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# **Nationalism, Westernization, or Neither? How International Exposure is Impacting the Views of Chinese Youth on the Ideas of Nationalism and Chinese Cultural Superiority**

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## **Abstract**

Continuous attempts are made by the Chinese government to ‘protect’ the minds of the young people of China from too many outside influences for fear it might cause them to view the Chinese government and culture in a less favorable light, but is this really a valid fear? In spite of things like internet censorship in China, Chinese youth are becoming increasingly internationally aware, partially through contact with international students, both on their home campuses, while studying abroad, and even on the internet sites they frequent. How are these encounters shaping the minds of the Chinese youth? Are they truly being won over by the West, or are the increased encounters with western people and ideas causing them to become disenchanted with the ‘wonders of western culture’ and instead prompting more pride in China on both a cultural and political level? Or, is there a third option, that in fact both phenomena are taking place simultaneously not only within the community of Chinese youths, but also with regards to each individual?

## **1. Paper**

China has a long history of rejecting foreign influence, and the current paranoia espoused by the Chinese Communist Party, leading to internet and media censorship, serves in some ways to continue this trend. The prevalent notion that outside influence is unwanted, unneeded, and will inevitably lead to the ‘westernizing’ of China and the subversion of ‘Chinese’ culture and politics seems to be a major driving force with regards to certain policymaking decisions by the Chinese elite. Paradoxically however, there exists a parallel fascination in China with the Western world that cannot be smothered, even among those who might claim that China is becoming too westernized. Since the economic reform and opening of China there has been a huge influx of foreign investment, often encouraged and sought after by Chinese entrepreneurs. The idea that China has something to learn from the west, that China can ‘adopt and adapt’ certain western strategies to its benefit, has been steadily growing even among Chinese political elites. Aspects of western culture are progressively becoming more common in China, from clothing brands to chain restaurants, and finally, more and more Chinese students are choosing to pursue advanced studies abroad, or are seeking out ‘international’ experiences at home by interacting with western students, circumventing the CCP’s censorship to access western social media, or participating in educational programs designed to give them a similar experience to studying in Europe, America, or Australia.

With western influence inevitably permeating Chinese society, the question then becomes how to interpret this influence and how it is truly impacting those who will shape China’s future. Is it a valid belief that the younger generations are becoming progressively more indoctrinated into the western way of thinking as their international exposure increases? Or is the opposite in fact taking place; that as they learn about the differences between their society and others, they are taking more pride in being Chinese and establishing a firmer belief in the validity of Chinese culture and strategies with regards to politics and social structure that are considered uniquely Chinese? Or,

is it instead the case that most Chinese youth are breaking free of the restrictions of the 'pro-China' vs. 'pro-western' duality? Like many things relating to China, the answer may at first appear to be contradiction; one way of looking at it just as applicable as the next. There are multiple schools of thought on the subject, and it is indeed likely that none can be considered exclusively wrong or right, but rather that different ways of looking at the subject are valid for different cases.

One school of thought on the opinions of Chinese students is decidedly pro-western. Since the economic opening of China and the student protests of Tiananmen Square in 1989 where the Statue of Liberty was held aloft as a goddess of freedom and democracy was demanded, it has been easy to observe the influence of the West on Chinese thought, especially among China's youth. "At the onset of [China's] reform and opening to the outside, Chinese college students, who had lived for many years under all kinds of restraints, were attracted to the material prosperity, free way of life, and democratic political institutions of the West. Worship of foreign things and pro-U.S. sentiments became the vogue. Foreign clothing and hair styles, Sartre's philosophical thinking, and the U.S. political democracy swept through China's campuses in quick succession."<sup>1</sup> One could argue that 'western' culture is now such an inextricable part of Chinese society that China's young generations accept and support it without even realizing it, and whether they like it or not. To be truly against the western influence in China would be to reject many things that are generally viewed as positive steps towards 'modernization' in China, from things as large and important as the capitalist characteristics of China's new economic system, down to something as small as picking up some fast food at a conveniently placed KFC in Shanghai.

