

AFFIRMING CHINESE IDENTITY IN A LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE: REFLECTIONS ON WRITINGS BY CHINA'S NEW NATIONALISTS¹

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A strident form of nationalism has appeared and developed in Chinese public culture since the late 1990s. To date it remains largely rhetorical. With the exception of occasional displays of public anger, nationalism remains mostly confined to a discourse aimed at bolstering national pride that characteristically includes a plenitude of chauvinistic and anti-foreign utterances. It can be found in bestselling books, magazines and newspapers and is prevalent on the Chinese Internet where it has acquired a particularly virulent form as anonymous cyberchatter. Ill-will towards perceived national enemies has sometimes taken the explosive form of angry street protests in major Chinese cities, in reaction to incidents that the protestors perceive as an injury to China's sovereign dignity. When the international leg of the protest-encumbered Olympic torch relay was underway in April and May 2008, these angry outbursts occurred for the first time in numerous cities across the world as mainland-born Chinese and diasporic Chinese gathered in public venues to defend the Beijing Olympics against its critics.

While these developments are troubling and have understandably produced growing apprehension among the international reading and TV viewing public, it is our contention that their effects should be neither exaggerated nor viewed in isolation. It is true to say that “anti-

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foreign feelings” have become much more visible in China in recent years but their occurrence is also mitigated by the depth of cosmopolitanism within present-day mainland society and culture. This cosmopolitanism is reflected, among other things, in the sheer magnitude of productive exchanges being conducted on a daily basis between Chinese and non-Chinese groups and individuals in the workplace, at social gatherings, or on the Internet. What is more, the growth of a civic consciousness in China that made its presence felt in the enormous public support for the victims of the May 12 Wenchuan Earthquake, together with substantial donations of time, money, medicine, blood and essential supplies, also reflects a love for the national family that stands in stark contrast to the hatred that contemporary Chinese nationalism typically directs against the nation’s enemies.

This is a necessary caveat for engaging with the violent anti-foreign rhetoric of nationalistic discourse in China today. An appreciation of the far wider range of positive developments within contemporary Chinese society is important. Moreover, we must also remind ourselves that, within China, patriotism is extolled in both official and popular domains as to be widely regarded as the “natural attitude” for Chinese citizens so that we do not reduce the anti-foreign rhetoric of Chinese nationalists to a mere caricature. For these reasons, it would be best to view the anti-foreign feelings that we will discuss below as an unfortunate and negative form of Chinese patriotism held captive by ugly and abject emotions of envy, anxiety, and paranoia.²

In brief, the contemporary nationalistic discourse is a means of assuaging wounded national pride that, for reasons we will explore, has become an important feature of Chinese public culture under authoritarian rule. Accordingly, our paper begins with a discussion of the rise of nationalistic discourse in China since the 1990s, with a focus on the popular appeal of *China Can Say No*. We then proceed to discuss the masculinist nature of nationalistic discourse and to trace its origins in earlier forms of anti-foreign and militant rhetoric within Chinese public culture. We will consider, in particular, the nexus between sexual humiliation and national humiliation that has become a key feature of this discourse and through which the discourse provides the means for people to affirm their Chinese identity in a language of violence.

² See also Gloria Davies, “Should We Worry about Chinese Patriotism”, posted 28 May 2008, <http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html>.

From Patriotism to Nationalism

The appearance in 1996 of the bestselling book-length polemic, *China Can Say No* (*Zhongguo keyi shuo bu*), is now commonly identified as a landmark moment in the rise of militant nationalistic discourse in post-Maoist China. The book's enormous popularity in China alarmed liberal-minded Chinese intellectuals, many of whom opposed and criticized the book in print. By 1997, a selection of rebuttals of *China Can Say No*, penned by prominent Chinese intellectuals, was published in Hong Kong in an edited book bearing the title *How China Faces the West*. These critical soundings, however, were clearly no match for the enormous popularity of *China Can Say No* in the mainland's then rapidly growing cultural marketplace. A decade or so later, the type of cultural chauvinism espoused in *China Can Say No* has continued to flourish. Indeed, the denunciations of the West that proliferated on the Chinese Internet during the international leg of the Olympic torch relay in April and May this year bear testament to the strength of xenophobic ways of speaking and writing within mainland public culture.

