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Chinese Nationalism: Insights and Opportunities for Comparative Studies

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Abstract

Comparative studies of nationalism rarely incorporate China as a case in their observations. Despite the rise of nationalism in salience throughout Chinese society, studies of nationalism in China are frequently tagged as insularly focused and unsuitable for comparison. However, a survey of the literature in Chinese nationalism studies reveals that similar blind spots and limitations challenge studies of China with more general comparative research on nationalism. Given this parallelism in development, I argue that looking to observations of China provides scholars of nationalism with vital opportunities to expand and refine theory to include insights from a non-western, non-democratic case.

Keywords: China; nationalism; comparative authoritarianism; everyday nationalism; theory building

On the morning of September 3, 2015, fighter jets raced across the cloudless blue sky over central Beijing. Below, tanks rumbled down Chang'an Avenue past Tiananmen Square and its namesake Gate of Heavenly Peace as part of a massive military parade. Ostensibly, this event commemorated the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory over fascism that ended the Second World War. However, as the lineup of military hardware thundered through the heart of the city, a decidedly more nationalist message about China's strength – martial or otherwise – was on display. The 2015 parade occurred alongside an increased scholarly focus on the nationalist undertones fueling China's rise to superpower status. As the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains in power, academic studies of authoritarian resilience have increasingly sought to understand the role played by nationalist politics in the contemporary PRC, exploring diverse topics ranging from questions about how the party invokes narratives about national greatness and national unity under the party's leadership to shore up legitimacy, to how the CCP uses nationalist rhetoric to mobilize support for policy initiatives (Diamant 2012, 496). While the resulting boom in research on the subject provides a deep well of knowledge about nationalism in China, these theories rarely make an impression in the broader study of nationalism outside the Chinese case.

China's rise to prominence in global politics in the last decade makes its model of authoritarian governance a frequent case for comparative study in subjects as diverse as political communication, social movements, authoritarian institutions, and political economy (Truex 2017; Dukalskis 2017; Repnikova 2018; Owen 2020; Qiaoan and Teets 2020). While at the start of the 2000s, China was frequently cited as unsuitable for comparison – in part because of the perception that its non-western, non-democratic political and cultural identities offered little explanatory leverage for understanding other cases – in the last decade the PRC's authoritarian resilience and steady

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economic growth have made it a necessary case to include in the studies of contemporary politics (Reny 2011, 118–125). The theoretical debates that form the core of the Chinese literature – once cited as being too insular or too particular to China to be of relevance to comparative studies – increasingly inform theory construction in comparative politics and IR (Reny 2011, 106). Why, then, do comparative studies of nationalism rarely incorporate theoretical findings from studies focused on China, or include China as a comparative case for theory building and testing?

Indeed, the question of China's suitability or appropriateness as a comparative case in nationalism studies has become the subject of much debate – even among scholars of nationalism focusing on China.[1] Partly, this is due to the cacophony of competing claims about how one might identify, define, and measure nationalism in China, and the subsequent contentiousness about how the findings from studies of Chinese nationalism ought to be used in application to erect barriers to its contributions to comparative study.[2] Notably, Allen Carlson's (2009) missive on the state of nationalism studies in China sparked a lively conversation on the applicability and usefulness of the collected theoretical insights of studies focusing on nationalism in the Chinese case. Critiquing the field for what he identified as a number of shortcomings, Carlson lamented its narrowness of scope, lack of agreement on basic definitions, disconnect from comparative referents and theoretical framework outside China, and tendency to prioritize nationalism over other competing causes in explaining sociopolitical phenomena (21–25). In the end, Carlson concluded, nationalism is a "flawed" prism through which to study identity in China (27–29).

However, such shortcomings are not unique to studies of nationalism in China. Indeed, the kinds of theoretical blind spots and methodological disagreements that occur in studies of Chinese nationalism also hinder the field of nationalism studies writ large.[3] Though the constructivist consensus in nationalism studies has established nationalism as but one of many competing identities that rise and fall in salience, case studies in nationalism often end up reifying or fixing national identity (Chandra 2001). Incorporating insights from observations of nationalism in China may not only expand and refine theory but prove key to moving the field forward.

In the remainder of this article, I identify five areas of oversight in the literature on Chinese nationalism. Just as in the broader field of nationalism studies, examinations of nationalism in China: 1) are primarily concerned with questions of national origins, 2) largely analyze elite or official narratives, 3) predominantly observe moments of contentious politics, 4) are centered on mobilized nationalist actors, and 5) generally focus on assessments of how the nation and nationalism are used as instruments to achieve political outcomes.

