A Short Anatomy of Chinese Nationalism Today

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China's resurgent nationalism has drawn attention around the world in recent months, and rightly so, since something powerful does seem to be afoot. One day it might buffet the globe. But what, exactly, is it? Phrases like "love of country" or "pride in nation" are too ambiguous to capture the specific thoughts and feelings that are at work. Pride is certainly there, as sometimes is love, but so are feelings like belonging, rivalry, victimhood, and personal insecurity--to name just a few. Equally complex is the question of the object of these various feelings. What does "the nation" mean? Is it the people of China? All of them, or just some? Is it the state? The Party-state? Is it the resplendent culture and its long history? Or "the mountains and rivers," to use the Chinese cliché? It is important to address these questions with as much precision as possible.

Step one should be to set aside the official terminology of the Chinese government. (People in the U.S. government do not do this enough.) For decades the purpose of PRC terminology on nationalism has been to achieve political goals of the CCP, not to describe reality. A much better entrée to popular thinking in China is available through the word usage of ordinary Chinese people in daily life.

The Innards of Nationalism

In broad terms the question divides into two--a *verb question*, i.e., "what feelings are we talking about?" and a *noun question*, i.e., "what group do they attach to?"

To begin with the noun question: whom do people have in mind when they say that they are "Chinese"? In official rhetoric, "Chinese" means a citizen of the PRC, including both the majority Han group and those who belong to various minorities. The Chinese language, in officialese, is called *hanyu* 'Han language' in order to underscore that it is only the language of the Han, not of everybody else who is "Chinese".

But this political definition of Chineseness is fairly superficial. It has little traction in daily-life language use, especially when nationalist passions begin to flow. Normally, "Han" is a synonym for "Chinese." Most Han people most of the time say they are speaking *zhongguohua* (literally 'China speech'), not *hanyu*. And *zhongguohua* in practice refers to the Han language--not to all the languages of the national minorities. Is this Han hegemonism in disguise? One might call it that, but in any case the question normally does not even occur to people. Similarly a person who looks physically like a Han will be said to "look Chinese" (*xiang zhongguoren*). A *hanxuejia* 'Sinologist' is literally a scholar of "Han" things, but in everyone's normal understanding, this means "Chinese" things.

The term *hua* 'China' illustrates the same point. *Hua* appears in the names of both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China, and in that kind of formal

context is clearly supposed to apply to all citizens of the nation. Just as clearly, though, in daily-life contexts *hua* refers exclusively to the Han. *Huayu* 'Chinese language' in daily-life practice means *hanyu*. If a Tibetan were to travel to Beijing, speak Tibetan there, and claim that he or she is speaking *huayu*, Beijingers would be stumped. "That's not *huayu*, it's *zangyu* (Tibetan)," they would think. Or consider the term *huaqiao*, which is commonly understood to mean "Chinese abroad." In fact it means "Han abroad." Han people living in Singapore are considered *huaqiao*, even if they have lived in Singapore for several generations; but if a Uighur family were to move from Urumqi to Samarkand, it would not occur to speakers of daily-life Chinese to refer to them as *huaqiao*. Implicitly if nit officially, *hua* is Han.

But what, exactly, is "Han"? The category is not determined by geography or citizenship, because a Canadian citizen living in Vancouver might be Han while national minorities living inside China, as Chinese citizens, are not Han. It is therefore tempting to view Han an ethnic category, but physical anthropologists say that this is difficult. They can show from DNA and other physical markers that Han includes a considerable variety of ethnic strands. To some extent, language can be viewed as the glue that holds Han together. The spoken varieties of Han language are as varied as the languages of Europe, but the written language--and the roots of the spoken languages--do provide some unity.

"Shared sense of history" is a vague phrase, but clearly is part of the Han idea. In most of the centuries since the Han dynasty (from which the name derives), "Han" referred to people involved in farming or merchant economies, who followed "Confucian" family patterns, and who usually lived within Chinese empires. By contrast Mongol, Turkic, Tibetan, and other groups on China's fringes differed in most of these ways. These factors led to a durable, if loose, conception of "Han." A tighter concept of Han--specifically as a "nation"--arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A string of military defeats of China led to an emergency mood that was fertile ground for social Darwinist notions that "nations" are things that need to compete in order to survive. Now "the Han" would have to do this, too. The new term *hanzu* 'Han nation' was born.

