

Testimony of
Professor Edward Friedman*
to the
United States China Commission,
Washington D.C.
April 14, 2005

Chinese Nationalism
and
American Policy

*Edward Friedman friedman@polisci.wisc.edu is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. His books include *The Politics of Democratization: Generalizing Asian Experiences, National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China*, and *What if China Doesn't Democratize?*

Thank you for this opportunity to introduce the topic of Chinese nationalisms. Please note the plural, nationalisms. There is more than one way to be a patriot. These different approaches produce political conflict. They also call our attention to alternative futures.

My conclusion, drawn from exploring debates within Chinese nationalisms, are (1) post-Mao nationalism is different from Mao era nationalism, (2) the nationalism that the ruling CCP promoted after the extraordinary events of 1989-1991 is not only anti-American but anti-democratic and also sharpens a military sword aimed at the Taiwanese people, and (3) this recent militarization of Chinese nationalism is already being challenged by other notions of patriotism. But that challenge, while facilitating peace for the moment in cross-Strait relations, does not emanate from a nationalistic mind-set that would recognize the legitimacy of Taiwan's separate identity and thereby, as with Russia and Finland or Britain and Ireland, allow for a truly peaceful resolution of and end to China's annexationist posture toward Taiwan, a switch which would help to assure peace, prosperity and pluralism in the Asia-Pacific region.

Many Chinese do not like to be told that they are nationalists. They have been socialized by Marxist-Leninist education to believe that capitalist imperialists are aggressively nationalistic while a victimized proletarian China has patriots who defend the threatened country. Therefore since good Chinese are patriots and bad Americans are nationalists, Chinese tend to hear the claim that Chinese today are ultra-nationalistic as an unjustifiable and malicious accusation by ill-willed people that the CCP-ruled PRC is a threat to its neighbors. They sometimes respond by saying that America is yet more nationalistic, more a threat to China and the world.

In the Mao era, Mao sought to restore Chinese glory and negate the previous "century of humiliations," a political category invented to hide the fact that the Manchu empire (Qing dynasty), which fell only in 1911, actually was one of the most territorially aggrandizing

gunpowder empires in human history. Its armies more than doubled the territory that had been previously controlled by the Sincized Ming empire that the non-Han Manchus had replaced in the 17th century. Modern Chinese Han nationalism silently lays claim to the conquered territories of that recent expansionist Manchu empire. It is an imperial nationalism presented in a discourse of anti-imperialism.

In the late Mao era, Chinese students were taught precisely how much territory Czarist Russia had stolen from the Qing dynasty which the Soviet Union had incorporated. It was the sacred duty of the Chinese people to recover land stolen from the Manchu empire. There were even regrets that Soviet Russia had been allowed to turn an independent Mongolia, once part of the Manchu empire, into its dependency. Today, in an era in which Beijing courts Moscow, the CCP is, at least for the moment, silent on these northern territorial revanchist demands. Politics changes and politics decides the contents of the nationalism and the territorial claims thereby legitimated. Nationalism should be understood instrumentally. It serves particular and contestable ruling group interests.

Given the mutability of Chinese nationalism's territorial claims, it should not come as a surprise that the Republic of China (ROC) (and then also the CCP) accepted, from 1911 through 1942, that Taiwan was not part of China, that Taiwanese should fight a national liberation movement against Showa era imperial Japan. Chinese today are not taught about the actual history of Taiwan and its relations with imperial dynasties, the ROC and the CCP. They have no idea how recently invented is the CCP fiction that Taiwan has always been part of China.

Actually it was only after the earth-shaking events of 1989 to 1991, an era going from the rise of a nationwide democracy movement in China that was bloodily suppressed on June 4,

1989 to the August 1991 failed reactionary coup in Moscow (that Beijing supported) which ended the “prison house of nationalities” that had constituted the Czarist Leninist empire, that Chinese rulers became panicked and decided to turn their guns on Taiwan. They were traumatized when ruling Communist parties in east and central Europe and Mongolia were endangered by, what the CCP fantasized was, an international democratic onslaught led by the USA, which included subverting and splintering China, beginning with the 1988 democratization of Taiwan. The actual peaceful overtures to China from a Taiwan whose history and identity are quite separate from the CCP’s PRC were ignored.

China’s rulers responded to the nationalistic fantasies engendered by their political traumas by ordering the construction of missiles to be moved across from Taiwan as part of a military build up to suffocate Taiwan’s democratic autonomy. The Chinese people were then socialized to imagine democratization as inducing chaos and decline, supposedly the story of Russia, Yugoslavia, India and even Taiwan, which is portrayed in China in terms of chaos, – of crime, corruption, kidnaping, etc. This passionately popular and territorially aggrandizing Chinese nationalism imagines democracy as splitism, as the enemy of China’s return to glory, as the enemy of a negating of the “century of humiliations.”