In an interview conducted in 2007, Song Qiang, one of the five authors of *China Can Say No*, claimed that the emotive tenor of *China Can Say No* gave the book a distinct edge. When asked how he viewed the book in retrospect, Song said:

I was 32 years old back then and wrote through my passion and exuberance—the sort of attitude that a young person ought to have. I wrote that book with true sincerity, and the important stuff still holds up. I can't say that it was my best writing, but the motivation was genuine. Criticize the book, but you can't look at it in isolation. We have no regrets about writing it; we have to protect our own points of view. Sure, we were hot-headed back then. We didn't check up on lots of things, and now we've paid the cost through criticism.³

It is clear that *China Can Say No* tapped into a powerful desire among the mainland reading public for a redemptive narrative about Chinese identity. In the same 2007 interview, Song admitted that he and his co-authors had wanted to "shock people or die trying." Nonetheless, he insisted that their affirmations of Chinese cultural identity and Chinese virtues were heartfelt: the result, as he put it, of the "intrinsic desire and passion" of each of the book's authors "to express his own opinions". He claimed that even though he and his co-

³ Translated by Joel Martinsen, "When China Learned to Say No," *Danwei*, <http://www.danwei.org/nationalism/godfathers_of_todays_angry_you.php> (accessed 12 Sep 2009).

authors did hope to produce a bestseller and to become famous, they were mainly driven by a sense of adventure, noting that “we all thought it was great fun and really stimulating to express our own viewpoints and write a book of arguments.”⁴

The success of *China Can Say No* exceeded the expectations of its authors. Zhang Xiaobo, another co-author, recalled that rumours were rife in 1996 as to the reason for the “say no” phenomenon. He claimed that some people suspected that “the publication of this book had cost China X billion in loans from the World Bank.” Zhang goes on to note that: “One senior domestic official issued an order to investigate the identities of the authors. Rumors flew wildly, a different one every day. The authors, too, were astounded: it was as if they had unwittingly set off a nuclear bomb, and the outcome was something they could never have foreseen.”⁵

As noted earlier, the type of writing that we might identify and view with apprehension as “nationalistic” is more commonly described in mainland China as “patriotic.” As to whether a text is patriotic or nationalistic is open to interpretation. Since patriotism tends to carry fewer negative connotations than nationalism, it is not surprising that the producers of a discourse that sets out to encourage and foster Chinese national pride should choose more frequently to identify themselves as patriots than as nationalists. The term nationalism generally implies a certain systematization of patriotic feeling – or “love for one’s country” – toward a set of shared beliefs and values. But whether a text is regarded as patriotic or nationalistic, as long as it has the overall effect of reducing the world to a series of “us” and “them” scenarios to present the Chinese as a morally superior race battling heroically against the evil designs of non-Chinese adversaries, it is clearly also xenophobic and chauvinistic.

At this juncture, it is important to note that such xenophobic and chauvinistic utterances have long been a feature of both official and intellectual forms of nationalistic discourse in China. It is appropriate to describe both these official and intellectual forms as nationalistic (rather than patriotic) as they prescribe an ideal way of belonging to the national family. We should also note that it is from these “higher” discourses in public culture that

⁴ Martinsen, “When China Learned to Say No”,
<http://www.danwei.org/nationalism/godfathers_of_todays_angry_you.php>

⁵ Zhang Xiaobo, “Yige guojiade yuwang yu kongju” (A country’s hopes and fears), published November 2007 at http://www.sohoxiaobao.com/chinese/_asp/articles_temp.php?id=10001472 (accessed 3 February 2008).

cruder and more violent utterances have been derived as “lower” forms within the popular and private domains. There are obvious commonalities between the official and intellectual discourses but there are equally clear differences in their treatment of nationalism.