Since then the term Han has carried a nationalistic edge. *Hanzu*, *hanyu*, and *han wenhua* ('Han culture') have all been things to be proud of or to protect. A collaborator in the war with Japan was a *hanjian* 'traitor to the Han'. Ancient symbols, like the Great Wall, were invoked as backing for modern nationalism. Even the protesters at Tiananmen in 1989, while calling for embrace of the West and more democracy, referred to themselves as *yanhuang zisun* 'descendents of [the legendary] Yan and Huang emperors' and *long de chuanren* "heirs of the dragon."

It is important to note that Han, and to a certain extent the nationalism that accompanies it, sometimes carries a connotation of 'male'. The word *han* is not explicitly gendered, but many of its uses apply only to males. A *laohan* 'old han' is an old man, never an old woman; a *dahan* 'big han' is a husky guy, not a burly lady. *Haohan* 'righteous hero' is implicitly a male hero. At least in some contexts, China's contemporary quest for national pride seems appears as a version of male pride. The BBC, quoting official Chinese sources, reports that 4014 Chinese infants born in the last fifteen years have been given the name *aoyun* 'Olympics', and that 92% of them are male.[1]

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[1]http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7448363.stm

People often assume that nationalism is focused on a large group, i.e., the "nation." But this assumption needs critical evaluation, because it is true only sometimes and in certain senses. Sometimes the whole point of nationalism is to support not the interests of a large group but the personal pride of the individual who identifies with the group. This is not a point about Chinese culture, but about human nature generally. Consider the patriotic passions that are aroused when people watch the Olympic Games or the World Cup. If I, as an American, feel elation at watching a diver from Denver win a gold medal, in what sense am I feeling "love of country"? Am I feeling love for all of the people of the country? Hardly. My feeling is much more focused and personal than that. Am I feeling love for that particular diver? But I don't even know him or her, except for what I see on the television screen. All I really know about her is the narrow fact that she is American and so am I. If she wins, then so, vicariously, do I. My "patriotism" in a case like this amounts to little more than the warm feeling I get from basking in someone else's glory. Is this properly called "support for a group"? Or is it the other way around? Isn't the group identity supporting me?

We human beings do this a lot, I fear. We take note of the groups that we are in--our town, our school, our country--and then tout those groups as ways of elevating ourselves. Why else do people as intelligent as Yale and Princeton alumni care which group of burly (*dahan*!) boys, whom they do not know personally, win a football game? We even join group identities arbitrarily for this kind of purpose, as when we choose to identify with either the Mets or the Yankees. To confirm that this is not “love of group” so much as “love of personal satisfaction," one need only observe Mets fans fighting one another for tickets.

There is plenty of evidence that Chinese nationalism, like other nationalisms, sometimes operates on this principle. In a famous 1921 short story called “Sinking,” the Chinese writer Yu Dafu writes of a Chinese student in Japan who suffers the perceived contempt of Japanese who look down on him as Chinese. Inhibited, frustrated, and eventually suicidal, the student walks toward the ocean saying, “Oh China, my China, you are the cause of my death! ...I wish you could become rich and strong soon!"[2] It is not hard to see why the “rise of China” in recent decades has meant much to the personal confidence of Chinese people everywhere, and especially--as Yu Dafu’s story suggests--among Chinese living abroad. In environments where Chinese national identity competes side-by-side with others, where Chinese people are minorities, and where they might suffer real or perceived discrimination, the image of a strong China back home can be even more important than it is to people who live inside China. An Olympic torch-procession counts more for Chinese nationalists in Paris than it does in Wuhan. (Overseas Chinese go too far, however, when they are willing, for the sake of their own sense of respect, to overlook the brutalities of a strong government against their compatriots back home. This does happen.)