However, I argue that these gaps in the literature illustrate the role that China can play in making theoretical breakthroughs. When Chinese nationalism is observed through the prism of the everyday, we may also gain an appreciation for how findings from China may bridge similar gaps in the general nationalism literature. Observations form China provide scholars with opportunities to dramatically expand understandings of the "here and now" of nationhood (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008a). Studying the maintenance of identity as it is experienced in the course of daily life in an authoritarian regime such as China throws open the doors for deepening knowledge about numerous phenomena, including non-democratic legitimation strategies and authoritarian resilience, social mobilization, passive resistance, ethnonational political economy, boundary negotiation and maintenance, and activation of intersecting identity cleavages. Looking to the everyday provides fuller picture of nationalism in China, while also providing opportunities for the refinement and expansion of general theories of nationalism for application outside the context of western, liberal democracy.

Nationalism and China: Oversights and Opportunities for Exploration

Though studies of Chinese nationalism are frequently dismissed as insular or walled off from comparative studies or ones attempting to build more general theories of nationhood, both bodies of scholarship exhibit similar blind spots. Thus, though the development of theory may have

occurred separately in each field, they are beset by similar challenges and oversights. Just as in the broader field of nationalism studies, observations of nationalism in China prioritize certain types of events, actors, and narratives at the expense of others. As such, the picture they provide of Chinese nationalism is limited and partial. However, the parallel development of common pitfalls also suggests that observations of China provide valuable information about how to move past the limitations inherent in the study of nationalism.

In order to illustrate the contributions that China-focused studies can make to the refinement and extension of theories of nationalism, this article first describes the common challenges that beset studies both inside and outside of China. In all, it identifies five aspects of Chinese nationalism on which much scholarship has been centered and describe the blank spaces such disparities of focus leave underexplored. Placing these observations in comparative context, it also indicates how these gaps in the literature on China mirror those in the field at large.

(1) Focus on Historical Origins

Studies of the origins and development of Chinese nationalism provide a sweeping historical account of the evolution of conceptions of the nation in China (Ng-Quinn 1993; T. Zhao 2011; Duan 2018; Leibold 2007; Mullaney 2011). An especially large amount of scholarship traces the influence of China's struggles against foreign imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on current nationalist sentiment (Reilly 2004; Y. He 2007). Framing contemporary Chinese nationalism as a response to the "Century of National Humiliation" (*bai nian guochi*), a number of studies connect 21st-century anti-Japanese and Anti-American sentiments to a desire to redeem China's national standing and position in the world after such hardships.[4] However, they provide comparatively less insight about the content of contemporary Chinese national identity, or how actors negotiate and reproduces its boundaries in the present day. Such discussions about ethnonational genesis and historical development of nations also form the bedrock of studies in comparative nationalism (Gellner 1983; Anderson 2006; Smith 2009). However, criticism from constructivists scholars – who argued that focusing solely on questions of origins risked reifying nations and obscuring experiences of nationhood in the "here and now" – pointed to a similar need to expand focus beyond stories of ethnogenesis (Brubaker 2004; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008a).

(2) Focus on Contentious Politics or Instances of Activated Nationalism

Much of the core literature on Chinese nationalism observe "noisy" politics or contentious events: protests, boycotts, vandalism or violence (D. Zhao 2002; Zhang 2005; Shen 2007, 38–70, 71–101; Costa 2017). In these moments, when mobilized actors respond to perceived challenges to China's sovereignty or national pride, national identity comes to the foreground. While understanding the conduct of politics during these eventful moments imparts valuable knowledge about the impact of nationalism on social mobilization, public opinion, regime legitimacy, and the policy-making process, they capture only the relatively rare moments where national identity rises to a high tide. The larger field of nationalism studies also shares this preoccupation with contentious politics and conflict surrounding the nation.[5] However, this fixation with contentiousness has also driven scholars to observe nationhood in the moments of quiet and low salience outside of contentious politics (Billig 1995; Goode 2012; Bonikowski 2016). Likewise, observers have endeavored to understand how and when issues become contentious, and how matters of everyday life retain ethnonational significance even in the calamity of unsettled times (Jones and Merriman 2009; Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2022).