The official discourse is aimed at promoting the role of the Chinese Communist Party in ensuring China’s national development and this is a discourse that takes the form of reports, editorials and commentaries published in state-owned newspapers, journals and Party organs as well as on TV, radio and the Internet. It also circulates in the form of speeches by Party leaders and the countless circulars and communiqués issued by government agencies and Party branches. The official discourse is also embedded in the language of history textbooks that primary, secondary and university students receive as part of their education in China. It is from these textbooks and other mandatory aspects of the curriculum such as compositions, speeches and debates that Chinese students acquire the vocabulary required for affirming the Chinese nation (*hongyang minzu*). Several scholars including William Callahan, Susan Shirk and Suisheng Zhao⁶ have noted that the official manipulation of patriotic sentiment to reinforce the legitimacy of one-party rule since the 1990s has produced both intended and unintended consequences.

On the one hand, the official discourse presents the post-Maoist Party-state as an exemplary government that has delivered to the Chinese people the benefits of modernization and raised their standard of living. The narrative of national humiliation is enlisted in this context to portray the government as the source of the nation’s strength. Thus, the phrase *qiangguo* “empowering the nation” enjoys heightened visibility in Chinese public culture. In fact, the influential online forum hosted at the *People’s Daily* website that now bears this name was first established in 1999 to facilitate the expression of public outrage against the United States and NATO after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Most of the people posting comments at *Qiangguo Forum* rejected NATO’s explanation that the bombing was accidental. They chose instead to read the tragedy as evidence of foreign malice and aggression against China.⁷ In this regard, it is worth noting that in his first venture into interacting with the Chinese public online, Party Secretary General Hu Jintao chose to do so

⁶ See, for example, William Callahan, , “History, Identity and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol.38 No.2 (2006): 179-208; Susan Shirk, *Fragile Superpower* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Peter Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 101-104.

at the *Qiangguo Forum*. Hu made a point of noting that he regarded the forum as an essential website: one that he would visit whenever he had the time.⁸

On the other hand, however, there have also been unintended consequences for the Chinese government's successful nurturing of nationalistic feeling, especially among young Chinese who are the recipients of post-Maoist patriotic education in the 1990s and since. Referring to such consequences as the blowback effect, Susan Shirk explains in some detail in her book *China Fragile Superpower* how popular nationalism poses difficulties for China's foreign policy, especially in matters concerning Sino-Japanese relations. This is because Japan remains widely perceived in mainland public culture as a potentially aggressive would-be enemy state. Shirk argues that in order to assuage a strident Chinese public, leading officials are now often forced to display a hard stance in relation to Japan, even when they privately regard this as unnecessary and undesirable.⁹

The kind of discourse that intellectuals like Song Qiang and Zhang Xiaobo produce shares the same basic premise as the official discourse: namely, that constant vigilance against the threat of foreign aggression is vital for the nation's well-being. But whereas the official discourse is focused on highlighting the Party-state's role in securing China's national borders and international prestige, the affirmation of national belonging in mainland intellectual discourse tends to be articulated in terms of finding appropriate remedies for a wounded and anxious nation. In this regard, the official discourse confines itself mainly to lauding China as a great nation and calling on citizens to display the requisite patriotic attitude. The writings of nationalistic intellectuals, on the contrary, expressly affirm and sanctify the use of violent rhetoric as if it were a form of self-therapy: that is to say, violent utterances become justified as the expression of righteous or patriotic anger and, by implication, as the affirmation of a person's Chinese identity.

Both discourses draw on national humiliation – an idea that has a rich and complex history in the history of twentieth century China, beginning with the practice of formally commemorating something called “national humiliation”, which first occurred in 1915 in response to Japan's unfair demands for extra-territorial rights and privileges in China. In 2001, the Chinese government revived the formal commemoration of national humiliation in the form of National Defense Education Day. The public commemoration of injustices past is always an occasion for the government to remind Chinese citizens that the Chinese

⁸ The video and transcript of Hu's online dialogue with anonymous netizens at *Qiangguo Forum* on 20 June 2008 is available at <<http://www.people.com.cn/GB/32306/33093/125024/index.html>> (accessed 12 Sep 2009).