These considerations--of whether nationalist sentiment involves love, pride, admiration, or something else--have brought us into what I called above the *verb question.* We should probe it further, and might begin with one of the purest and most elemental of nationalist sentiments: the reflexive response of sympathy for compatriots who are

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[2]Yu Dafu, "Chenlun," translated by Joseph S.M. Lau and C.T. Hsia as "Sinking" in Joseph S.M. Lau, C.T. Hsia, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, eds., *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949* (Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 141.

victims of a disaster. Americans experienced this after 9/11, as did Chinese following the earthquake in Sichuan in May 2008. The sympathetic responses were strong in both cases. But since human sympathy can, and often does, flow across national boundaries, we need to ask in what sense the responses to these disasters were specifically nationalist. In the case of 9/11 a foreign enemy was involved, and that fact obviously introduces an important element of nationalism. But in both cases--and more obviously in the earthquake case, where there was no foreign enemy to blame--nationalism arose from the simple fact that the victims were compatriots. The group that suffered was "our" group. In such cases the person who sympathizes does not have to know any of the sufferers personally in order to feel the tie that a shared national identity provides. Daniel Bell, who was teaching at Qinghua University in Beijing at the time of the earthquake, reports that Chinese students in his class were eager to support the Sichuan victims but were cold to the notion of helping victims of the equally disastrous cyclone that had just torn through Burma. Both groups of victims were large, anonymous, and distant from the Beijing classroom. But one counted as *tongbao* 'compatriots' while the other did not, and that made all the difference.[3]

It is worth noting that, in situations like this, both the givers and the receivers of sympathy get rewards. The quake victims receive moral and monetary support, while the ones who offer sympathy get the psychic reward of feeling that they are doing the right thing. When sympathy is "nationalist" (by which I mean "when it is offered specifically to compatriots, not just to any human beings anywhere"), the rewards of generosity are often magnified. John Kennedy was aware of this special allure when he pronounced his famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."[4]

Finally, we must note that although phrases like "love of" country, or "pride in" nation might suggest that the nationalist thinks his or her country is doing well, powerful nationalisms can also spring from perceptions that one's country has not been doing well or has been mistreated. We must add phrases like "feel aggrieved for" and "feel defensive about" to the list of verbs that can comprise nationalism. As the case China shows, such "negatively based" nationalism can in fact be much stronger than the positively based" varieties.

Causes of the Resurgence Nationalism

Chinese nationalism in the early 2000s has sometimes been puzzling for the virulence and the puerile bluntness with which it is expressed. Perceived affronts to Chinese dignity "hurt the feelings" of "1.3 billion compatriots" who inherit "5000 years of civilization," while memory of earlier humiliations leave "hatred burning in all hearts," and so on. To be sure, such phrases have been around since the Mao era in China, but their resurgence today, especially among an Internet-savvy and upwardly mobile younger generation--who cannot be viewed as holdovers from the Mao era--calls for explanation. Chinese nationalism has long been colored by notions of victimhood. But why should there be a sudden increase in victim mentality precisely during years when China is rising?

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[3]"Xenophobic Nationalists?" *International Herald-Tribune* Op Ed, May 21, 2008.
[4]Presidential Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

One cause of the phenomenon, certainly, has been the Communist Party's emphasis on "patriotic education" since the early 1990s. The Party has always relied on legitimating ideology (in addition, at times, to violence) as a tool for maintaining its grip on power. For decades this ideology was socialism and Maoism. During the 1980s the language of socialism was ringing quite hollow, but it still was in place, could be used in official contexts, and allowed the CCP at least to pretend that it pursued a purpose higher than itself. Then, with the decision in 1989 to use the Chinese army to kill Chinese citizens in public, followed in the 1990s by an explicit embrace of capitalism that not only permitted but explicitly called for "certain people to get rich first," the CCP found itself ideologically naked. And this happened right at a time when the Party's popularity, because of the Beijing massacre, was at a nadir. The answer of the Jiang Zemin regime (which came, actually, from Deng Xiaoping in the background), was to stoke nationalism.

In textbooks, museums, speeches, newspaper editorials, television programs, and elsewhere, the Chinese people were reminded that they inherit a glorious ancient history; that they have been terribly humiliated in recent times; that Japan, Europe, and America are to blame; that the CCP was and is their champion. If foreigners criticize the CCP today, that is because they opposed the rise of Great China. Every Chinese person is insulted when this happens.