(3) Focus on Elite Actors and Official Nationalism

Much of the scholarship on China's nationalism focuses on elite actors embedded within state institutions (B. He 2014). These studies view such "official" or "state" nationalism as shaped by

narratives and interests of the Chinese Communist Party and discuss the ways in which it is intrinsically connected to the party's efforts at political legitimation (Hyun and Kim 2015). As such, these studies highlight the behaviors of elite actors in the government or party bureaucracy and focus on the ways in which institutions of the state cultivate or articulate nationalist values in the general public (S. Zhao 1998; Sneider 2013; Chu 2015; Koesel 2020). Likewise, these studies also frequently assess the CCP's attempts to build up China's soft power (Lovell 2008; Hwang and Schneider 2011). These studies do not capture those expressions of national identity that fall outside of officially endorsed tropes. Relatedly, by focusing on the party-state as the transmitter of nationalist politics, these studies leave open the question of how ordinary citizens receive and internalize such messages. In prioritizing official nationalisms, the field loses sight of how the nation may become the subject of contestation. Instrumentalized studies of nationalism – which primarily assess nationalist sentiment as a top-down, state-centered, or elite-driven phenomenon, utilized for mass mobilization or distribution of public goods – comprises a large portion of studies in comparative studies of nationalism (Bates 1974; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Tilly 1996; Franck and Rainer 2012). However, the predominance of elite-focused studies of nationalism has produced a call for understanding nationhood as a popular phenomenon in which the masses play a participatory roles in shaping conceptions of the nation, and ordinary people hold agency in how they define and maintain the boundaries of ethnonational identity (Edensor 2002; Fox 2013; Goode and Stroup 2015).

(4) Focus on Mobilized Nationalist Actors

When studies of Chinese nationalism do examine non-elite perspectives, most center attention on nationalist actors themselves (Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010; Gao 2012; Yang and Zheng 2012; Liu 2012). For example, studies of online nationalism primarily focus on nationalist netizens, another mobilized population, for whom national identity is frequently high in salience (Wu 2007; Bislev 2014; Han 2019). Studies of state responsiveness to these actors also provides a thorough picture of the limits of the CCP's tolerance for nationalist mobilization, and what kinds of discourse and mobilization cross the line.[6] These studies produce detailed understandings of the tactics that activists use to mobilize and lobby the state, and which venues provide them a platform for airing demands. Admittedly, however, such actors comprise only a very small segment of China's enormous population. The degree to which the sentiments expressed by these activists mirrors those of the broader Chinese public remains relatively unexplored.[7] However, in many other areas besides China, researchers give a spotlight to those proponents of virulent, or chauvinistic nationalisms – especially those examining "new nationalism" following the success of populist rightwing movements in the mid-2010s. However, Siniša Malešević (2019) in critiquing the field's focus on motivated nationalist activists, observes that such approaches "overlook the centrality of nationhood in the modern era" and in so doing fail to capture much of the work nationalism does to structure contemporary geopolitics. Among other arguments, Malešević implores readers to look to the "micro-interactional grounding" of nationalism in the lives of ordinary people (8–13).

(5) Focus on Nationalism as a Causal Variable

Many studies examine the impact of nationalist demonstrations or nationalist attitudes on other phenomena, primarily treating it as a causal variable. For example, a particularly large body of scholarship discusses how nationalist sentiments influence China's foreign policy decisions (Reilly 2012; S. Zhao 2013; Weiss 2014; Costa 2017). Another examines how nationalist narratives reinforce the CCP's legitimating narratives.[8] These studies frequently employ an instrumentalist lens to emphasize how various actors use nationalism as a tool, especially as it is used in pursuit of regime legitimation (Heberer and Schubert 2006; Holbig and Gilley 2010). However, these studies say relatively little about the content of Chinese nationalism itself. Questions about when nationalist

sentiment waxes and wanes, and what kinds of claims may be considered nationalist in nature, require examinations that focus on the content of Chinese national identity rather than the outcomes it produces.[9]

Mylonas and Tudor's (2021) assessment of the state of the field of nationalism studies explains how practice-based approaches to studying nationalism see the instrumentalization of the nation by elites as indivisible from the way in which the nation is maintained and renegotiated through the practices of mass publics.[10] In such a view, mass conceptions of national identification emerge through collections of shared practices that mark the boundaries of identity vis-à-vis others. These claims about the distinctiveness of such practices as belonging to a national identity both illuminate and contest the content of identity and obscure the fuzzy heterogeneity found on the edges of the nation. These practices may be instrumentally read by elite forces seeking to use them for mobilization. Indeed, understanding the circumstances in which national identity may be used to spur on collective action is valuable. However, arguments that posit nationalism as an instrumental, causal variable necessarily depend on an understanding of the meaning of these practices that illuminates the content of identity and a thorough accounting of their prominence in society. As such, exploring the content of national identity helps to increase explanatory leverage about when, why, and how successfully the nation may be instrumentalized. A more complete articulation of why nationalism is a powerful tool of legitimation in China, or how deep attachment to the nation compels Chinese citizens to collective action, relies on a deeper exploration of how the content of national identity is identified, contested, and practiced.