⁹ Shirk, *Fragile Superpower*, 179.

Communist Party has kept the national family safe since 1949. Such reminders have acquired a particular importance since the 1990s as evidence of the soundness of Party-state rule. This is not surprising given that the Party leadership is anxious to secure public approval in the context of stark inequalities, endemic official corruption and other problems of magnitude that have emerged out of the nation's rapid economic growth.

As a consequence, because of the government's tacit approval of anti-foreign outbursts as patriotic expression, these outbursts have become a source of relatively unconfined expression of which large numbers of people have availed themselves. Indeed, it is precisely because nationalistic utterances tend not to attract state censorship that emotive expressions against one or another perceived national enemy make a frequent appearance in mainland public culture. Such utterances are also normalized as a result of the entrenched practice within that culture of invoking an ideal future China as the result of a collective quest of modern redemption: one that would restore the nation to its former civilizational glory.

For these reasons, the Chinese government is generally tolerant of anti-foreign displays and will not curtail angry outbursts unless they pose a threat to public safety or, more importantly, if they risk becoming a challenge to the authority of the state. But as we noted at the outset, virulent nationalistic utterances are but one aspect of mainland public culture that reflects, on the whole, far more cosmopolitan sensibilities than nationalistic ones. Among Chinese nationalists, there are divisions as to what constitutes the correct attitude or disposition towards nationalism.

For instance, when reflecting on nationalism in 2007, Song Qiang and Zhang Xiaobo both sought to distance themselves from the vituperative utterances of those who have been labeled by their critics as “angry youth” (*fen qing*) or “patriotic rogues” (*aiguo zei*). In fact, when asked about these strident young nationalists, Song replied that it was perfectly normal for people to condemn “this extreme form of nationalism”, noting that it was best to dismiss the use of shocking language merely to provoke a reaction. In this context, he also lamented the prevalence of anonymous online rants that had turned China “into a paradise for those who conceal their identities”. Zhang Xiaobo likewise urged his readers to focus on the need for reconciliation – “between the government and the people, between the government and intellectuals, between the people and intellectuals, and even among intellectuals themselves”.¹⁰

¹⁰ Zhang Xiaobo, “Yige guojiade yuwang yu kongju”,
<http://www.sohoxiaobao.com/chinese/_asp/articles_temp.php?id=10001472>

Neither was prepared to acknowledge that *China Can Say No* had played an important part in legitimizing and popularizing the use of violent rhetoric among strident young nationalists. In particular, neither referred to the rhetoric of sexual humiliation that they had used with great effect to suggest the felt experience of national humiliation. In 2007, Zhang wrote poignantly of national humiliation as a condition that reduced the Chinese people to stuttering in a highly constrained language. This sits at odds with the clarity of the inflammatory prose he penned in *China Can Say No* to produce derogatory portraits of the nation's enemies and to show how they continue to subject the Chinese people to humiliation. It is to the violent language and imagery in the nationalistic discourse, beginning with *China Can Say No*, that we now turn.

Affirming Chineseness Through Violence

China Can Say No is a book that consists of a plenitude of scenarios of division and struggle that pit the Chinese against their enemies. The text is aimed at arousing feelings of outrage at humiliations past and present as well as disgust for the immoral conduct of the nation's enemies. The theme of sexual humiliation is an important feature of the book and one frequently quoted passage involves an Englishman named Mark, presented as a sexual predator who travels the world with "a huge stack of condoms" and who "prowls the streets, campuses and hotels of Third World countries, chatting up pretty girls by asking them for directions."¹¹

