The Rise of Han-Centrism and What It Means for International Politics

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Abstract

This article addresses the rise of Han-centrism, a form of hyper-nationalism, in contemporary China. As Chinese nationalism has become more ethnocentric since the 1990s, the cultural chauvinism of Han-centrism has become increasingly more influential in the debate over national identity. Within this narrative, Han culture is considered to be the authentic character of the nation; to deviate from the Han identity will only tarnish Chinese exceptionalism and impede China's rise. While Chinese nationalism consists of many competing discourses, we argue that Han-centrism has a significant influence within both policy-making circles and the public sphere in China, and, as a result, has important consequences for the future of international politics.

Introduction

Understanding the causes of Chinese actions in international politics is one of the major issues facing scholars of international politics. Academics and policy-makers seek to comprehend whether China's rise will overturn the present international order or may be accommodated and evolve within it. Critical questions revolve around what China wants, in what circumstances China will use force to advance its aims, and will its rise provoke a war, or intense security competition, with the United States, India, Japan, the Philippines, or Vietnam, or an allied coalition of these states.

 Naturally enough for such seminal and complex questions, there are many causes of Chinese behaviour, and Beijing's actions may be usefully studied from multiple perspectives. Scholars have well-developed theories and approaches to

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this question. Power transition theory yields insights into past hegemonic struggles; neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism also provide understanding, as do theories of foreign policy analysis and bureaucratic behaviour. Sinologists provide additional approaches that yield significant judgments and discernments into Chinese motivations and likely future actions.

In essence, with China's growing power, we return to questions asked of the Soviet Union: what motivates it now, in the past, and in the future; is it an aggressive or status quo power; in what circumstances will it use force. To answer these questions, scholars of international politics since Leopold von Ranke broadly fall into two schools of thought, emphasizing either structural – or external forces – in contrast to domestic and cultural explanations.

Both schools yield major insights, but the approach of this study is explicitly the latter. We submit that Chinese national identity, and specifically Han-centrism, a particularly important and dangerous form of nationalism, is essential for comprehending Chinese actions.

For the last twenty years, nationalism has been an intensely and widely studied topic with good reason. The national and ethnic conflicts spawned by the fall of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia generated considerable academic and policy interest in its causes and consequences. Scholars made important contributions to our understanding of this nettlesome issue (e.g. Comaroff and Stern 1995; Greenfield 1992; Van Evera 1994). Their scholarship captures important insights into these wars (Chafetz 1996–97). At the same time, when moved to the Chinese context, the approaches fall short of the necessary deep analytical penetration of Han-centrism and Chinese nationalism due to the long history and considerable complexities shrouding Chinese national identity.

This study advances three major arguments. First, we begin our analysis with the recognition that Chinese nationalism contains many facets, and is thus similar to nationalist beliefs held by many peoples and states in history. Nationalism may be grounded in ideological or ethnic foundations, or some amalgamation, with different emphases placed on those foundations at various times by the government. What we identify is that Chinese nationalism has evolved from greater emphasis on the ideological foundation of Maoism to an ethnic one, based on Han identity.

Second, we submit that Han-centrism, or Han supremacy, shapes contemporary Chinese society and foreign policy-making. Our analysis reveals that Han-centrism is an ethnocentric narrative deeply embedded within the aggressive ethnic nationalism shaping China's political and economic rise in international politics.

Third, we build directly on this analysis to explore why this particular strain of Chinese nationalism, Han-centrism, is worrisome for the stability of international politics given the increasing power of China, and its concomitant growing ability to shape norms and values.

The Many Dimensions of Chinese Nationalism

Our analysis begins with the recognition that nationalism in many states serves a myriad of functions for a state's population and elites. For populations, as many

scholars of nationalism have demonstrated, national history provides the people of a nation with 'the false unity of a self-same' (Duara 1995:4). In this sense, as Anderson (1991) has famously noted, the nation is an 'imagined community'. However, when studying the dynamics of national identity in modern China, we have to first ask 'who' is doing the imagining and what are the internal and external influences shaping the narratives of the nation, or what Duara (1995) aptly calls 'nation views'.

The 'nation views' of China is a complex topic that requires deep exploration because Chinese nationalism is not invariable. Rather, as Yongnian Zheng (1999:113) correctly notes, 'it has been repeatedly re-constructed in accordance with changing domestic priorities and international circumstances and is thus in a state of flux'.

Much attention has been given to the rise of 'ultra-nationalism' in China since Tiananmen (Feng 2007; Liu 2012). Scholars are right to do so, as such aggressive sentiment has greatly shaped relations with Japan, the West, particularly the United States, and the treatment of ethnic minorities within the country (Guo 1998). To understand the manifestations of this form of nationalism and its implications for international politics, it is important to first address two major transformations of Chinese nationalism, or 'nation views', since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. That is to say, the Chinese nationalism that once defined Mao Zedong's China has been more recently replaced with a form of ethnic nationalism, according to Lai (2008), that focuses inward and looks to the past in 'search for roots' (*xungen* [寻根]).

In the former case, Chinese nationalism can be seen as deeply ideological and based primarily on Marxism-Leninism (Seckington 2005). Drawing largely from communist ideology, this earlier form of Chinese nationalism was fiercely anti-imperialist and sought to escape China's 'century of humiliation' by reasserting Chinese exceptionalism in the face of Western hegemony. Within this nationalist narrative, China has been a victim of foreign oppression and aggression since the First Opium War of 1839. However, it was not so much China's defeat by the hands of foreigners that caused this humiliation, but rather the overturning of a long history of Sinocentrism in which Imperial China was considered to be the centre of the known world (Zhang 2011) and a 'tribute system' defined China's foreign relations with its neighbours (Fairbank 1943, 1968). According to Geremie Barmé (1995:211), there is the belief held by many of the Chinese political elite that 'the world (that is, the West) owes China something' and 'past humiliations are often used as an excuse to demand better treatment from the West'.