Despite the recent convergence on constructivist approaches within the field of nationalism studies and the broad consensus among nationalism scholars that nations are one of a number of socially constructed products, "macrohistorical, contingent social processes of identification," studies in the field have struggled to build these assumptions about the process of social construction of national identities into their research design and findings.[11] Kanchan Chandra's (2001) assessment of the state of nationalism studies after the "constructivist turn" in the field lamented scholars' failures to design research on constructivist principles and to examine nationalism in a way that accounted for its rising and falling in salience, in interactions with other identities, and how identity itself changed and evolved.

Such observations have led others to take these constructivist tenets seriously in designing research, allowing for more complete understandings of how and when national identities become salient, where they overlap with competing identities, and how content of identities may change and evolve (Brubaker 2004; Chandra 2012; Wimmer 2013). Though difficulties with reification of national identity and undertheorized invocations of instrumentalized versions of the nation still persist, deliberate efforts to better understand and seriously account for the construction of national identity itself has improved the explanatory leverage provided by studies that examine nationalism as a causal variable.

Overcoming Blind Spots in and outside of Research on China

While the blind spots cited above limit the study of nationalism in China, they are certainly not unique to scholars of the Chinese case. Indeed, the broader discipline of nationalism studies likewise struggles to capture experiences of nationhood outside of the top-down official nationalisms or noisy and contentious politics. In primarily observing only a narrow range of expressions of national identity – those where the nation takes its most visible form – scholars risk reifying and fixing understandings of the nation that would be otherwise fluid, affirming or canonizing the claims of nationalist actors that might otherwise be contested and overstating the power of legitimizing or mobilizing narratives that might otherwise fail. Moreover, critics often complain that this tendency toward methodological nationalism results in treatments of nationalism that prioritize homogenizing official expressions of nationhood and overlook individuals' agency to express national identity in various different ways, through numerous practices in the midst of their

daily lives (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008b; Goode and Stroup 2015, 718–724). In short, in these understandings, national identity is shown to be a pervasive, salient, and decisive force in daily decision-making processes, even if the rarity of moments of heightened nationalist activity suggests otherwise. As Brubaker et al. (2006, 375–379) suggest, those who go looking for nationalist significance will find it. In presuming that nationalism is the cause, such studies overlook the ways in which nationalism often overlaps with, competes with, or is eclipsed by other identities (Carlson 2009).

That these challenges recur throughout nationalism studies beyond China points to the potential for studies of China to enhance, refine, and expand theories of theories of nationalism beyond their current scope. Indeed, as Bill Callahan suggests, pointing to the limitations of literature does not render it unimportant or suggest that we must abandon the study altogether.[12] Rather, incorporating insights from observations of China would not only decenter nationalism studies from its foundations in the experience of nationalizing 19th-century European states but would also help to develop greater understandings of the how nationhood is lived in non-liberal, non-democratic states. Furthermore, China presents valuable opportunities for theory testing. As a single-party authoritarian state without the legitimating mechanisms provided regular open elections, China provides a "most likely" case for nationalism as a tool of legitimacy and mobilization.[13] Observations of China thus allow for tests that might illustrate when nationalism succeeds as a legitimating claim and – perhaps more importantly – when it does not.

In short, understanding what defines the boundaries of Chinese national identity, who those boundaries encompass, who they exclude, and when those boundaries shift, harden, or become porous provides foundations for a much-needed widening of perspectives about how the nation is experienced and reproduced. It would also illustrate of the limits of nationalism to affect or explain social or political change by indicating when nationalism does not register as salient.

Deconstructing Chineseness: Viewing China Through a Critical Lens

As a rejoinder to the challenges discussed in the previous section, scholars adopting a critical perspective have provided avenues for further development of theory. In their deconstructions of the concepts of Chinese nationhood, they have interrogated historical narratives about Chineseness, cautioned against the over-instrumentalization of studies of the Chinese nation, expanded the field of vision beyond elite politics, and pointed toward ways in which the content of Chinese nationalism may be more deeply investigated. These represent key advancements in well-trodden areas in the study of nationalism.

Through thorough processes of deconstruction, critical scholarship has helped provide greater understanding of the politics and processes of nation-building in China. Rather than taking the positions of nationalist actors – officially or otherwise – as given, or assessing them instrumentally, these studies look toward how such claims are constructed, reproduced, and internalized outside of the state. Through such critical analysis, they unearth previously underexamined findings about the processes of national myth-making, the construction and maintenance of Chinese nationhood, the inclusions and exclusions that mark the boundaries of Chinese national identity, and the resonance – or lack thereof – of nationalist narratives in the broad public.