Appearing in a chapter authored by Zhang Xiaobo, this description is followed by the comment that this Caucasian male offers "love that is just like a gob of sputum, it can be hocked up anytime." Using crude and provocative language Zhang then reprises his earlier attack on a Chinese man named Wang, a friend of the predatory Mark, whom Zhang describes unflatteringly as a sycophant of all things Western:

But when he has violated our sisters, we're supposed to feel honored [like Wang does] because they have been "loved by Mark". I feel suffocated by that type of Chinese, by the words and deeds of whitey's slave! I spurn the lot of them.
Pah!¹²

¹¹ Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, *China Can Say No* (Beijing: Beijing Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1996), 60.

¹² Song, Zhang, Qiao, *China Can Say No*, 60-61.

The focus of Zhang's chapter is not the denunciation of the lecherous Mark per se but Chinese people like Wang, referred to as "that type of Chinese" who would willingly serve as "whitey's slave". Hence, it is not Caucasian male lust for Chinese women that angers Zhang as much as Chinese men who fail to be roused to anger by that lust. When Zhang writes of feeling suffocated by "whitey's slave", he implies that disgust and repulsion for the craven conduct of one's fellow-citizens is a felt experience of national humiliation that helps, in turn, to foster a robust sense of Chinese identity.

It is not surprising that sexual humiliation is a device that Chinese nationalists frequently use to dramatize the psychic effects of national humiliation. After all, down the ages, women have long been considered as property and this has frequently resulted in the rape of women in situations of armed conflict as "the spoils of war". Indeed, it is the prevalence of rape in our time as a military tactic aimed at humiliating one's national or tribal rival that led the UN Security Council in recent weeks to approve a resolution that formally recognizes rape as a war crime and a component of genocide (and to demand of warring governments and factions that they halt the use of sexual violence against women).¹³

In this regard, we must not confuse the sexualization of national humiliation in the writings of Chinese nationalists with the moral condemnation of actual sexual violence. This is because the nationalistic discourse neither affirms the rights of women nor seeks to redress injustices committed against women. Instead, women are generally presented as passive objects of male lust with the implication that they lack the will and the moral agency to defend their own honor, let alone the nation's honor. For instance, in figuring "Mark" as a representative Caucasian male, Zhang also presents Chinese women as unthinking hence easy prey. Thus, it is the effect on Chinese women of perceived Caucasian male potency that most aggravates him.

The popular appeal of this masculist rhetoric reflects a readiness among young Chinese men to identify and invoke national humiliation as the cause for any number of negative emotions ranging from fear and anxiety to feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy. This is because the idea of national humiliation offers the promise of deliverance from these ugly feelings in the form of a robust Chinese masculinity. Writing in 2004, Peter Gries observes:

¹³ "UN calls sexual violence a war crime," *Taipei Times*, 21 June 2008, at <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2008/06/21/2003415316>> (accessed 20 Sep 2009).

[F]oreign men are the object of many Chinese nationalists' anxiety: the recurring figure of China as a raped woman has recently reemerged in nationalist discourse, and many of its young male exponents are enraged by the very idea of white men intimately involved with Chinese women.¹⁴

Inter-racial intimacy, read as a cipher for national humiliation, leads nationalists typically to demand that Chinese women *belong* to Chinese men. For instance, when discussing the type of attitude that Chinese men should adopt in present-day cosmopolitan China, Wang Xiaodong, a prominent nationalist, advocates what he has popularized as “the spirit of militancy” (*shangwu jingshen*). He asks in a widely read 2005 essay, “What would happen to us if we don’t endorse the spirit of militancy and if we don’t have nationalism? And so I say to young Chinese men, take heed because without these things you’d have no chance of getting a woman.”¹⁵