This all-fronts propaganda effort began at the same time that the scope for political expression on other matters was being choked off. In the 1990s it was much harder than it had been in the 1980s for Chinese people to engage in public discussion (in literature, the press, public lectures, etc.) of such questions as "What kind of China do we want?," "What are the roots of recent [i.e., Maoist] disasters?" and "What ethical and religious values do we need?". It also became harder in the 1990s to dissent or to vent frustrations in public. In short, the Chinese people's various impulses toward public political expression were channeled, by necessity, through the single sluice-gate of a narrow version of nationalism. Ian Buruma, viewing this phenomenon in global context, has observed that "aggressive nationalism usually goes together with authoritarian politics."[5] A portion of the younger generation in China, popularly known as *fen qing* 'angry youth', has been especially vulnerable to what might be called the New Indignation generated in recent times by the CCP's Publicity Department.

But the notion of "China as victim" is not itself new; what we see today is an exaggeration of the phenomenon, not its creation. At many points in the last hundred years of Chinese history (the May Fourth Movement, the War of Resistance against Japan, the anti-imperialism of the Cultural Revolution, and elsewhere), it is easy to find instances of Chinese anger stimulated by the perception that "foreigners are victimizing China." And in most of these cases, as today, the fuel for the indignation has included a mixture of solid history and myth. It is true, for example, that the Western powers humiliated China by handing Shandong to Japan after World War I; it is not true that a sign bluntly reading "No dogs or Chinese" hung in a Shanghai Park, although the story of the sign has been important in Chinese nationalist lore.[6]

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[5]"Victim or Victor? China's Olympic Odyssey" *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday June 7-8, 2008, p. W6.

[6]A photograph taken in the mid-1880s of the offending sign shows list of nine items under the heading "Public and Reserve Gardens: Regulations". See Xiang Hua, *Shanghai shihua* (Historical notes on Shanghai) (Hong Kong: Muwen shuju, 1971, front matter). The lines are illegible in the photograph, but it

In measuring the size of flare-ups of nationalism, it is important, as a baseline, to note instances where Chinese have been surprisingly quiescent. The eminent Sinologist F.W. Mote, who was in Nanjing at the end of World War II, heard heart-stopping stories of Japanese war atrocities against Chinese civilians, but was also surprised at "the lack of revenge sentiment" in the people who were telling the stories.[7] Mote attributed this reserve to a forgiving spirit in China's ordinary people. The silence of political leaders, though, has been more complicated. In December 1945 Chiang Kai-shek, at the time more worried about the Communists than the Japanese, announced that the attitude of the Chinese government toward the defeated Japanese would be to "recompense injury with kindness." Mao Zedong, whose calligraphy is now prominently on display at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, ignored the massacre during the 27 years that he ruled China. He never made a speech about it or visited the families of its victims. He, too, had other priorities. It was left to Mao's successors to discover the political advantage of stirring up an issue that had lain dormant for many years.

But memory of past humiliations, whether artificially stimulated or not, does not quite explain the sharp edge to the nationalism that we have seen in recent years, especially among the *fen qing*. In them, something more immediate and pressing is at stake. It apparently has to do with China's prestige in the contemporary world and the identity tie between an individual's pride and a nation's prestige. China's place on the world stage affects their self-respect and their sense of respect by others, and their quest for respect can turn into a fountain of nationalism. A better word to describe this passion--rather than "anger" or "pride"--might be "rivalry". The Western democracies, especially the U.S., are the main rivals. For better or worse, they are the yardsticks against which nationalist Chinese youth measure their pride.

The uglier expressions of their passion can look like hatred, and it is tempting to use that word after seeing, for example, Internet commentary after 9/11 that says things like "serves them right!" or "down with American imperialism." But even these words, in my view, are far less likely to be a rejection of the Western way life than they are demands for respect within it. It is as if they are saying, "Move over, American imperium, so that we can be there, too! Why do you think that we, too, should not be wealthy, free, and respected?" On the surface, this mentality can appear to be contradictory, as if it is denouncing and admiring the same thing at the same time. But both feelings are authentic, and at a deeper level they fit together nicely. One of the clearest examples from recent years was the student response to the US bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. By day, crowds of Chinese students threw rocks and eggs at the US embassy in Beijing; in the evenings, many went back to their dorms to continue with their preparations to apply to graduate school in the US. It would be a mistake to interpret either of these actions as insincere.