To reclaim its rightful historical destiny and moral superiority, Mao's China drew from communist ideology to produce a national identity defined by revolutionary Sinocentrism, or *Tianxiaism*, which argued for solidarity among the Chinese people in opposition to Western imperialism. On this point Douglas Howland (2011:177) argues: 'In Mao's Eyes, although the civilization of the Han nationality most defined the civilization of the Chinese nation, all of China's nationalities were united as collective victims of imperialism and equal in their striving to shake off foreign oppression.'

Mao used similar rhetoric to make appeals of Third World solidarity among 'oppressed nations', and, during this time, the PRC began reaching out to, and building relationships with, Africa and other countries of the Third World (Zhang 2013). In this sense, Sinocentrism could be partially recovered. That is, while China was no longer the great power of the 'known world', it could become the centre of the Third World and the great champion of anti-imperialism.

As Jian Chen (2001:237) notes, an age-old Chinese ethnocentrism and universalism penetrated Beijing's revolutionary policies and rhetoric of Third World solidarity. In particular, within the context of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Cold War, Chen points out that the PRC demanded that Hanoi recognize China's moral superiority with the intention 'to create . . . a modern version of the relationship between the Central Kingdom and its subordinate neighbors' (ibid.). When the Vietnamese refused, according to Chen, the Chinese 'found it necessary to "punish" their former comrades in order to defend their heavily wounded sense of superiority', resulting in 'the final collapse of the 'alliance between brotherly comrades''' (ibid.).

This form of Chinese ethnocentrism, also referred to as the 'great Han chauvinism' by some, greatly shaped the PRC's vision of Han leadership within the struggle against Western imperialism. Most telling are the arguments put forth by Li Weihan (1987:366–68), Chairman of the Nationalities Affairs Commission, on the role of the Han in China's self-determination.

> In its long history, China had already become a Han-centric, unified, and multi-nationality state; the struggle against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism required unity of all nationalities of China; and the Chinese revolution had to be led by the proletariat, a class that did not exist with minority nationalities, and therefore these peoples' separation from the Han would mean their deprivation of sound leadership.

However, while the PRC acknowledged the threat of unfettered Han chauvinism to the establishment of a multicultural society,[1] Han-centrism could not be easily removed from Chinese socialism and its conception of the nation for two reasons. First, territorial sovereignty required the support of the Han majority, especially in domestic disputes with recalcitrant ethnic minorities like the Uyghur in Xinjiang and border disputes with neighbouring countries such as India. Second, many of the political elite viewed the non-Han minority groups as backward and inferior, requiring Han tutelage to transform them into proletarian supporters of revolutionary socialism (Howland 2011:172). As a result, Han paternalism lingered within government policies throughout the Maoist period, particularly with regard to national minorities and relations with neighbouring countries.

From Communist Ideology to Ethnic Nationalism

Since the political and economic reforms of the early 1980s, Chinese policy-makers and intellectuals, increasingly concerned with confronting Western economic and military power, have abandoned the ideologically driven

nationalism of the Cold War in favour of a new narrative of the nation that better suits China's changing role in international politics (Zheng 1999). As the works of Jonathan Unger (1996:xi) and Perry Link (1993) note, the demise of the Maoist ideology at this time produced a 'crisis of faith' and a 'thought vacuum' within the inner core of Chinese political and intellectual life. The debate around China's 'core problem' was not so much about finding a new political ideology to replace Maoism, but rather a crisis of faith in Chinese culture, particularly among the political elite who were concerned with mobilizing a younger generation in support of new national interests while simultaneously preventing an outgrowth of cultural nihilism (Guo 1998:164).

To achieve this, Chinese nationalism would become less ideological and more Sinocentric, drawing primarily from Confucianism and ideals rooted in nativism and chauvinism to redeem past humiliations and regain international power (Bernstein and Munro 1997; Lilley 1996). As Zhang (2011) points out, these ideals were not imported from the West or new to China for that matter, but rather Sinocentric beliefs that date back to Imperial China and have since influenced Chinese political thought. That is, this belief in Chinese exceptionalism is 'an essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government and many intellectuals . . . [and] can also provide the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations that both policy-makers and analysts inside China see as in dire need' (ibid.:307). In sum, as has been recognized by many students of Chinese national identity, it has always been comprised of different elements, and at alternative periods in its history various elements and expressions have been emphasized by the government (Callahan 2010; Duara 1995).

Promoting Chinese Nationalism through Education Campaigns

To foster this sense of exceptionalism, the political elite, one notable example being Jiang Zemin, former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has supported a nationalist discourse that emphasizes 'national spirit' (*minzhu jingshen* [民主精神]), 'patriotism' (*aiguozhuyi* [爱国主义]), and the 'Chinese civilization' (*Zhongguo wenming* [中国文明]) (Gilley 1998; Zhao 1998). To instil patriotism and xenophobia among the younger generations, the CCP has and, indeed, continues to implement a patriotic education campaign (Weatherly 2014:185).

At the core of this campaign of reshaping collective memory is a whitewashing of modern Chinese history, that is to say, a strategy of 'misremembering the past' (Friedman 2008) accompanied by narratives of 'chosen glory' and 'chosen trauma' (Wang 2012). In these narratives, the crimes of the Mao era, the death and destruction of the Cultural Revolution, are absent and, instead, the story of how Mao and the ruling party saved the Chinese people from the imperialism of barbarous foreigners, most notably the Japanese, is centre stage. However, this 'victor narrative' (Chinese triumph over Western and Japanese imperialism) that defined the Mao period, has been more recently combined with a new 'victim narrative' that emphasizes Chinese suffering at the hands of foreign 'devils' (Gries 2005a). Thus, since the early 1990s, the government has attempted to promote this

narrative by, in part, requiring that all school textbooks be revised to reflect this victimization theme that blames the 'West' for China's problems (Wang 2008).