Mao era nationalism had also sought Chinese glory. To make China the leader of the international camp of anti-imperialist revolution, Mao intentionally alienated the Soviet Union, India, Vietnam and Mongolia. Post-Mao leaders have abandoned Mao’s self-wounding policies and re-interpreted China’s nationalism so that this quest for glory allows a normalization of relations with Russia, India and Vietnam. The new nationalism concentrates instead on Taiwan

(and Japan and America). The anti-Japan element is poisoned by racialistic hatred, a rising racialism which also negatively impacts Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists.

Mao's quest for glory, Chinese analysts inform us, actually undermined Chinese security. But today's nationalism, still defines China, which in fact has risen again to be a great power, as somehow still a victim of "a century of humiliations," again placing patriotically shaded eyeglasses on Chinese eyes such that Chinese have a hard time seeing how much they have brought trouble, or can bring trouble, on themselves by policies such as seeking absolute energy security by autarky and amoral realism and by opposing the spread of democracy and human rights.

A similar logic of victimization holds today in China as in the Mao era. Chinese can not see into their political system so as to understand the actual origins of China's militarization of its Taiwan policy. They cannot see how China's 1995-96 military exercises meant to terrorize Taiwan's democratic people actually boosted a separate Taiwan identity and led Asian neighbors to seek America as a balancer to China and led America to move toward military cooperation with Taiwan so as to be better able to respond to China's next armed provocation. Within Chinese nationalism, these defensive responses of others to Chinese offensive actions are understood as American interference meant to obstruct China's return to glory and keep America hegemonic. Given this nationalistic orientation, Chinese leaders feel a self-induced pressure to respond to imagined American-initiated threats, understood as a US-led effort to strangle a just emerging and still fragile Chinese return to glory. This is a potentially dangerous kind of nationalism. It hides from the Chinese people the actual content and benefits of China's policy of deep engagement with America.

Given the militantly anti-democratic nature of the new nationalism, China's CCP rulers feel themselves compelled to challenge America in international institutions so as to block the spread of democracy and human rights, imagined as a threat to the very survival of the CCP, whose position of state leadership is treated as the key to China's return to glory. At one point, China even got the U.S. voted off the U.N. Human Rights Commission which meets in Geneva. China has moved into U.N. Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) to block efforts at democratization, especially in what Chinese leaders see as their Asian backyard. Consequently, China has joined the UN PKO both in East Timor and in Cambodia. China has launched a major effort to train Chinese PKO forces and has brought trainees to China from all over Asia. From North Korea to Burma to the Central Asian Muslim republics, the new Chinese nationalism prods Chinese leaders to oppose the spread of democracy and human rights throughout the region. As a great power, China means to sustain and spread authoritarianism. The consequences of the policies of great powers merit serious attention.

In sum, given the new nationalism and a great power status which resists constraints, it does not seem that international engagement with China promotes China's democratization. Instead, China's rulers use international organizations to advance their perceived vital interests, to oppose democratization and to strengthen the grip of the CCP on state power. Villager self-government, aided by so many well-meaning international groups, is intended by the CCP to strengthen local state capacity in order to make the authoritarian rule of the CCP more efficient. It has little to do with democratization, a path on which the ruling CCP has no intention of embarking. The leading position of the CCP is beyond questioning.

But this nationalism and these CCP policies are challenged inside of China, just as Mao's self-wounding nationalistic notion of glory was challenged by Chinese who understood that his kind of nationalism would bring catastrophes on the heads of the Chinese people, as it indeed did. Some Chinese see the CCP's aggressive policy toward Taiwan as self-defeating for China. They see it as disastrous to hastily move down a path that could produce a military confrontation with American and alienate Asian neighbors and undercut the sources of Chinese growth, its rise to great power. These Chinese, usually understood as southern and coastal and tied into the world economy, embrace a nationalism which prefers a long term policy of open integration with the world to facilitate China's peaceful rise. They see Taiwan eventually falling of its own weight into the Chinese basket. After all, China really is the world's number one beneficiary of globalization and the Taiwan economy is increasingly integrated with and dependent on China's. No one should underestimate the will and persistence of CCP ruling groups to shape the international world to serve their narrow power interests and their expansive nationalistic notion of security.

Nonetheless, American policy to China should not try to weaken or undermine these non-militaristic Chinese patriots. The American government should understand that there is close to nothing that outsiders can do to shape the dynamics of Chinese politics. China is not a banana republic. It is a great and independent nation whose fate will be decided by the actions of the Chinese people themselves, not by foreigners. For America, constructive cooperation with China is the better way ahead.

