

## Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission

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#### PANEL V: POPULAR CHINESE NATIONALISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHINESE STATE MEDIA

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What is the relationship between popular nationalism and the state media in China today? This question raises three issues. First, the relationship between state and popular nationalism in China is dynamic, evolving, and has a profound impact of the state’s legitimacy and stability. Second, the opposing forces of politically driven media control and market driven media liberalization pull the Chinese media in antagonistic directions. We know surprisingly little about either topic. Third, the issue at their intersection – how state information and media control impacts popular Chinese nationalism – is one we know even less about. These are three highly politically charged issues, and it is difficult if not impossible to do systematic interviews or surveys on them.

In a context of information scarcity, it is extremely important that analysts be humble and cautious about the conclusions that they draw from the limited available evidence. It is easy to compensate for a lack of facts by filling in the gaps in our knowledge with preexisting beliefs about broader ideologically charged issues such as the nature of communist regimes, and the importance of media freedoms. This is especially important for Americans, who share a Liberal ideology centered on the passionate defense of individual freedom. Central to our Liberalism are two strongly held views that can easily distort our views of Chinese nationalism and media control. The first view is that Communist states are unitary monoliths repressing individual liberties. The second view is that our First Amendment rights – the freedoms of the press, speech, assembly, etc. – are ends in themselves.

#### 1. POPULAR NATIONALISM AND THE CHINESE STATE

Most Americans are familiar with the “tank man” photographs taken in Beijing following the Massacre near Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The images resonate with many Americans both because we admire the anonymous Chinese man’s courage in standing up alone against a line of Chinese tanks, and because we both despise and fear everything those tanks represent to us – Communist tyranny. In many ways the “tank man”

photographs have come to represent the mainstream reductionist American view of Chinese politics as brute force. In this view, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), like dictatorships everywhere, is seen as ruling through simple coercion.

The idea that even the massive People's Liberation Army (PLA) has a gun at the head of 1.3 billion Chinese 24 hours a day seven days a week is of course farfetched. The CCP rules not just on the basis of coercion, but also through persuasion. It is therefore very attentive to public opinion on issues central to its legitimacy, such as nationalism. The CCP won the late 1940s civil war against its Nationalist Party rivals in large part because it was able to depict itself as more nationalistic than the Nationalists. And the nationalist message that only the CCP can lead the Chinese people in their struggle to regain wealth and power for China has been central to CCP claims to legitimacy in the almost 60 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

Due in part to our "tank man" view of Chinese politics – that communist regimes rule by brute force alone – western and especially American analysts have been slow to pick up on the emergence of a genuinely popular nationalism in China autonomous of the state. Expressions of nationalism in China, from the anti-American demonstrations of May 1999 following the Belgrade Embassy bombing to the April 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations, have tended to be depicted in the West as top-down state affairs. Western analysts tend to view the CCP as deploying its propaganda and media apparatus to manipulate and use nationalism for various policy objectives, whether it be diverting domestic discontent abroad, or extracting concessions from American or Japanese diplomats.

This dominant western view of Chinese nationalism is both overly cynical and overly optimistic. It is overly cynical in depicting the CCP as a monolith, reducing individual Chinese citizens to impotent puppets in the hands of omnipotent CCP propagandists. But it is also overly optimistic, implying that since the CCP controls the spigot of Chinese nationalism, it can also turn it off at will.

The reality is far more complex. While the CCP may wish that it were both omniscient and omnipotent, it is not. The CCP's educational and propaganda apparatus have played a major role in shaping the context within which popular Chinese nationalism has emerged, but the CCP has lost its hegemony over nationalist politics. Indeed, popular nationalists are increasingly adept at using the CCP's own nationalist claims against the CCP itself.

First, popular nationalists frequently claim that the CCP is too weak in its foreign policy, forcing the CCP to decide between taking a tougher stand and antagonizing foreign governments, or rebuffing popular nationalist demands and weakening CCP legitimacy at home. The former dynamic was at play in China's Japan policy over the course of the Koizumi administration. As popular anti-Japanese nationalism proliferated both in cyberspace and in demonstrations on the Chinese street, the CCP was forced to take tougher and tougher stands against Japan. By the end of the Koizumi administration, Sino-Japanese diplomacy had come to a virtual halt, with no top Chinese leader willing to commit political suicide by meeting Koizumi directly. Popular nationalists had arguably

forced CCP policy makers into a foreign policy that undermined China's national interest in stable Sino-Japanese relations to promote China's economic development. The latter dynamic of doing little in response to popular nationalist demands and risking popular ire can be seen frequently in cyberspace ridicule of weak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) policies. For instance, during the recent Tibetan uprising and repression, CNN's Jack Cafferty made insensitive remarks about China. Popular nationalists were so upset that the MFA felt compelled to publicly demand apologies from CNN three times. Yet Chinese netizens ridiculed the MFA's impotence in Chinese cyberspace.