In other words, the government draws heavily from historical memory to refashion a national identity to meet the economic and political needs of a rapidly changing Chinese society. According to Zheng Wang (2008), there are three core components of Chinese historical memory that underlie the government's patriotic campaigns and nationalist rhetoric: emergency and urgency; Chinese suffering at the hands of foreigners; and tensions with countries that have had historically bad relations with China, such as Japan and the West. The history and memory underlying the patriotic education, according to Wang (2008), makes possible a shared identity that unites the people together under the banner of redemption for past wrongs caused by external forces during the 'century of humiliation' and resistance to continued 'bullying' from the West.

The government's objective here is quite simple – distract the Chinese people from the failures of the CCP, such as the notorious 1989 Tiananmen massacre and growing public concern over political corruption, by promoting patriotism and nationalism among the younger generations that fosters an 'us versus them' mentality (Friedman 2008). According to the CCP Central Committee's patriotic education campaign, the intent is 'to inspire national spirit, enhance national cohesiveness, set up national self-esteem and pride, reinforce and develop the broadest patriotic united front' (*Xinhua Net* 1994).[2] Such an understanding can also be seen in the teaching agenda set by the Ministry of Education (2002) for high school history courses:

> Chinese modern history is a history of humiliation that China had been gradually degenerated into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; at the same time, it is also a history that Chinese people strived for national independence and social progress, persisted in their struggle of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and was also the history of the success of New-Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CCP.

This attempt by the CCP to rewrite collective memory through education campaigns and the use of propaganda in school textbooks has been challenged by the influx of Western values and ideals within Chinese academic institutions. Acknowledging the growth of non-Chinese values on college campuses, the CCP has started to crackdown more aggressively on the spread of ideological material that challenges the victimization narrative and, thus, the government's legitimacy (Buckley 2013). Along these lines, the government has banned academic research and coursework on seven 'Western' topics: universal values, civil society, citizens' rights, freedom of the press, benefits of capitalism, the independence of the judiciary, and mistakes made by the CCP (Economy 2014).

Interestingly, socialism is the only western ideology considered by the government to be acceptable, with the call for new guidelines that require the 'country's higher education institutions to prioritize the teaching of Marxism, ideological loyalty to the party and the views of President Xi Jinping' (Levin 2015). Viewing colleges and universities as ideological fronts in the war of ideas

against the West, Education Minister Yuan Guiren (*Xinhua Net* 2015) called for the four 'Nevers' in the management of course textbooks:

> NEVER let textbooks promoting western values enter our classes; NEVER allow speeches that slander the leadership of the Communist Party of China and smear socialism appear in our classes; NEVER allow speeches that violate the country's Constitution and laws prevail in university and college classes; NEVER allow teachers to vent their personal grudges or discontent while teaching to pass negative ideas to their students.

The Rise of Ethnic Nationalism

With the emergence of China in global and regional politics, the PRC has pursued a two-pronged nationalism described as state-lead nationalism – the establishment of a strong homogeneous identity with an assertive national self-awareness – and ethnic nationalism – that is, the creation of a community that shares a common history, culture, and language (Harris 1997). Mostly, this strategy has worked because the concepts of nation and state have been vaguely defined, yet nonetheless intertwined, in China since the Qing period (Duara 1988; Fitzgerald 1995; Tan and Chen 2013). Thus, what we see today is the CCP seeking to maintain legitimacy (Gries 2005a), making appeals to ethnic (Han) nationalist interests *and* promoting patriotism and national identity by emphasizing China's long history and the country's disempowerment during the "Hundred Years of Humiliation" (Bislev 2014:118).

However, the by-product of the state-led nationalist education campaigns is not only a widespread cultural nationalism that overwhelmingly pervades Chinese society, but also a growing number of 'angry youth' (*fen qing* [愤青]) that are helping fuel the rise of hyper-nationalism (Shen 2004; Yang and Zheng 2012). The CCP's emphasis on victimization and call to regain China's central role in international relations has gained a great deal of support within the growing populist nationalist movement from below (Friedman 2008; Xu 2001). In fact, others have already noted the use of the internet by the angry youth to mobilize fellow nationalists in protest against perceived adversaries of the country, most notably the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 or the more recent 2005 protests against Japan (Liu 2006; Tang and Darr 2012).

At the forefront of this movement are Han nationalists articulating their own strongly nationalistic counterclaims and voicing their right to participate in Chinese politics (Gries 2005a; Friedman 2008). These aggressive nationalist counterclaims are, in part, attempting to shape the CCP's rewriting of historical memory, as well as influence the position China takes in regional and global politics (Chen Weiss 2014; Reilly 2014). Such populist (Han-centric) nationalism can be easily found in the numerous 'historic books' and novels that portray Imperial China as benevolent and more advanced than the West and the need to re-establish the powerful position in international affairs that has been wrongly taken from the Chinese people.

For example, popular nationalist books like *Those Happenings in the Ming Dynasty* (2010), *Stories of the Two Song Dynasties* (2009), and *Memories of the*

Late Qing Dynasty (2007) emphasize Han Chinese heroism, power politics and social Darwinism, the failure of the cultural traditions of the neighbouring countries, and the importance of territorial expansion through colonialism to revitalize China (Yu 2014). Moreover, these historical narratives have accompanied the growth of a 'Greater China' nationalism (Duara 1993; Townsend 1992), which calls for, at any cost, the preservation of China's territorial integrity.

