentieth Century." In *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity*, edited by Harumi BEFU. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1993. Pages 36-60.

> Waldron's essay shows how the meaning of the Great Wall as a national symbol has changed over the twentieth century. He argues that the Great Wall had traditionally been associated with dynastic evil and that it became a symbol of national greatness only in the early twentieth century when the identity of Chinese civilization experienced a crisis. He then traces the symbolic meaning of the Great Wall from the May Fourth Movement to the post-Mao era.

Class Session Three (Optional): Diversity of Nationalism and National Identity in China

**UNGER, Jonathan, ed. *Chinese Nationalism*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

Recommended chapters:

- Duara, Prasenjit. "De-Constructing the Chinese Nation" (Chapter 2; pp. 31-35)
- Fitgerald, John. "The Nationless State: The Search for a Nation in Modern Chinese Nationalism" (Chapter 3; pp.56-85)

Unger's edited volume looks at the search for a nation as it emerges in modern Chinese nationalism. A variety of nationalisms are considered and demonstrate the plurality of "imagined communities" that claim to represent the Chinese nation.

**GLADNEY, Dru C. "Clashed Civilizations?: Muslim and Chinese Identities in the PRC." In *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, edited by Dru C. Gladney. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Pages 106-131.

Using the case of Muslim Chinese, Gladney illustrates the complex pattern in which the identity, self-image, and ethnic boundaries of a minority group are defined. The article shows the diversity within the official category of Muslim Chinese and discusses what this means to Muslim and Chinese identities in the People's Republic of China. Works well with excerpts from Unger's book.

Further Reading for Instructors and/or Students

DITTMER, Lowell and Samuel Kim, eds. *China's Quest for National Identity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

FRIEDMAN, Edward. *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995.

GRIES, Peter Hays. *China's New Nationalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

HONIG, Emily. *Creating Chinese Ethnicity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

SUN, Lung-Kee. *The Chinese National Character*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to structure in-class discussion in the second class session or the third if the unit is taught over three class sessions. Best presented to students to accompany their reading prior to class, and then brought to class to structure discussion:

- Why is it important to consider the historical origins of the formation of the nation and present the diversity of representations of national identity that characterize nationalism in contemporary China? What does it tell us about the relationship between politics and culture in China?

- What are some comparisons (similarities and differences) that can be drawn between the process concerning national identity that has been going on in China since the beginning of the twentieth-century and any parallel processes going on in the U.S. throughout the same period? What is the significance of how both countries have classified and treated their "minorities"? What is the relationship between the treatment and consideration of "minorities" and the type of political system in each country? From this perspective, is there a large difference between communist and democratic regimes?

- How is national identity a political project? What is its role in legitimating a ruling regime? In the construction of a modern nation?

- What are the competing interpretations or discourses of nationalism at work in Chinese politics today? Is there a real danger for the nation-state in popular nationalism? Or is it mainly a political tool to be utilized by the Chinese leadership?

- Why are "popular nationalisms" and "ethnonationalisms" double-edged swords when it comes to state-society relations?

Critical Memo Assignment

This assignment can be used at the end of this or any other teaching unit to help students analytically connect the readings in the unit to broader topics (e.g. world politics). The questions and topics for individual readings are intended to be incorporated into class sessions prior to the assignment of the critical memo. These questions and topics are designed to get students to begin thinking more in-depth about the readings for which the critical memo will be assigned. When the memo is assigned, have each student choose one of the readings from the teaching unit on which to focus in the memo. This reading could be a chapter from a book or an article. The three sections are designed to be addressed separately by students in order to encourage 1) conciseness in thinking and writing, and 2) selection and weighting of arguments or support for arguments. Section one is designed to help students think about the connections between readings in a semester-long course. Section two is designed to help students think about the broader implications of the reading about which they choose to write. The final section is to push students to analyze and think critically about the reading they have chosen, but in selective and concise ways. (This assignment is adapted from http://www.jhu.edu/polysci/faculty/tsai/criticalmemo.html.)

Preparatory Guidelines for Writing a Critical Memo

1. The purpose of the critical memo is to enhance your critical thinking abilities using the assigned readings and to improve the depth and breadth of our in-class discussions.
2. Simple summaries of the material are not sufficient.
3. As preparation for writing the critical memo paper, think about the following questions and topics as we do each of the assigned readings. We will be incorporating these questions and topics into our in-class discussions and activities, so come prepared.

Questions for individual readings:

1. What is the intended purpose of the assigned chapter/article? Is the author making an explicit argument about a topic? Does the author purport to present an "objective" description of facts? What are the most important points the author is trying to convey? How well does the author succeed in conveying these points?
2. If the author is making a clear argument, what is the author's normative agenda in making the argument(s)? More interestingly, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the author? Why?
3. What kinds of evidence does the author use? What kinds of sources? If the author appears to be describing an apparently factual event, phenomenon, or theory, to what extent do you find the evidence presented convincing? Does the use of the evidence seem to you to be fair and reasonable? Were you persuaded by the author's argument based on the evidence? To what extent has the author presented the material objectively? (Hint: What type of evidence might strengthen or weaken the author's argument(s)? Given the sources you have at your disposal in this course, what sorts of arguments might you have made that the author does not make?)

Topics for individual readings:

1. As you think about the individual readings, compare the one you are reading to the others you have read this term. How might the authors of the articles speak to each other or what might they discuss if they were seated at a seminar table, on the same roundtable panel, on a long flight together overseas? Choose two authors. What would be their topic of conversation and what would be their points of agreement, disagreement, and compromise?
2. To what extent are these authors talking about the same issue or different aspects of the same issue? That is, how do the themes in one reading relate to themes in earlier readings this term or themes and ideas in our class discussions?
3. If you were invited to participate in their discussion, what would you say? In other words, would you find yourself siding more with one author than the other? Why? Or would you make an alternative argument and/or interrupt with additional evidence? What would that argument be or what would the additional evidence consist of?
4. How has the reading(s) enhanced your understanding of historical and/or contemporary China? In what ways did it amplify, differ from, or change the impression you got from my summaries or our in-class discussions?

Guidelines for writing the Critical Memo paper

Memos are meant not only to assist you in carefully considering the readings you have done for this course, but also in understanding what they suggest about Chinese politics in particular and world politics more broadly. Memos should not be used to summarize the readings — I want to see evidence that you have thought analytically about the readings in some depth and considered their implications.

Details: double-spaced, typed, 8 1/2"x 11" paper, 4-5 pages (DO NOT GO OVER 5 PAGES).

To write an excellent memo, you need to:

- Section 1 (clearly marked): Discuss the main points or arguments of an assigned reading of your choice (consider each reading's "hook" or "punchline"-what hits you about it), and how this reading of your choice relates to other readings you have done this semester.

- Section 2 (clearly marked): Describe what the assigned reading's argument(s) imply/implies about how we should analyze 1) contemporary Chinese politics and 2) world politics more broadly.
- Section 3 (clearly marked): Provide your own critical analysis of these argument(s) — providing a well-reasoned (well supported with evidence) explanation of 1) why you agree or disagree with the author's arguments and 2) what alternative arguments or evidence you would add to the assigned reading you have chosen to write on in order to improve the work. Points to consider:
    - What are some of the contradictions or ambiguities in the reading?
    - Does the author support all of his or her assumptions?
    - What are the sorts of biases that exist in the reading?
    - Are there ways that what is discussed in the text is congruent with your own experience?
    - Did you have any particular personal responses to the reading? What were they? Why?