For example, Callahan (2005) urges us to explore the ways in which nation, nation-state, and nationalism do not cohere into monolithic entities and to describe where they interact with other identities and structures. Looking beyond the official politics of the state, he considers the infusion of nationalist imagery into China's popular culture and soft power initiatives. Though the audiences of these cultural products is frequently assumed to be external, Callahan reminds scholars that the narratives produced in popular culture also inform the sentiments of China's broad public (Callahan 2010; 2013). Through observations of soft power products, he discerns the ways in which expressions of national pride and humiliation intertwine to form a "structure of feeling" that conveys China's "national aesthetic" (Callahan 2010, 9–10). Rather than solely focusing on official

actors, Callahan (2013, 17–43) instead examines those "citizen intellectuals" (bloggers, novelists, filmmakers, scholars, and artists) engaged in articulating new and aspirational visions of China's future. The intimate and personal expressions of nationhood Callahan presents illustrate how nationalist messages from the state may resonate with individuals even as they attach their own private and divergent aspirations to them. Callahan's findings invite a reassessment of the implications of using nationalism as a legitimating tool.

Similarly, developments in scholarship from critical Han studies have also begun to deconstruct the Han majority identity often positioned as the center of China's national identity (Mullaney et al. 2012). Such dissection not only breaks down notions of a monolithic Han core of Chinese nationalism but also invites discussion about how individual conceptions of identity contrast to those proffered up by the state. In one prominent example, Kevin Carrico's (2017) ethnography of activists in the Han Clothing Movement (*Hanfu Yundong*) describes the way that practitioners literally wear expressions of the nations on their sleeve. By donning robes thought to be reflective of a Han traditional past, Carrico explains, these activists seek fulfillment otherwise lacking in their daily lives. The movement and its participants illustrate how people living otherwise mundane lives find meaning in the "weird fantasies and wild longings" of the imaginary community of the nation (24). Carrico's accounts demonstrates how the material object of Han clothing becomes a ritual object, which is the foundation for national imagining and construction of a communal identity. In so doing, it not only exemplifies the ways in which ordinary actors may distort official narratives in their daily maintenance of identity but also provides an opportunity to build bridges between nationalism studies and sociological research done on material culture.[14]

Other efforts to refocus studies of national identity in China examine the process of nation-building from the periphery to assess how individuals in positions of marginality experience the inclusions and exclusions of the state's nationalization efforts. While these projects – such as the body of work in critical Han studies or the scholarship examining the way that ethnic minorities have been included in the Chinese state – are often labeled as "ethnic politics," in describing the centrality of Han identity to the Chinese nation-building project and reviewing the hierarchies of power that structure China's ethnic relations, they illuminate how expressions of nationhood are articulated and how boundary lines for inclusion in the nation are drawn (Leibold 2007; Mullaney et al. 2012). Looking to these studies, therefore, provides a rejoinder to instrumentalized or narrowly framed discussions of Chinese nationalism.

For example, Elena Barabantseva (2010) decenters China's nationalizing project in order to understand how the state's narratives encompass – or leave out – those at the margins. By observing how state narratives discuss diasporic overseas Chinese and China's ethnic minorities, she illuminates understandings about where the boundaries of Chinese national identity fall, who falls within them, and what forces drive the process of nation-building in China. By viewing Chinese identity from the vantage point of the periphery of Chinese national identity, Barabantseva concludes that China's efforts at nation-building and modernization are entwined in one another. Thus, she explains, China's efforts to assimilate ethnic minorities into a larger Chinese nation dovetails with the CCP's efforts to claim legitimacy as a provider of advancement and modernity.

Similarly, David Tobin's (2020) examination of how ordinary people view the state's narratives around identity and security in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region highlights how perceptions of threat construct exclusive national identities. After exploring the CCP's narratives of ethnic unity under party leadership and deconstructing the regime's securitization of ethnic identity in Xinjiang to safeguard the claims, Tobin describes how these messages are experienced and understood by ordinary people. In his conversations with Han and Uyghurs in the region, Tobin observes how Han and Uyghurs reconstruct state narratives about national unity in their daily lives, often in ways that cast non-Chinese cultural and religious expressions as threats to security.

Studies like these illustrate how to overcome obstacles that limit nationalism studies more generally. These studies do not treat state-promoted narratives as uniformly received but rather illustrate the ways in which they are received, interpreted, and enacted differently away from the

center. Observing nationalism through a critical lens helps to revisit and challenge conventional wisdom about matters such as the efficacy of nationalism as a mobilizational tool, the role of the state, and the influence of nationalism in policy-making. Also, by viewing the process of construction removed from the centralized perspective of the state, they provide suggestions about what content comprises Chinese national identity and indicate how such matters are contested. Each of these studies expands the range of observations, theories, and methods used to study Chinese nationalism and demonstrates how including insights from China might spur further development in the field of nationalism studies at large.