Throughout the Chinese internet, young nationalists are demanding that China regain its past regional dominance, as evinced in the tributary system, that defined the dynastic period. According to this understanding, not only are Taiwan, Tibet, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and Hong Kong part of 'Greater China', but also the islands and shoals of the South China Sea – anything within the nine-dash line. For the most extreme, even parts of Korea are included, specifically the territory of the ancient proto-Korean Kingdom of Goguryeo, 37 BC–AD 668 (Chase 2011; Horesh et al. 2014; Yahuda 2013), which, as Gries (2005b) points out, has more to do with national identity, specifically defining the ingroup and Chinese superiority ('big brother status') than political, economic, or security reasons.

When Xi Jinping claims that certain territories, such as the islands in the South China Sea, have been China's 'since ancient times' (Wong 2015), he is effectively tapping into a deeply rooted historical memory of humiliation and exploitation. Therefore, it is no surprise that young Chinese cyber nationalists have responded to The Hague's recent decision to reject China's territorial claims with a militaristic video, titled 'South China Sea Arbitration, Who Cares?' (Rauhala and Denyer 2016). These angry youth have bought into Xi's historical allusions and are united by a strong Han-centric identity and the patriotic desire to reassert Chinese civilization by reclaiming what outsiders have unfairly taken.

The online presence, such as blogs, chat rooms, and posts, of the angry youth and their demands for a more assertive China that looks more like Putin's Russia and less like the United States (Guo 2014), has significantly grown over the years. While the Chinese government's control of cyberspace is fairly efficient, especially with removing content deemed threatening to the CCP's legitimacy, 'patriotic anger' on the Chinese internet remains one of the safe topics that the government tolerates and even encourages at times (Bislev 2014).

As a result, hand in hand with the rise of new historical narratives have been an increasing number of popular 'non-fiction' books calling for a more assertive and aggressive China. Books like *China Can Say No* (1996), *Unhappy China* (2008), and, most notably, Liu Mingfu's *China Dream* (2010) convey the Party's new victimization narrative and call for assertive foreign policies in the region and towards the United States, which is considered to be hindering China's rise. These writings, in part, represent an attempt to participate in Chinese politics by redefining Chinese nationalism and China's worldview. For example, these concerns have been popularized recently through a widely circulated essay by Zhou Xiaoping, a noted Chinese blogger, entitled 'Nine Knockout Blows in America's Cold War Against China' (Wong 2014). In many of his posts, Zhou, using the victimization narrative, accuses the West of robbing, slaughtering, and brainwashing China through a campaign of 'shame' and 'slander', and that

American culture is eroding the moral foundation and self-confidence of the Chinese people.[3]

Some have already begun to investigate this relationship between the CCP and the populist movement. Philip Pan argues that 'the government has grown expert at . . . rallying nationalist sentiment to its side', in turn greatly enhancing the party's reputation (Pan 2008:323; see also Holbig and Gilley 2010). Along similar lines, Gilbert Rozman (2012:95) writes: 'The [Chinese] leadership has skewed debate over the symbols of sovereignty and national identity in ways that fuel intense reactions among a vocal part of the population.' He continues, 'treating the temporal dimension as mix of unvarnished pride in the fruits of Sincentrism and exaggerated humiliation at the price of weakness, they have produced a narrative relatively unmitigated by conflicting themes' (ibid.).

In fact, President Xi Jinping was quick to endorse Zhou Xiaoping as 'positive energy' (Wertime and Hui 2014; Wong 2014). Compared to Deng Xiaoping's policy of 'hide brightness, cherish obscurity' or Hu Jintao's 'continuously keep a low profile and proactively get some things done' (Chen and Wang 2011:198, 212), Xi is more overtly embracing the populist movement and its critique of the West. Similar to the nationalist historical narratives discussed earlier, the ideological core of Xi's administration – 'China Dream'[4] – emphasizes the need to search for the roots of China's greatness in order to put the country back on the road to revival (*Xinhua Net* 2012). Because Xi fears that Western political and economic ideas will undermine the power of the Chinese state (Economy 2014), he appears to be resurrecting historical glories to rejuvenate China, most notably his recent emphasis on Confucianism as China's 'native culture' and the importance of Confucius Institutes as a way to balance Western ideals (*People's Daily Online* 2014).

The Han-centric Roots of Chinese Ethnic Nationalism

In many ways, Xi's 'China Dream' feeds into the narrative of Chinese exceptionalism, specifically the nostalgia of the dynastic period, the 1911 Xinhai Revolution in particular, and national heroes like Sun Yat-sen. For nationalists like Zhou Xiaoping and his fellow netizens, Xinhai represents national awakening and serves as a model of how the Chinese (Han) people successfully overthrew foreign influence (the Manchu) that prevented their growth and prosperity (Leibold 2014).

With this outgrowth of ethnic nationalism from above and below, we are witnessing the rise of Han-centric beliefs obsessed with the roots of Chinese weakness. It identifies pernicious foreign influences as the cause of China's downfall in the past and the obstacle to regaining its historical position of power in international relations (Zhao 2000). The 'foreigners' in this narrative are not just Westerners but also internal foreigners, such as the various ethnic minorities within the country.

In particular, according to Mathew Chew and Yi Wang (2012:3), is the 'claim that the real culprit that had prevented historical China from progressing into modernity was a non-Han ethnic group (the Manchus)'. Implicit in this is the argument that, had it not been for Manchu rule, China would have modernized,

matched the West, and avoided colonization. Within this narrative, China, and the Chinese people at large, must once again embrace traditional social thoughts, religious beliefs, language, literature, and the like. Interestingly, as Chew and Wang point out, this cultural conservative discourse is not found solely among academics and the political elite, but instead reflects public concern and lay knowledge.

Despite the PRC's call for multiculturalism, Chinese ethnic nationalism has a Han-centric dimension (Zhao and Postiglione 2010), which claims that 'the Han culture is the world's most advanced and its race is one of the strongest and most prosperous', such that 'the interests of the Han race are equivalent to the interests of China as a whole and the welfare of its people' (Leibold 2010:549). In this sense, what differentiates Han-centrism from state-led nationalism in general is the emphasis on race and culture, such that the Chinese nation (*guojia* [国家]) is believed to be the home of the Han people and the revival of Han culture is required for China's continued development.