Wang further illustrates the necessity of having a militant spirit in his comments about the controversy surrounding the publication of *Shanghai Babe*, the steamy novel about sex and drugs and inter-racial encounters in urban Shanghai that turned its young author Wei Hui into an instant celebrity identified under the marketing label “a beautiful female writer” – *meinu zuojia*.¹⁶ According to Wang, while it is understandable that “Chinese men should feel anguish and rage when they see beautiful young Chinese women being snatched away from them by those foreign codgers”, it is also necessary to recognize that writers like Wei Hui are “expressing the innermost thoughts of many Chinese women.” Wang continues:

We should feel for these Chinese women because their circumstances are tragic: they leave their homeland to settle in countries where they can’t speak the language; they live without love because they end up marrying foreign men who are old, ugly and stupid (and sometimes also very poor); they may even be bullied and humiliated but they dare not speak of these things and when they visit their parents, with their faces swollen from the hiding they’ve received, they pretend that they have put on weight. Their life is truly not easy and this is why we must have the ability and the will to seize them for ourselves.¹⁷

In this grotesque account of inter-racial union, Wang reduces all Chinese women with non-Chinese partners to passive and abject victims of their own misadventures.

¹⁴ Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, 10.

¹⁵ Wang Xiaodong, “Lun shang wu jingshen” (On the Spirit of Upholding Militancy), at <http://www.snzg.net/shownews.asp?newsid=5420> (accessed 20 Sep 2008).

¹⁶ This is a term that gained currency in the 2000s and that is widely used as a tool for marketing these works as a genre of popular literature.

¹⁷ Wang, “Lun shang wu jingshen”, <http://www.snzg.net/shownews.asp?newsid=5420>.

Concomitantly, all non-Chinese men with Chinese partners are presented as not only “old, ugly and stupid” but “sometimes also very poor” and thus as brutes who abuse their Chinese wives and exploit their labor. His aim, as he expressly states, is to enjoin Chinese men to acquire the kind of militant spirit needed that would so captivate Chinese women as to make them desire only Chinese men. In this regard, he avers that this spirit is embodied in “an innate sense of personal dignity and a willingness to help other Chinese”, adding that these are qualities to be found not only among mainland Chinese but also among “the ordinary, plain living and unsophisticated Chinese folk overseas”. Against this simplicity he endorses, Wang opposes the negative image of Chinese men who he claims are not only incapable of feeling “anguish and rage” but take perverse delight in seeing Chinese women with foreign men. In fact, he asks the reader to recall the descriptions of the craven conduct of “people of this type” that are provided in *China Can Say No*, adding that these people are simply beyond redemption.

The promotion of a robust Chinese masculinity as the remedy that will save the nation from further cultural erosion has its roots in the discourse of early Republican intellectuals. In that earlier discourse, it was commonplace to attack male effeminacy as the cause of China’s weakness. By the 1950s, however, equality between men and women had come to be encapsulated in the old saying “women hold up half the sky” that Mao made popular as a slogan. In this regard, although gender inequalities prevailed in the lived everyday in Maoist China, in rhetoric at least, gender equality was the ideological norm.

In stark contrast to politically correct speech of the Maoist and early post-Maoist years of the 1980s, mainland culture since the 1990s has seen not only the resurgence of an antiquated masculist nation-building rhetoric but the aggrandizement of Chinese male assertiveness. It is important to remind ourselves here that the economic prosperity of the 1990s and since has delivered an unprecedented range of material comforts and consumer choice to middle-class Chinese. Accordingly, life in contemporary post-Maoist China bears no resemblance to the exigencies of living in war-torn Republican China that once led Lu Xun and his peers to affirm a militant attitude to nation-building. But Lu Xun and other Republican intellectuals were also staunch defenders of a cosmopolitan attitude in their bid to renovate and to modernize Chinese cultural attitudes. Conversely, when contemporary nationalists like Wang Xiaodong invoke the moral authority of that precedent discourse to promote “the spirit of militancy”, their intentions are counter-cosmopolitan and aimed at preventing rather than facilitating engagement with ideas and cultures in the world outside China.