In each of these studies, observations of China challenge established understandings of the nation or blaze a trail forward in overcoming the limitations that frequently beset studies of nationalism. In avoiding many of the blind spots identified above, these studies suggest ways in which comparative studies may also avoid replicating these issues. In particular, they point to the usefulness of studying the way state narratives are understood on a quotidian level. In applying the insights provided by such critical deconstructions, I argue that continuing to explore everyday nationhood in China presents opportunities to continue to deepen theory.

Conclusions: China's Role in Building Better Theories of the Everyday

The emerging body of critical scholars working on Chinese nationalism cited in the previous section have begun the process of addressing the major oversights and underexplored questions in the field. Through their challenges to traditional studies of nation and nationalism in China, they have illuminated numerous areas for further examination and study. In particular, their response to state-centered approaches of nationalism highlights key opportunities to study nationalism in China from the ground up.

Applying a lens of everyday nationalism in China presents vital opportunities to continue to build, refine, and extend theory, specifically through expanding scholarly understandings of how the nation is lived and experienced by ordinary people living under the governance of a single-party authoritarian state.[15] Though the politics of the everyday unfold in liberal and illiberal states alike, the vast majority of studies of everyday nationalism take cases in democratic or democratizing states as subjects (Goode and Stroup 2015). However, the repertoire of practices available to actors living in authoritarian states may appear different from those highlighted by the study of democracies (Goode 2021). As such, examining the Chinese case allows researchers to explore whether differences in regime type contribute to the identification of alternative casual mechanisms or arrive at unexpected conclusions when studying nationalism.

Looking to China provides new tests for theories of everyday nationalism in a context where daily practice of identity occurs without the platforms provided by a truly independent civil society and where the state actively pursues a monopoly on expression of identity (Béja 2008). Indeed, the tenure of Xi Jinping as China's paramount political leader has brought renewed focus to elite or official politics. While, historically, the CCP has used other legitimation strategies (e.g., through revolutionary socialism during the Mao era or economic performance under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin), Xi Jinping's turn toward a campaign – the China Dream – with an explicitly nationalist logic at its core make China a potentially illustrative case study (J. Wang 2017). Xi's marriage of the overarching goal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" to the party's ability to provide a diverse array of public goods – including economic performance, societal stability, interethnic unity, entertainment and cultural spectacles, sporting accomplishments, enhanced moral values, technological innovation, and increased international standing for China – renders the relationship between the regime and the Chinese nation one that is both multifaceted and all encompassing.

The prominence of nationalist rhetoric in China's official discourse extends opportunities to scholars to treat it as a "most likely" case for the salience of the nation – opening up the door to surprising findings about when and why the nation does not matter. China's continual attempts to

forge a solidified national identity from its geographically, demographically, and culturally diverse geobody make observing the moments when the nation recedes in salience of particular analytical value. A look toward the everyday – where the nation is not presumed to be a constantly relevant social entity – might furnish examples of when competing identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, religion, political affiliation, migrant status, and so on override national identity.

China presents a vital opportunity to assess how average citizens internalize authoritarian legitimation claims in daily life (S. Zhao 1998; Z. Wang 2008). Centralizing measures enacted by the leadership in Beijing necessitate a deeper understandings of how high-level political actors develop and implement strategies of governance and legitimation. In particular, Xi's embrace of nationalism makes the examination of official nationalism crucial for understanding the viability of the Chinese party-state as a ruling entity. However, exploring nationalism in China at only the official state level risks omitting vital aspects of the picture. Observations of the state level alone do not assess when and whether or not state claims about the nation achieve salience, nor do they explain why official claims made by the state are persuasive (or, indeed, in some cases why they are not). Further, while state-focused discussions provide informative evidence about authoritarian governance strategies, they must be paired with assessments about whether such strategies succeed.

To do so, scholars must look beyond the state to understand whether preference falsification or sardonic replication of regime messaging may be contained within the hidden transcripts of public response to official policy. Knowledge of this kind is fundamentally important for making the motivations and actions of the state intelligible and are necessary for understanding the success or failure of the legitimation claims that rest on official invocations of nationalism. Crucially, however, knowledge of this kind must be observed on the everyday level. A complete understanding of the role that nationalism plays in China's authoritarian retrenchment requires an examination of how the rhetoric, policies, and behavior of the state are perceived by the public at large.