A second way that popular nationalists use the CCP's own nationalist claims against the CCP is not to demand more hardline foreign policies, but to indirectly push for greater political liberalization: "waving red [nationalist] flags to oppose red [communist] flags." For instance, one of the CCP's highest nationalist objectives is to reunify Taiwan with mainland China. Given that Taiwanese are unwilling to unify with a China that lacks basic political liberties, many mainland Chinese liberals have been circulating the idea that the CCP should liberalize itself politically for the nationalist objective of bringing about peaceful reunification with Taiwan.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. MEDIA CONTROL AND THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

We thus need to be wary of allowing our Western fear of tyranny to color our understanding of Chinese nationalism. We also need to be cautious about allowing our strong views about the freedoms of the press and speech to influence our understandings of media control and censorship in China. Americans arguably view their First Amendment rights not simply as tools to use against state power, but as ends in themselves. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what being an American would mean in the absence of the First Amendment.

Many Chinese do not share these American views. For them, freedoms of the press and speech are means to other more pressing ends, such as good governance and national rejuvenation. At the elite level, the CCP has long utilized the press as both a policy tool and to consolidate its rule. In 1957 CCP propagandist Hu Qiaomu argued that while reporting the truth was important, the foremost duty of the media was political: to serve the Party. Over 50 years later, little has changed. State media outlets like the *People's Daily* still clearly put politics ahead of what we would consider media professionalism. For instance, analysis of the *People's Daily's* influential column "International Forum" (*Guoji luntan*) reveals that virtually all columns that discuss America do so with either a negative or critical tone. Coverage of other countries is more balanced, however, with both positive and negative reports. Coverage of China's international positions, meanwhile, is unwaveringly glowing. While America's recent foreign policies have been unpopular around the world, there is little doubt that the *People's Daily* has a clear policy of writing critically about the US.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion that nationalism can help bring about the democratization of China is beguiling but likely erroneous, however. A more nationalist China is more likely to turn in a populist than liberal direction.

Regional and more popular newspapers now face vigorous competition in the Chinese marketplace. Unlike the *People's Daily*, they must satisfy not just the “political boss,” but also the “market boss.” That their coverage of US foreign policies also tends to be quite negative cannot, therefore, be solely attributed to state control.

At the popular level, broader Chinese publics may not always agree with CCP media policies, but many Chinese do not agree with American views about the freedom of the press either. Popular Chinese furor following Jack Cafferty’s impolitic remarks on CNN reveals this difference starkly. From an American perspective, whether you agree with Cafferty or not (and I do not) that Chinese are a “bunch of goons and thugs,” the vast majority of Americans would defend on principle his right to say what he wants and CNN’s right to broadcast it.

Popular Chinese nationalists would disagree. For them, the freedoms of press and speech are secondary to the issue of China’s national dignity. Coming out of a more collectivist culture than individualist America, broad Chinese publics viewed Cafferty as representing all Americans in insulting them as Chinese. And as self-respecting Chinese, many felt the responsibility to defend China’s honor by attacking Cafferty and CNN.

Differing Chinese and American attitudes towards the freedoms of the press and speech will likely be on display again this August during the Beijing Olympics. Western athletes and activists will view it as their right to express their views on issues such as Tibet and Darfur. The Western press will similarly view it as their right and responsibility to report not just on the “winners” and positive consequences of China’s 30 years of economic development, but also on the “losers” and downside of “Reform and Opening.” Most Chinese, however, will not likely view such Western speech and media coverage as principled expressions of individual rights, but as Western assaults on China’s national honor.

### 3. POPULAR NATIONALISM AND MEDIA CONTROL

I have argued that a Chinese popular nationalism has emerged in China today that is both autonomous of the state and can challenge its legitimacy. I have also argued that while media censorship exists in China, many Chinese agree with the Chinese state that media freedoms are not ends in themselves. How do these two issues interact?