In this regard, we should note that the myriad online comments posted in support of the crude arguments of nationalists mostly evince an anxiety for social acceptance and for communion on the basis of a shared identity. In the daily pressures of middle-class life in urban China, the availability of ready arguments for attacking people as “whitey’s slaves”, offers the disaffected the consolation of taking symbolic revenge against those who are better off, better educated and who speak fluent English. For those who cleave to the identity of being one of the “ordinary, plain living and unsophisticated Chinese folk” that Wang Xiaodong extols, the use of abusive language can thus always be justified as a form of patriotism, as it were, of defending true ways of “being Chinese” from the corrupting influence of wealthy cosmopolites in their midst.

The use of militant rhetoric in nationalistic discourse also draws on the language of knight-errant literature and martial arts films, both of which have enjoyed enormous popularity in China since the 1990s. Thus, it is not surprising that the popular phrase, “killing a person every ten paces” has become a favorite motto of the nationalists. For Wang Xiaodong, the phrase encapsulates “an ancient cultural gene” that the Chinese must awaken in themselves in order to strengthen their national identity. The violence of the phrase is thus mitigated as a traditional aesthetic – a martial spirit that the Chinese must reclaim in defense of their national identity.¹⁸

The Dubious Consolations of Nationalism

When Song Qiang and Zhang Xiaobo reflected in 2007 on the success they had achieved with *China Can Say No*, both freely acknowledged that what they had published was a crude polemic but were nonetheless keen to defend the integrity of what they wrote. Song pointed out that the book’s bestselling status and the use thereafter of “say no” as a catchphrase offer clear evidence that he and his co-authors had effectively expressed what the mainland reading public wanted to hear. In this context, he noted that in a 1995 survey conducted by Wang Xiaodong and Fang Ning, a large proportion of young Chinese named the United States as the country they hated most.¹⁹

Thus, Song averred that even though the crudeness of the book incensed some members of China’s educated elite, it was nonetheless a true reflection of public sentiment in

¹⁸ The phrase is repeatedly used in Wang Xiaodong, Fang Ning, and Songqiang, *Quanqiuhua yinying xia de Zhongguo zhi lu* (China’s Path in the Shadow of Globalization), Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 1999.

¹⁹ See Martinsen, “When China learned to say no”,
<http://www.danwei.org/nationalism/godfathers_of_todays_angry_you.php>

mainland China. Song also recounted with evident satisfaction how the success of *China Can Say No* enabled him and his co-authors to notify the U.S. embassy that its reliance on “the Chinese who float in your circles” meant that it received distorted information. He claimed that this was grounds for viewing *China Can Say No* as having made an important and positive contribution to international relations insofar as the book provided the U.S. with “real information” about China.

Similarly, Zhang Xiaobo wrote in 2007 of how *China Can Say No* “unwittingly took on a major test of public opinion, one whose conclusions were frightening to both heart and mind.” He continues in an elegiac mode:

The sheer size of the rift, the depth of the gulf, how a sense of family gave way to alienation and loss - all of this made us feel like we had no way to answer the question "where do we go from here?" Sadly, to a certain degree our troubles are vastly different from those of the Jewish people; they can seek Jerusalem after Auschwitz, while we have no way to find an eastern way to bear the "lightness of being."

The title of Zhang’s essay, “One Country’s Desire and Fear”, was his way of signaling the difficulties that Chinese people faced in the present-day. He claims that it was because the idea of “being Chinese” had yet to be “elaborated and expressed with precision” that Chinese people are gripped by fluctuating feelings of desire and fear. He explains that this is because Chinese soul-searching remains guided by such questions as “how we appear in Western eyes”, “how we appear in our own eyes” and “what were we like originally”. Accordingly, he claims, “When we seek to affirm ourselves, we are immediately conscious of our fear. When we try to tell the world, ‘We’re here’, the answer that comes back remains, ‘where are you?’”