It would also be a mistake to view China's rulers themselves as "above" this kind of two-leveled attitude toward the West. Yes, they are the champions of Chinese pride in public contexts; but they also send their children and grandchildren to the West, especially to the U.S., not only for education but to become citizens.

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appears that one of the regulations explains that the park is for Europeans and another that no pets are allowed.

[7]F.W. Mote, "Getting There," unpublished manuscript. "I found virtually no one who sought revenge despite deep feelings of resentment that many shared'.

Political Manipulation of Nationalism by China's Rulers

To argue that recent Chinese nationalism has been stimulated only "from above," by the Chinese government, is too simple. To view it as a popular movement "from below," which the government needs to prevent from getting out of hand, is also too simple. The two phenomena are intertwined. Government authorities have at times stimulated nationalism and at times tamped it down. This is not because they are confused. Both the stimulating and the tamping, each in its time and place, are done from the consideration of preserving CCP power.

The Party's reasons for stimulating nationalism have been several. One, as noted above, has been the need for a renewed ideological claim to legitimacy. Something had to replace socialist ideals, and nationalism was the obvious candidate. But to cement the association of the Party and the nation in the popular consciousness, so that "love of country" automatically became "love of Party," more than just theory was necessary. Practical tactics were important as well. The regime's Olympic bids were win-win propositions in these terms. If a bid were successful (as it was in 2001), the glory would redound to the Party; if unsuccessful (as in 1993), foreigners could be blamed for disrespecting the Chinese nation--and this, too, would pull the Party closer to the people.

The Sichuan earthquake relief in May 2008 provided another such opportunity. All across China the earthquake elicited strong, spontaneous responses of sympathy for fellow Chinese, and the CCP did a good job of presenting itself as the channel and emblem of that sympathy. NGOs, whether domestic or foreign, were not allowed to donate funds or to offer assistance outside of CCP rubrics. When a group of dissidents in Beijing created a quake relief fund, it was shut down as "illegal."

After the initial wave of sympathy had subsided, complaints began to appear in the Chinese blogosphere that donations by workers in state-controlled work units had been extracted under pressure from Party leaders; some even complained that donations had been "deducted" from their wages by fiat. Many, in addition, raised the problem of transparency: how do we know that our "donations" are really reaching the victims? (Official corruption in China has been endemic for so long that this question immediately gets popular resonance.) The top leaders in China of course know about the corruption problem, and I do not believe that their reason for insisting that relief funds flow through CCP channels was to allow lower-level officials to siphon off some "squeeze." No. Their reason was to reinforce the message that the Party is the source of relief and of "caring," and to align the Party with the strong spontaneous sympathy that Chinese people were feeling for one another. Theirs was, at root, a tactic for profiting politically from that sympathy.

(If the mission of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao were truly to side with the victims, they would have said or done something about the questions that have haunted bereaved parents all across the quake area: "Why did primary-school buildings collapse when others did not? Was there corner-cutting in their construction, perhaps caused by corruption?" These are matters that fall within Hu's and Wen's scope of responsibility as officials, but they have side-stepped them; on a matter that falls outside their responsibility--an earthquake--they are tearful and eloquent.)

Another benefit of stoking nationalism, from the Party's point of view, is that it distracts attention from popular complaints. Chinese people, like people everywhere, are most concerned with issues that affect their daily lives: Can I feed my family? Can my children go to school? What if somebody gets sick? What will I live on in old age? To judge from the Chinese blogosphere, from popular anti-corruption fiction, from the complaints of petitioners, from popular *shunkouliu* satiric ditties that are passed around orally and in text messages, and from the rising number of public protests that are big enough that the police, by their own count, have had to suppress them--to judge, in short, from a thick and impressive range of evidence--these daily-life questions are what dominate the attention of Chinese citizens. They are also angry at corruption, special privilege, and the growing wealth gap. They are not particularly concerned to denounce the Dalai Lama as a jackal in monks' robes or Taiwan splittists or American bullies or even the Japanese (although, on that score, for the elder generation, painful memories of the war do persist). When issues such as these are highlighted (and, it must be said, distorted) in China's state-controlled press, the passions that are ignited draw people's attention away from issues on which the government is generally their adversary and toward issues on which it presents itself as their protector. In Paris, when a paraplegic Chinese athlete is photographed protecting the Olympic torch from a French human-rights advocate, the CCP gets a political windfall.