This does not mean that outsiders should not support local self-governance efforts which check cruel local corruption. It is a good thing for humans to help each other grapple with their

problems. But it will backfire to try to impose on China. In arenas where China seeks help – for example, environment, disease control, philanthropy – one should not hesitate to help. After all, it is the case that a robust, active civil society, painfully constricted today by the CCP dictatorship, is part of the solution to today’s global ills in China as elsewhere. China’s authoritarian leaders, however, fearful of autonomous societal organization, keep the Chinese people from fully benefitting from the talents and energies of decent, humane, and caring Chinese people.

Chinese, as all people, do want to solve their society’s problems. There are many in the judicial system in China who are ashamed of the pervasiveness of police brutality and arbitrary executions. They work to move China in the direction of legal due process because Chinese dignity demands it. They even have had some important successes. It is good to help such humane efforts. Likewise, some Chinese work to make the non-democratic village self-governance elections actually representative of the will of the people. One could even invite Chinese to America to learn how the contributions of religious groups keep down the costs of care for the ill and elderly. The Chinese government too worries about the high cost of such medical assistance.

The Chinese system and people cry out for political reform to free the Chinese people to contribute more to China and the world. But the rulers will not permit democratization, although there are ever more people in China who see democratization as the only way for China to solve some of its problems and achieve a glorious international status.

As China has opened to the world and achieved so much to be proud of in so many diverse fields in such an amazingly short period of time, many Chinese want, in addition, the soft

power they feel they now merit and which they find is denied to China because their rising nation is seen in much of the international community in terms of anti-democratic negatives, of Tibet, Taiwan and human rights abuses, which obscure a far happier story of China's return to international glory. Some politically conscious Chinese are beginning to recognize that the problem arises not from unfriendly foreign propaganda but from unappetizing Chinese realities.

As you all know, right after the U.S. Department of State releases its annual human rights reports on numerous countries, including one on China, the CCP government responds by publishing a report on the human rights abuses of the United States. It is the CCP's notion of tit-for-tat. Clearly, the Chinese government does not like these excellent State Department reports. But these cautious and reliable descriptions of pervasive human rights abuses in China cannot be ignored by the CCP, which denounces the reports for dirtying the national escutcheon. The CCP works to get the Chinese people to see human rights activists abroad as scum.

More should be done in this human rights field, although, again, America should not act unilaterally as a bull in a China shop. More international cooperation is needed so the CCP cannot succeed in the political equivalent of playing Boeing off against Airbus. It is a good thing when the international community (governments, NGOs and international institutions) celebrates the human rights efforts of the Dalai Lama or the democratic achievements of Taiwan or expresses its distress at the jailings by the CCP of journalists, web users and peaceful political reformers. The anti-sweatshop movement on American college campuses helps the cause of human rights in China, advancing labor rights. It would be a wonderful achievement if the democratic peoples of the region, from Mongolia, South Korea and Taiwan through Indonesia to India, could join together to promote human rights in the region. This would highlight how

authoritarian China is the odd nation out in Asia (the majority of Asians who live in dictatorships live in China), and therefore a country that can not be fully welcomed into a trusted leadership role in the increasingly democratic region unless China too democratizes.

Why not even offer to the CCP cooperation in which they send people here to improve the human rights record in the USA and in which we send human rights specialists to work in China? It is mutual aid for mutual benefit. The point is that there are plenty of Chinese who would prefer to see political reform in China so that China can achieve the soft power to match its hard power and therefore be welcome by the international community to play a much larger role, one worthy of the greatness and glory of an ancient Chinese civilization and its contemporary and future achievements.

In short, the present virulently anti-democratic nationalism in a risen great power China is a very recent construction. It can change the world in a direction antithetical to the values of the democracies. But this nationalism need not be the one, only and eternal way that Chinese come to comprehend what it means to be a Chinese patriot. Outsiders will do best in not obstructing that better cause of a different and more open and tolerant nationalism if they do not overestimate their ability to influence Chinese politics and then inadvertently alienate the Chinese people, throwing them ever more into the arms of overly sensitive, revanchist, military chauvinists. If it is the case that China's return to glory requires continuing growth that has to be premised on basic political reforms out of today's pervasively corrupt Leninist authoritarianism, as so many analysts insist, then it should become clear, over time, to the wise and ever more informed Chinese people that it is in their most fundamental interests to reject a militaristic nationalism which augurs ill for all the peoples of the region and, as with Mao's nationalism,

may even bring catastrophes on the heads of the extraordinary Chinese people, even reversing the monumental gains of the most recent quarter of a century of hard work and wise policies.