While this Han-centric narrative runs counter to the government's 'official' multicultural nationalism in which all fifty-six ethnic groups make up the nation, this understanding of Han exceptionalism as distinctly Chinese is well entrenched within the historical memory evoked by the political elite through patriotic education campaigns and revisionist historical novels (Callahan 2010).

In fact, the multicultural (ethnic balance) narrative has had to compete with Han-centrism since the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). However, despite the efforts of the Manchu during that time to address the 'ethnic problem' through the establishment of social engineering projects, or what Mark Elliott (2001) refers to as 'Qing universalism', Han Chinese expansion continued in the southwest, resulting in Han–Hui violence and the spread of the social Darwinian *Hanzu* identity by Han nationalists like Zhang Binglin (1868–1936), Liang Qichao (1873–1929), and Zou Rong (1885–1905) as part of an anti-Manchu movement (Mullaney 2011). Through the combination of Western racial ideas and Chinese traditionalism (Fiskesjö 2006), the new *Hanzu* ('Han-race-lineage') identity served as a form of 'Han racism' and cultural prejudice that nationalists during the Republic Period (1912–1949) like Sun Yat-sen used to construct a racial nationalism (Callahan 2010; Chow 1997; Laitinen 1990). Even Chiang Kai-shek's vision of a mono-*Hanzu* China adopted the racial nationalism of Sun Yat-sen, with 'the supposedly distinct groups of the republic' serving 'merely as subvarieties of a common stock' (Mullaney 2011:2). Furthermore, as Magnus Fiskesjö (2006:28) points out, 'ethnic minorities', formulated as 'barbarians', provided, and continue to provide, the 'backward periphery' needed to distinguish the *Hanzu* from the *Other*, in turn making possible the Han nationalists' racial revolution.

Building on the work of Stephen Van Evera (1994),[5] we consider Han-centrism a form of hyper-nationalism that claims that the Han are more racially pure, following social Darwinist thinking, than other peoples, and Han culture, or the Han way of life, is superior to other cultural groups. In this sense, Han culture is viewed as hardworking, disciplined, patriotic, and modest (conservative in behaviour and dress) while the ethnic minorities of the country, or the more recent Africans working/studying in China, are seen as essentially the opposite – lazy,

exotic, sexualized, undisciplined, and culturally backward (Baranovitch 2010; Berry 1992; Gladney 2004; Hood 2013). This racialized understanding of the ethnic groups inside and outside the country can be seen as an example of what Jing Lin (1997) calls the 'great Han mentality', which forms the basis of a deeply rooted discriminatory bias against the non-Han.

While this mentality has a long history in Chinese racial thought, Reza Hasmath (2014:9) argues that the PRC, since its early days, has 'reinforced the image of Han superiority by intertwining it into a Marxist ideology of progress'. He adds: 'Recognized minority nationalities were categorized according to five major modes of production: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. The Hans were ranked the highest on this scale, reinforcing the Han idea that minorities are "backward" and perpetuating the Communists' portrayal of Hans as the "vanguard" of the people's revolution' (ibid.). With respect to ethnic minorities, they 'were . . . encouraged to follow the Han example' (ibid.).

Indeed, Frank Dikötter (1992:118) argues that 'race was the catalyst of [Chinese] group homogeneity; it created clear boundaries by binding the ingroup and distancing the outgroup'. In this sense, through racial categorization, Han-centric nationalism places China within a Social Darwinian world, one in which resurrects 'martial values that in the past had led its dynasties to expand territorially across Asia' and emphasizes that 'every event in China's "neighborhood" involving other actors is a potential challenge to China's status and thus must be met with an immediate response' (Agnew 2012:305).

Manifestations of Han-centrism in Chinese National Identity

Han-centrism can be found all over the Chinese internet, especially within popular nationalist blogs like Zhou Xiaoping's. Chew and Wang (2012:4) cite the following expression of this powerful sentiment:

> We are looking forward to Han ethnic group's invigoration and China's gaining of wealth and power! Alas, I feel sorry that our countrymen's sense of belonging to the Han ethnic group is too weak! In order to awake the Han spirit in everyone and to raise ethnic pride, we need to popularize the classical culture of the Han ethnic group.

However, while the Han-centric narrative considers the Manchu to be the historical culprit, other ethnic groups in the country today are also seen as threats to China's reawakening. For example, Uyghurs, in particular, are all too often targets of Han-centrism. According to Blaine Kaltman (2007:128),

> Han-Uighur relations are colored by racist attitudes. Many told me that the Uighur are a 'fierce' and 'unreasonable' people and that they have a 'primitive mentality' and are 'apathetic to development' . . . 'Their problem is that they just don't care. They don't care to be modern. They don't seem to care about anything.'

Such discrimination is intensified by what Enze Han (2010) refers to as 'rigid group boundaries' between the Han Chinese and the Uyghur. Essentially living

in separate worlds side by side in Xinjiang, the perception of the Uyghur as 'backward' and 'lazy', along with interethnic tensions due to linguistic and cultural differences, has made it difficult for many to find employment in the urban job market. As Han (2010:254) notes, 'many job advertisements explicitly state that only Han Chinese can apply'. And, as clashes between the Han settlers and Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang intensify and become more violent, such attitudes towards the Uyghur will undoubtedly grow (*The Economist* 2013), especially with the Chinese government's ongoing crackdown on some Islamic practices in the region (Bovingdon 2004; Jacobs 2016).