How angry are top Chinese leaders when George Bush or Angela Merkel meets with the Dalai Lama? Their public rhetoric is white-hot with anger, to be sure, but I doubt that in their private calculations they are nearly so angry. To be able to seize on such events and present them to the Chinese public as attempts by arrogant foreigners to split the sacred motherland does at least as much good for the CCP at home as the actual talks with the Dalai Lama, and their publicity overseas, do in the way of harm. Tibetan groups have raised the question of whether the March 14 riots in Lhasa may have been encouraged by the Party precisely in order to generate propaganda material. A Tibetan eyewitness, writing on a Beijing blog under the pen name Ahshn, shows in detail how Chinese police stood back on March 14 as rioters took their time while the state press videotaped damage. Over the next few days the harvest of videotapes was shown, repeatedly, all across China. By contrast on March 29, when another riot broke out in Lhasa, police immediately swooped down to stifle it.[8] In a public statement published on March 22, a distinguished group of Beijing dissidents wrote:

> We take note of the fact that on the very day when violence first broke out in Lhasa (March 14), the government authorities in Tibet were already announcing that "we possess ample evidence that the violence has been organized, plotted in advance, and meticulously orchestrated by the Dalai clique." If so, then government authorities knew in advance that rioting was going to occur and yet did nothing to prevent it or to stop it from spreading. There should be a rigorous inquiry into the possibility of official involvement and malfeasance.[9]

"Official involvement" in this phrase does not mean the central authorities, and it is important to note that stimulating nationalism for political gain is not always a project of the top leaders on behalf of the Party as a whole, but is sometimes done for special interests within the Party's bureaucratic structures. Phuntsog Wanggyal, for years a

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[8]Woeser blog, April 7, 2008.

[9]As translated in *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 55, no. 8 (May 15, 2008).

leading Party official in Tibet and now an independent voice, notes that bureaucratic careers have been invested in the doctrine of "anti-splittism" in Tibet.[10] In order for these careers to flourish, "splittism" itself must not disappear, so incentives are created to highlight (or even fabricate?) evidence of it however one can.

U.S. Policy

The United States government continues to play a much weaker hand than it could in supporting the Chinese people in their quest for an opener, fairer, more transparent, and more law-governed society. U.S. officials, as well as some of their advisers in academe, consistently use the word "China" as if it referred only to the policies and attitudes of the country's rulers. The costs of ignoring the much more complex realities of China--not only other voices in society but other levels in the thinking and values of even the leaders themselves--are huge. China's problem is its political system, not its people, but U.S. policy-makers have trouble getting past the one in order to reach the other.

Some of the more grievous errors in US policy arise from a misunderstanding of the concept of "face" in Chinese culture. US officials appear to believe that their cultural sensitivity to the Chinese idea of face can be expressed only by showing that they know how to "save face" for the other side. Hence--much more often than necessary--they handle "sensitive" questions by opting for "quiet diplomacy" on grounds that "the Chinese do not respond well" to public embarrassment. But this is naive, and in fact reveals ignorance of Chinese culture. In Chinese life "face" is well known to cut both ways: you give it when you want, and you specifically withhold it when you want. Others can do the same to you. The Chinese government certainly does both. When it calls Jimmy Carter a "friend of China," it is doing one thing; when it calls the Dalai Lama a "wolf," another. Both are uses of "face." The United States, which is widely viewed in China as the world's strongest democracy, could do much more good than it is now doing by using dignified, clear, and strong public statements.

[10]Wang Lixiong, "The Cry of Tibet," *The Wall Street Journal* Op Ed, 28 March 2008.