In the same essay, Zhang draws particular attention to the sense of cultural inadequacy and uncertainty that he claims the Chinese have suffered for over a century, figuring this cultural aphasia as a “stutter”. He writes:

What’s so aggravating is that when we attempt to think this through and make our thoughts known, constrained as we are by the Chinese language, we become childish, stammering and oblique, and it sometimes seems as if the entire nation gets stirred up over a particular prejudice to the point that what the West sees is “an extremely poor performance.”

In these remarks, Zhang betrays a telling anxiety about “how the West sees China” – a Chinese phrase that bears the imprint of national humiliation insofar as it bespeaks a longing for acceptance and approval. The image of China as the Self, cast in the role of a formerly defeated and humiliated nation, is one that creates a complex psychic relation to the putative West as the *still* victorious Other. Accordingly, the Other becomes the object of both desire and fear, as it were, a superior adversary the Self must emulate yet resist at the same time in the interest of its own survival.

This psychic ambivalence is an undertow in phrases that conjoin the West and China or that imply the West as the addressee, whether in the form of “how the West sees China”, “how China sees the West” or even “how China faces the world” (when the West is read as synonymous with “the world”). The ambivalence comes of reading the abstract geo-cultural name, “the West”, as both friend and foe – a source of modernization and the cause of traditional China’s destruction. As we saw with Wang Xiaodong’s advocacy of “the spirit of militancy”, the nationalistic discourse condemns all positions contrary to its own, leading many mainland critics of contemporary Chinese nationalism to remark on distinct similarities of style and diction between the nationalistic discourse and the denunciatory prose of the Cultural Revolution.

But it is neither the Cultural Revolution nor the politics of class struggle that inspires the nationalists. Rather they strive to project a heroic masculinity onto the idea of “being Chinese” within the context of market competition and they are as happy to draw on Japanese as well as Chinese exemplars of such masculinity. For instance, despite his frequent calls for revenge against the humiliations that Japan has visited upon China, Wang Xiaodong nonetheless commends Japan’s militant spirit during World War Two.

Yet because Wang’s call for a militant spirit is directed not at soldiers facing imminent death but at middle-class men anxious about their marriage prospects, it is unwittingly farcical. The preoccupation of Chinese nationalists like Wang, Song Qiang and Zhang Xiaobo with conjuring up images of male potency and heroism as an ideal way of “being Chinese” reflects, above all, a desire for status and a concomitant fear of ordinariness. Their discourse is one that encourages the disaffected to adopt the posture of true patriots to distort and attack any number of *personal* objects of envy and fear by elevating these to the status of a *national* threat.

It is a discourse that has flourished in the post-Maoist cultural marketplace because of tacit support from the Chinese government. This official support is not surprising since the nationalists' call for a robust national identity lends credibility to the patriotic education the post-Maoist state has used since the 1990s to legitimize continued one-party rule. Moreover, the counter-cosmopolitan attitude of "saying no" lends popular support to the idea of "spiritual pollution" under which acts of state censorship have been and continue to be justified. In this context, we should also note that while the nationalistic discourse has little purchase among cosmopolitan open-minded Chinese, it has proven to be a refuge for those who yearn for a strong sense of community amidst the daily pressures of living in a highly competitive market-driven society. The fact that it is mainly through shared use of crude and violent language that the nationalists and their supporters derive a sense of communal belonging is unfortunate but not uncommon.

The consolations of self-aggrandizement that the nationalistic discourse offers are dubious insofar as they require a heightened sensitivity to perceived slights and injuries and a preoccupation with discovering enemies everywhere. The "stutter" that Zhang Xiaobo laments is perhaps best described as a condition that arises only if one insists on asking the question "where do *we* go from here?" When one insists on the unity of a "we" and mythologizes the nation as an organic and unique entity in pursuit of its destiny, there is generally a corollary demand for everyone to abide by the same set of underlying values. By its own stark logic, the nationalistic discourse thus cuts itself off from conversing and engaging with other discourses and other sensibilities. Because of this self-imposed isolation, it is a discourse that can only multiply the objects of its grandiloquent desires and abject fears to perpetuate the same angry "stutter" *ad nauseum*.