Furthermore, since the revolutionary Sinocentrism of the Mao era, China has attempted to take a leadership role in Africa. As the economic relationship between the two continues to grow, an increasing number of Africans are coming to China to study, while many Chinese merchants have migrated to African countries in search of work. Associated with this is a spike in anti-African racism on college campuses in China, suggesting that discourses of race are a central underlying component of Han-centric nationalism and 'racism with Chinese characteristics will keep growing as China continues to be a global power' (Cheng 2011:562).

In fact, for many of the Africans studying and working in China, such overt discrimination is an all too common experience (Hevi 1963), in which 'rising racism, police harassment, and an increasingly stringent and corrupt visa system dominated by Chinese middlemen, has made life difficult for even the most successful' (Rennie 2009:379). For the Africans living in major cities like Guangzhou, life is not what they expected: 'Many Africans express feelings of helplessness, humiliation and anger, railing against the harassment, racism and indifference they face. "Africans are treated like cockroaches here"' (Rennie 2009:391).

Through an analysis of this portrayal of the non-Han, we can begin to understand how Han nationalists shape the ongoing debate around national identity as they struggle to redefine the Chinese state and who belongs. As Kai-wing Chow (2001:47–83) points out, historically Chinese intellectuals have looked to the *Other*, the generalized enemy, to narrate the Chinese nation. A similar process is playing out today: The PRC's attempt to rewrite collective memory to support China's political and economic rise in international politics has reawakened a Han-centrism that holds an extremely racialized worldview.

Furthermore, like most forms of ethnic nationalism (Wimmer 1997), xenophobia, defined here as fear and contempt of foreigners, plays a significant role in the Han-centric narrative.[6] According to Ben Xu (2001:122), the Chinese government elicits xenophobia to unify the population against international criticism and pressure by portraying foreign influence as a threat to the Chinese way of life, be it outside accusations of human rights abuses or the dangers that Western (i.e. alien) values, cultural heritage, modes of knowledge, and vision of history pose to Chinese exceptionalism.

For example, following the October 2008 slapping incident of intellectual Yan Chongnian by a young Han nationalist, there was a shared consensus found throughout blogs, chat rooms, and message boards that Yan deserved to be 'beaten like an old dog' because his sympathy for minority rights made him a 'bastard

Manchu worm', and a 'Tartar coated' Han (Chew and Wang 2012). These racial slurs are particularly insightful to the racism and marginalization associated with Han-centrism, in which the other ethnic identities in the country, Manchu and Tartar in this case, become derogatory and belittling terms.

Another example of how Han-centrism is attempting to shape constructions of race and Chineseness in contemporary China can be seen in the 2009 cyberspace debate over the national identity of television show contestant Lou Jing, a woman of Chinese and African-American descent. As Robeson Frazier and Lin Zhang point out, the xenophobia and racism of this form of nationalism has a strong anti-black discourse associated with it, such that Lou Jing's dark complexion and her claim to Chinese ethnicity become a point of contention for many netcitizens (Frazier and Zhang 2014). For most, Lou Jing's dark skin colour marked her as 'black' and, thus, overrode her claims to Chinese nationality, that is to say, she had no legitimate connection, according to nationalist bloggers, to the Han ethnic lineage that defines the nation but rather was seen by many as a 'black chimpanzee' and 'black devil' that 'polluted the larger Chinese national body' (ibid.:239).

While it may be easy to disregard the slapping incident of Yan Chongnian and the racial slurs against Lou Jing, one might consider such sentiment as the nonsense and defamations commonly found throughout cyberspace, numerous scholars of contemporary China have pointed out the importance of the internet in the construction of Chinese national identity. The revival of Han chauvinism found on such online forums like *Baidu Tieba* [百度贴吧] is no exception. For example, forums on Han nationality and traditional Han culture (*Huaxia* [華夏]) include such topics as rejuvenating the great Han nationality and the importance of promoting traditional Han culture.[7]

Although it is difficult to empirically prove the pervasiveness of Han-centrism on the internet and in modern Chinese society, the research covered on Chinese nationalism above suggests that these racial beliefs and opinions matter for the re-construction national identity. In fact, not only does China engage the world through social media (Frazier and Zhang 2014:239), and thus the image, norms, and values it portrays to the rest of humanity, but Chinese cyberspace also serves as an outlet for political venting and identity formation that has contributed to 'the re-emergence of nationalist consciousness' (Wu 2007; Yang 2009; Zhao 2008).

Furthermore, through this revival of Han identity and desire to reclaim Han greatness, the Chinese government is able to use the strong ethnocentrism and xenophobia of Han-centrism to promote what Isabelle Côté (2011) refers to as 'Han regional minority mobilization'. To support the political mobilization of Han Chinese settlers in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the PRC not only ignores the growing Han aggression towards the Muslim majority, arresting far more Uyghur than Han during outbreaks of violence such as the events of summer 2009, the government has created the circumstances under which the Han settlers migrate to the XUAR in the first place. According to Côté (2011:1866), 'by promulgating Han-friendly policies in the effort to persuade them to stay in Xinjiang permanently', the Chinese government responds favourably to Han demands and fosters 'a political discourse justifying Han settler presence in minority areas'.

While the number of Han settlers in Xinjiang has grown in recent years, the mobilization of Han Chinese by the government in minority-dominated areas is not new. During the Mao period, the government, in the form of a civilizing mission, 'sent down' (*xia fang* [下放]) millions of young urban Han Chinese into minority areas to 'build a socialist countryside' and teach the ethnic communities the advanced Han way of life (Bovingdon 2002; Prybyla 1975). In this sense, the *xia fang* movement was an attempt at Sinicization by the government, and 'for the minorities, this meant attacks on the "feudal nature" of many of their customs and religious practices, their languages, and the alleged extravagance of their traditional costumes' (Teufel-Dreyer 1975:358). Thus, since Mao, the mobilization of Han Chinese has been, in part, predicated on the chauvinism and nativism of Han-centrism and the attempt to rally the population under the discourse of revitalizing and defending Chinese exceptionalism.