Rather than simply focusing on how nationalism is delivered through state institutions or paraded in large-scale national spectacles, an everyday approach also attends to the way that such presentations of the nation are received by the broader public. As such it avoids falling into the trap of methodological nationalism, reproducing the logic of nationalists, or treating the nation as always providing a causal spark for sociopolitical phenomena (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Goode and Stroup 2015). Shifting focus toward the examinations of how the nation is practiced, rather than how it is presented by a legitimacy-seeking regime, unlocks potentially profound insights about how and where popular understandings distort images of the nation presented in official material, and in some cases, where they eschew them altogether (Fox 2013).

Here, too, China offers opportunities to extend theory building or identify previously unexplored causal mechanisms. Though China's system of compulsory patriotic education is by no means unique, especially among autocratic states, it exemplifies a long-running and well-developed program intended to inculcate nationalist values and promote ruling legitimacy. As such, observing the Chinese case provides an opportunity to assess the efficacy of these efforts at cultivating legitimacy by the state. Though incorporating insights drawn from ordinary Chinese people's reception of nationalist claims, researchers may sharpen measures to assess the success or failure of nationalist legitimation claims in more opaque political contexts. Through these examinations, scholars may also identify alternative explanations for how, why, and when nationalist rhetoric mobilizes mass publics, or articulate how nationalism provides a casual mechanism in motivating regime actions in ways that were note previous specified or understood.

Moreover, assessing the content of these legitimation claims affords nationalism scholars an opportunity to revisit assumptions about the nature of nationalism under authoritarian states. Many discussions surrounding the nature of authoritarian nationalism emphasize its compatibility with exclusive or ethnically based conceptions of national identity that contrast to more civic and inclusive invocations of the nation employed by liberal democratic actors (Clements 2018; Tudor and Slater 2021). In China, however, the CCP's pursuit of legitimation through rhetorical appeals to citizens that both urge them to resist external threats to limit China's rise and to join in the building

of a multi-ethnic and inclusive Chinese national identity (*zhonghua minzu yishi*) blur the lines between civic and ethnic nationalisms, as well as the lines between populism, patriotism, and nationalism.[16] Adding in China as a comparative case in studies of legitimacy-seeking authoritarian nationalist entities may enable a revisitation of these typologies or help to answer lingering questions about conceptualization of terms like patriotism and nationalism (Mylonas and Tudor 2021, 122–123). Furthermore, examining the popular response of Chinese citizens to these claims may help revise understandings about the perception and efficacy of these claims in societies where formal opportunities voicing dissent is limited.

Likewise, the highly visible community of nationalist activists in China invites further study of conditions that precede activation and mobilization.[17] China's single-party system allows for the identification of how mobilization outside of the context of electoral competition. Recent interest in the global rise of populist nationalism has focused on the emergence of nationalist parties and their responsiveness of activist movements in order to win elections.[18] In authoritarian states, means of measuring legitimacy are less clear cut. While nationalism studies has long explored the role of nationalism in bolstering legitimacy in non-competitive, non-electoral authoritarian systems, a more recent wave of scholarship eschews the assumptions that such measures always succeed, and seeks to determine when – if at all – they do.[19]

As an example, the growing number of studies finding political apathy among China's youth pose an interesting question for the field of nationalism studies at large: why do nationalist narratives resonate while other forms of political engagement are met with indifference? (Li 2015; Liu 2012). Assessing the way that these so-called "apolitical youth" construct and form attachments to national identity may help refine understandings of how the values associated with nationhood are transmitted. Likewise, examining whether or not the visions of the nation offered by China's youth, who complete a comprehensive nationalist curriculum as part of their education, match those espoused by official rhetoric may illuminate new understandings about what kinds of appeals mobilize mass publics behind nationalist initiatives, or identify new causal mechanisms about when the nation matters in promoting collective action. These types of observations of everyday habits or non-elite opinion may indicate where and why nationhood detaches from or supersedes ordinary politics.

I would be remiss to conclude without some meditations on the practicalities of doing research on everyday nationalism in China as concerns about access and ethics in fieldwork mount. In addition to the current difficulties in travel and safety imposed in the aftermath of the global coronavirus pandemic, China's authoritarian turn under Xi Jinping has left many researchers questioning whether continuing to do fieldwork in China is ethical or even feasible (Fuchs, Fuk-Ying Tse, and Feng 2019; Romig 2020). In particular, the passage of the broad and all-encompassing Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020 prompted many scholars to ask whether, and when, they would return to China to do fieldwork (*ChinaFile* 2021).