The March 2008 controversy over Western media coverage of the Tibetan protests and repression reveals the complexity of the interaction between popular Chinese nationalism and state information and media control. I wish to make two points. First, there is little question that the CCP largely blocked direct Western and Chinese media access to Tibet during and after the March 2008 protests. As a result, to this day we lack sufficient objective information about what exactly happened. In this context, both the Chinese and Western media exhibited significant media bias. The Chinese media depicted the events as Tibetan violence directed against innocent Han Chinese civilians, with no mention of the background issues of religious persecution and economic injustice. Given a broader

state narrative of benevolent Han Chinese favorable treatment of minority Tibetans, this official media story was met with popular Han Chinese dismay and outrage towards Tibetans. For its part, the Western media was not controlled by the state, but exhibited bias nonetheless. In the absence of objective information about what was happening in Tibet, the Western media filled in the gaps in its knowledge with preconceived assumptions about Han Chinese religious persecution and Tibetan Buddhist pacifism. Western media of all types converged around a common narrative of Han Chinese oppression and Tibetan suffering.

The second point is that popular Chinese outrage about Western media bias in covering the Tibet story cannot be attributed solely to Chinese media censorship. Many of the Chinese who mobilized against Western media coverage of the Tibet issue were overseas Chinese who had full access to the Western press. Education policies and earlier Chinese media narratives of paternalistic Han Chinese policies towards minority Tibetans surely set the background context within which overseas Chinese interpreted the Tibet issue, but direct official coverage cannot be held accountable for their views. Instead, popular Chinese outrage against the Western press is better explained by a collectivist mentality that interpreted Western criticisms of Chinese government policies as insults directed against China and all Chinese.

The May 2008 media coverage of the Sichuan earthquake further illustrates the evolving relationship between popular nationalism and media control in China today. First, several popular Chinese media outlets initially ignored directives not to cover the earthquake, and rushed to the scene. The quantity and quality of Chinese media coverage of the earthquake were impressive, and clearly reveal the potential role that a free press could play in China today. However, it is important to note that the earthquake was largely an apolitical issue, and media liberties were only allowed for that reason. Furthermore, once the CCP leadership realized that they could make political use of the earthquake by constructing a paternalistic narrative of CCP leadership benevolence, media control was re-imposed, and Chinese news coverage was dominated by stories of Wen Jiabao and other CCP leaders visits to Sichuan.

Second, like 9-11 in the US, the 5-12 Sichuan earthquake was followed by a massive “rally-around-the-flag” effect, whereby Chinese from all around the country and from all socioeconomic classes came to identify themselves strongly as “Chinese” through sympathy towards fellow Chinese victims of the tragedy. While the state attempted to co-opt this empathetic nationalism, it also had a strong ethnic component independent of the state.

Third, Western media coverage of the earthquake was overwhelmingly sympathetic. After the March Chinese repression of Tibetan protests and the Chinese counter protests against Olympic torch demonstrators in April, Western attitudes towards China deteriorated dramatically. If there was a silver lining from the May 12 earthquake, it was that Western sympathy towards the Chinese victims of the tragedy appears to have offset some of the negative images from the previous two months.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: DECLINING STATE CONTROL OF POPULAR NATIONALISM

There is little doubt that the Chinese state has the ability to deploy the People's Armed Police (PAP) or the PLA at any time to crack down on popular nationalist demonstrations on the Chinese street. It also has a large and active cyberpolice that has the ability to suppress popular nationalist activities in cyberspace at any time.

But the state's coercive capacity is not the end of the story. The state must also consider the price that it pays each time that it chooses to deploy coercive methods against its people. Given that the CCP has long constructed its legitimacy based on its nationalist credentials, when it cracks down on popular nationalism, it undermines its own claims to nationalist legitimacy. This explains why popular nationalists have considerable freedom to deploy the state's own nationalist rhetoric both for their own purposes and even against the state. As a result, nationalism is one of the most "democratic" political topics in Chinese cyberspace.

Furthermore, with the rapid spread of Internet use in China, and the proliferation of television, magazines, and newspaper outlets under conditions of market competition, the "attentive public" for popular nationalist issues has exploded. When popular "China Can Say No" nationalist books emerged in 1996-97, readerships were limited. Today's audience for nationalist topics is exponentially larger, making state control much more difficult. One result is that today's media routinely publish material that would have been forbidden even five years ago.

In short, the state's control over popular Chinese nationalism is slowly declining. On the positive side, popular nationalism increasingly impacts state policies. For instance, the attentive gaze of nationalist opinion pressured the CCP to respond forcefully and effectively to the March 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, and will hopefully lead to the enforcement of school building codes in the future. On the negative side, popular nationalism increasingly impacts state policies. For instance, popular nationalists increasingly force the CCP to take tougher foreign policy positions on sensitive issues like Japan and Taiwan than they may wish to, complicating the making of a rational Chinese foreign policy. Furthermore, Chinese nationalists frequently display an ugly "Red Guard" style of hooliganism reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. We would be wise, therefore, to carefully monitor the growing impact of popular nationalism on Chinese foreign policy.