What is more, the PRC refuses to accept such chauvinism and racism, as well as the overall aggressive nature of Han-centric nationalism, as a problem. According to Barry Sautman (1999), this failure to acknowledge and address the prevalence of ethnic prejudice in the country has been going on for many years, with high-profile political leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Zhao Ziyang (the former CCP chief) arguing that racism and ethnic discrimination have never existed in China and are instead problems other countries face (ibid.). Of course, the PRC has formal constitutional protections for ethnic minority identities, cultures, and languages, and insists that Chinese identity is ethnically neutral and multicultural, while preaching harmony between China's many ethnic groups as part of its state-led patriotic campaigns and through the bureaucracy (McCarthy 2009). But despite these safeguards, the government continues to draw out the Han-centric sentiment deeply embedded within the population when some of these ethnic minorities challenge governmental policies, such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans, or during territorial disputes with other countries in the region (Bulag 2002; Carlson 2002; Howland 2011).

The Growing Influence of Han-centrism on Chinese Foreign Policy

Bringing domestic factors into the study of China's foreign relations is empirically difficult given informal mechanisms and the lack of information available on decision-making processes, such as the degree of influence the military and bureaucratic factions have on Chinese foreign policy (Chen Weiss 2015). As a result, we must start unpacking the black box of foreign policy decision making (Hudson and Vore 1995).

Our research on the revival of Han exceptionalism has found that Han-centrism appears to be promoted and reproduced at the top by the political elite and at the bottom by nationalist elements like the, angry youth, settlers, bloggers, and those in the diaspora (Liu 2005). In this sense, Beijing tolerates and, in some cases, stirs up the hyper-nationalism when China is faced with pressure from foreign forces or internal pressure from non-Han minority groups that are viewed as an obstacle to the country's development (Reilly 2014). For example, during the 1999 anti-American protests over the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the

government provided 'buses to take students to foreign embassies and consulates, and even supplying the slogans that they should shout once they got there' (Perry 2001:168). However, as Zhao (2003) notes, the government eventually lost control over the student protestors who became very suspicious of China's involvement in Belgrade, resulting in numerous student–government conflicts.

Beijing's use of the nationalist card appears to be creating Stuart Kaufman's (2006) 'symbolic politics trap'. As previous outbursts of nationalism revealed, the PRC, at times, struggles to put the nationalists back in their box as demonstrations spiral out of control, in turn harming China's diplomatic relations (Yang 2014; Zhao 2005). On this point, Thomas Christensen (2011:60–61) writes: 'Apparently gone are the days when Chinese elites could ignore these voices . . . Therefore, nationalist pundits and bloggers in China find allies in high places, and top government officials are nervous about countering this trend directly.' He continues, 'the result has been the creation of a dangerously stunted version of a free press, in which a Chinese commentator may more safely criticize government policy from a hawkish, nationalist direction than from a moderate, internationalist one' (ibid.; see also Fewsmith and Rosen 2001:151–90).

In fact, it appears that Han-centrism is beginning to co-opt Chinese foreign policy-making in that elites have been forced by this growth of popular nationalism to move away from a pragmatic ('peaceful rise') view of international politics towards a more aggressive and muscular approach. Some have already noted that due to its access to public media, the military has significant influence over specific foreign and diplomatic actions, such as territorial disputes with neighbouring countries (Swaine 2012). For example, although seldom explicitly found among China's top leaders, the notable exception being Liu Mingfu's *China Dream*, a growing number of lower and middle level People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers, such as Luo Yuan, a major general from the PLA Academy of Military Science, are embracing the populist nationalist narrative and advocating that military officers should be 'hawks' not doves and 'show the sword' when necessary (Chen and Wang 2011).

The growth of populist nationalism within the ranks of the PLA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs appears to be a concern of the Xi administration and the reason behind Xi's push for China's new National Security Commission (NSC). As David Lampton (2015:760) notes, the new NSC will allow Xi to 'consolidate his personal sway on the domestic, foreign policy, and military realm', with a specific objective of controlling the 'free-wheeling corruption and untethered military Hu Jintao had tolerated'. However, reigning in the relatively autonomous security apparatus of China will require Xi to build inroads with the PLA, as opposed to simply overturning a fairly entrenched power structure.

Xi's influence over the PLA, according to James Mulvenon (2011), is strengthened by his extensive political and military experience and knowledge of the operations at the highest levels of the Chinese bureaucratic system. As a result, under the Xi administration, the PLA, which You Ji (2014) refers to as Xi's primary power base, seems to be playing a larger role in setting the agenda of China's strategic interests. This growing influence has become a concern because while not all Chinese military leaders are hawks, a larger number appear

to be more nationalistic than their civilian counterparts and take a hardline stance on most national security issues, especially those concerning territorial disputes and U.S. involvement in the region (Li 2015; Scobell 2009). As Yawei Liu and Justine Zheng Ren (2013:256) note, Xi is using the PLA to consolidate power and actively 'curtail internal corruption and prepare for war over the rising tensions of the East China Sea and the South China Sea'.

Furthermore, a strong Chinese military is a key component of Xi's goals of reviving nationalism. In other words, Xi's China Dream is very much one of robust military power. Acknowledging the changing nature of Chinese civil-military relations, Jeremy Page (2013) submits: 'Mr. Xi has made high-profile visits to army, air force, space program and missile command facilities in his first 100 days in office, something neither of his two immediate predecessors did. He has taken personal control of China's military response to a newly inflamed territorial dispute with Japan.' In addition, 'he has launched a campaign to enhance the military's capacity to "fight and win wars"' (ibid.).