As such anxieties make clear, scholars not only must think about the practicality of gaining permission to do work on a sensitive issue in the field but must also take seriously their responsibilities to protect respondents in an environment increasingly defined by surveillance and suspicion of foreign journalists and academics – both from the state and the general public.[20] Given these constraints, researchers ought to strongly consider how they might balance the ambitions of their research agendas, their obligations to report honestly and openly on a pressing subject of great sociopolitical importance, and their responsibility to protect respondents – which includes ensuring their safety and their anonymity even after leaving field sites.[21] These pressures are by no means unique to China-focused work, and, as the implications of the sweeping Security Law continue to be made clear, adding lessons learned from China may be useful in providing an ethical toolkit for researching nationalism under authoritarianism (Knott 2019; Yusupova 2019).

However, even as the window continues to close for doing fieldwork in China, these strictures provide vital opportunities for the evolution of field. Barriers of access to the field – whether ethical or practical – demand that scholars of China consider new methodological and conceptual means of

conducting observation. Concerns about a researcher's presence in the field causing disruption might lead scholars to reconsider where the field is, perhaps looking to digital ethnography, or the everyday practice of nationhood in observations of social media communities. Similarly, anxieties about endangering respondents due to their participation might lead researchers to look to historical evolutions of concepts of nationhood. In so doing, they may further understandings about how ordinary people's experiences of the "here and now" in previous eras evolve or persist in the present.[22] In this sense, considerations about how to study everyday nationalism in China may provide conceptual and methodological breakthroughs in the study of closed spaces, which will benefit the field at large.

As this overview has shown, rather than signaling out China as an exceptional case or demonstrating the ways in which theory derived from observations of China are unsuitable for comparison, the blind spots in the literature call attention to the ways in which the study of nationalism itself lags behind – specifically in accounting for the influence of nationalism in day-to-day life in authoritarian states. Moreover, looking toward China provides opportunities to expand theories of the everyday to account for the relatively under-explored region of East Asia.

Notes

1 See the ongoing debates between Carlson and interlocuters, especially Carlson 2009; Costa 2014; Carlson et al. 2016; Gustafsson 2016; and Rae and Wang 2016.
2 This is a complaint voiced in writings from Diamant, Costa, and others. See, in particular Diamant 2012; Costa 2014.
3 See, for instance, the overview of the field made by Goode and Stroup (2015).
4 Chang 2001; Gries 2004a; Callahan 2010; and Z. Wang 2012
5 Indeed, Brubaker and Laitin's (1998) exhaustive catalogue of the various means of studying ethnonationalist conflict and violence provides a testament to the predominance of the subject within the field.
6 King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Gries and Wang 2021
7 A handful of studies have attempted to discern just how closely the view of these nationalists aligns with those of the general public, and whether or not these nationalists' demands actually challenge or threaten the legitimacy of the state. See, for example Qiu 2006; Hyun and Kim 2015; and Weiss 2019.
8 Gries 2004b; Seo 2005; and Shue 2010.
9 On the subject of whether nationalist sentiment in China is rising, see Johnston 2017.
10 For further reading, see Mylonas and Tudor 2021, 119–120.
11 Goode and Stroup 2015, 717-719; Mylonas and Tudor 2021, 113–114.
12 See Callahan's contributions in Carlson et al. 2016.
13 On the potential of "most likely" single case studies for use in theory testing, see George and Bennett 2005, 80–81.
14 See, for instance, Zubrzycki 2017.
15 On the study of everyday nationalism, see Brubaker et al. 2006; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008b; Skey 2011; Goode and Stroup 2015; and Skey and Antonsich 2017.
16 On the development of *Zhonghua minzu* and its importance to the CCP's legitimation claims, see Leibold 2007 and Tobin 2015.
17 For example, Stroup's ethnography of interethnic relations between Han and Hui explores how daily instances of prejudice perpetuate mistrust that builds to larger conflict. See Stroup 2020.

18 See, for example, discussions of nationalist parties in Bieber 2018 and Bonikowski 2019.

19 Dukalskis and Lee's study of everyday nationalism in North Korea provides a strong overview of how authoritarian nationalism influences the lives of ordinary citizens. See Dukalskis and Lee 2020.

20 See, in particular, concerns raised about harassment of foreign journalists; see Foreign Correspondents' Club of China 2019; Reporters Without Borders 2020; Davidson 2021.

21 Thankfully in response to these challenges, researchers have developed a number of resources tailored to the fieldwork experience in China, specifically. See Heimer and Thøgersen 2006.

22 Here Elizabeth J. Perry's work on evolving concepts of rights and the legacy of revolution in Chinese politics may provide an example of how such research may be conducted. See Perry 2007; 2008.

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