However, bureaucratic fragmentation within China's Central Military Commission has made possible 'substantial room for myriad maritime security actors to push their own agendas, especially in the South China Seas,' in turn posing a major challenge to Xi's attempt at top-down leadership over the PLA (Jakobson 2014:9; see also Lai and Kang 2014). While there is civil-military consensus on certain aspects of Chinese foreign policy, such as 'core interests' like territorial integrity, You Ji (2014) argues that agreement on the use of force remains unclear, especially within the context of the U.S. pivot to Asia.

Fearing a national movement against the state, President Xi and many government officials may continue to pander to hawkish foreign policies of the PLA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to gain popularity and distract nationalists from questioning the political legitimacy of the CCP, while simultaneously using such animus to sustain economic growth and confront security concerns. Since a historically weak and humiliated China is a central grievance in the Han-centric narrative (discussed above), Han nationalists have rallied behind CCP hardliners and PLA hawks and pushed political and military leaders to take aggressive action against internal and external forces perceived as a threat to China's rise. In other words, as Minxin Pei (2001) asserts, 'China's national experience and collective memory constitute a powerful force in foreign-policy decisionmaking'.

Moreover, considerable evidence suggests that popular nationalists are increasingly able to operate and mobilize independent of the government. Due to the outgrowth of popular nationalism, fuelled by the angry youth and the proliferation of historic books and novels with aggressive nationalist themes by 'popular historians', the government appears to be losing its hegemony over the nationalist discourse and the rewriting of collective memory.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the rise of Han-centrism and its growing influence on contemporary Chinese society and foreign policy-making. As Chinese nationalism has become more ethnocentric and less ideological since the 1990s,

the cultural chauvinism and nativist beliefs of Han-centric nationalism have become increasingly more influential in defining the nation, specifically what it means to be 'Chinese'. Within this Han-centric narrative, to be Chinese is to be Han such that Han culture, in contrast to the backward cultures of the non-Han, is the authentic character of the nation, and to pollute or deviate from the Han identity will only tarnish Chinese exceptionalism and impede China's rise. While Chinese nationalism as a metanarrative remains incoherent, instead consisting of many competing discourses, Han-centrism has grown significantly in power and influence.

In part, the success of this 'nation view' over other narratives can be attributed to its reproduction by many Chinese political and military leaders. It is a lamentable fact that this form of ethnic nationalism has served the PRC well, enabling the government to politically mobilize the population against international criticism as the country goes through profound economic and social changes. In particular, the racism, xenophobia, and nativism embedded within the Han-centric narrative have made possible a strong 'us versus them' mentality that the PRC uses to promote its national interests, be it territorial disputes with Uyghurs and Tibetans or stirring up patriotic sentiment in opposition to the West, all of which can be seen as part of China's attempt to reassert Chinese exceptionalism in international politics. Although it is difficult to accept the unfortunate growth of hyper-nationalism, Han-centrism has significant influence over Chinese policy-making and Beijing's perception of international relations, and to ignore this is to fail to understand the dynamics of governance in contemporary Chinese society.

The current liberal international order, based on multilateralism and institutionalism, requires cooperation between states and non-state actors. While China appears to be willing to work within this status quo, many have already begun to question whether Beijing will support the liberal order or abandon it, in favour of unilateralism supported by nationalistic sentiment, once the country is powerful enough, particularly concerning security issues and territorial disputes over Taiwan and the South China Sea (Hughes 2005).

In sum, a 'reality check' is needed. The international community in general should take concern with the rise of Han-centrism in Chinese society and pressure Beijing to adhere to the principles set within the liberal tradition – i.e., anti-racism, fair labour practices, minority rights, and anti-discrimination. We emphasize that Han-centrism is only one of many identities, albeit an alarmingly powerful one, in contemporary Chinese society. This is good news in that the hyper-nationalism of Han-centrism can be discouraged and delegitimized, while competing voices, those that are more progressive, internationally focused, and civil rights oriented, within the country can be encouraged and supported.

Notes

[1] For example, in his 1957 speech 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', Mao emphasized the need to curb Han chauvinism in order to maintain a positive relationship between the Han majority and minority groups (cited in Mao 1971).

[2] An interesting suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer, with which we are in agreement, would be to compare textbooks from the Maoist period to the post-Tiananmen period.

[3] Zhou Xiaoping, 'The Nine Knockout Blows in the U.S. Cultural War with China' [美国对华文化冷战的九大绝招], available at http://guancha.gmw.cn/2014-07/14/content_11961243.htm.

[4] While a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of our study, we recognize that the term 'Chinese Dream' has contrasting interpretations, the most important of which are Xi's and Liu Mingfu's.

[5] Van Evera (1994) defines hyper-nationalism as the belief that one's nation is superior and, therefore, has the legitimacy to dominate inferior nations.

[6] Foreigners were traditionally described as 'devils' in Chinese history, but they are distinguished by their skin colour, with Caucasians referred to as 'white devils' (baigui [白鬼]) and those of darker skin as 'black devils' (*heigui* [黑鬼]). However, not all 'devils' were regarded in the same way; white devils were perceived as 'rulers' and black devils as 'slaves' (see Jacques 2009; Qingguo 2005).

[7] For examples of Han-centrism on *Baidu Tieba*, see the following forums: 'Rejuvenate Han and Develop China, Strive for the Rejuvenation of the Great Han Nationality' [興漢振華, 為偉大的漢民族復興而努力], available at: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%BB%AA%CF%C4%BA%BA%C3%F1%D7%E5; 'Rejuvenate Han Culture, Amend the History of the Ming Dynasty That Has Been Defamed and Tampered With' [复兴汉文化、修正被诋毁篡改的明朝历史], available at: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E6%98%8E%E6%9C%9D&frs=yqtb; 'Inherit and Promote Traditional Culture of Huaxia' [继承和弘扬华夏传统文化], available at: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E5%8D%8E%E5%A4%8F&frs=yqtb.

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