One popular notion supported by this school of thought is that by embracing an international system; a 'global culture' as it were, the Chinese people are playing the west's game, since the current global culture is primarily influenced by the west. This is evident not just among the elite political policymakers but to some extent in almost all spheres of Chinese society, and perhaps particularly among Chinese university students; young, educated, and intensely aware of world events. This school of thought somewhat dismisses the question of how much China's young people hold on to ideas of Chinese nationalism or cultural pride, claiming that any conceptions Chinese youth might hold regarding China's culture are already irreversibly shaped by the influence of the west. Indeed one major vehicle for a deep sense of pride in China is its rapid economic rise and its now indisputable status as an up-and-coming superpower on the world stage; a way of conceptualizing validity and power based on the western-shaped norms of global culture. China's economic rise has led to the greatest single reduction of poverty in recent history, and this monumental accomplishment was achieved only through China's willingness to plug in to the global network; a network shaped by the west. It is no longer possible for China to view itself as the center of civilized society.

Simply the fact that so many Chinese students are choosing to pursue advanced studies in the US, Europe, Australia, Canada and the UK is proof that they recognize the validity of western culture and western political-economic strategies. This school of thought claims that it isn't particularly important how personally enamored they may or may not be with the west, but rather that they choose to continue what was started with the economic opening of China by accepting and validating the hegemony of western influence in the modern world. Even the desire among some Chinese students for China to exert an influence on this global system can be seen as further validation; China does not seek to shape their own world order, but rather to be accepted into the existing one as a 'card carrying member'; a position of cultural submission even if it is only on a subconscious level.

Of course this school of thought also claims that Chinese students believe in the superiority of the west on a multitude of issues, for example the perception that western students are more creative than Chinese students<sup>2</sup>, or the idea that westerners often have more dynamic personalities and are better at expressing and asserting themselves. Thus the ideas of western superiority extend not only to matters of politics and economics, but also to more personal and social issues that are seen as the result of cultural differences between the west and China.

This school of thought also commonly asserts that the 'sea turtles' (Chinese citizens who spend time in the west, including western educated Chinese who then return to China) are poised to be an important force for democratization and the promotion of western ideals in China. It presents a rather rosy and occasionally somewhat condescending picture of young Chinese people having their eyes opened to the amazing ways of the west before returning home to enlighten others who were not lucky enough to have such experiences firsthand. "Returnees are both more "internationalist" than the middle class [who have not been abroad] and less nationalistic. So they are likely to support China's increasing international role and perhaps constrain China's growing nationalist sentiment."<sup>3</sup> It has also been found that Chinese students come back with a particularly positive view of their host country above all others<sup>4</sup>, thus indicating how the experience of actually living in another country is able to provide a concrete example of an alternate mindset that then is able to compete, and according to this school of thought often wins over, the mindset that has been provided by their native culture. This school of thought not only relies on the ability of western culture to 'convert' young Chinese to a western way of thinking about certain issues, but in fact often

goes further to claim that these now educated Chinese youth are imbued with an almost missionary zeal to go back and apply their new ideals to their home country, having accepted western strategies as a sort of one-size-fits-all solution, or at least agreeing with the old adage that it's the worst one, except for all the others that have so far been attempted.

The second school of thought on the matter suggests that international exposure is in fact causing Chinese students to develop more of a nationalistic identity and a positive view of Chinese culture due in part to the marginalization and 'otherization' they face in western cultures.<sup>5</sup> While in some ways it cannot be disputed that 'western' culture has become an important factor in modern Chinese society, this school of thought claims that there is a more significant backlash against it than there is acceptance of it.<sup>6</sup> For example, although China has shown some signs of acculturation into the global, western culture on a superficial level, there is no significant evidence of structural assimilation, and as China's power grows it is contributing more and more to the global culture itself.<sup>7</sup> In fact much of the displeasure Chinese youth express with their government is in fact related to the thought that Chinese officials are being 'too soft' on western countries or are corrupt and pandering to private western business interests, rather than the fact that they do not conform to western ideals like democracy and freedom of the press.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that many modern Chinese students find themselves disillusioned with western culture and western ideals once they are actually exposed to it firsthand. Before it was possible for Chinese students to have extensive international experiences, the values of the west could represent their wildest dreams; 'democracy' and other western notions stood for a bright and shiny alternative to everything they were dissatisfied with at home. Now that they are able to see a more accurate picture of the west complete with all of its flaws and shortcomings, far from continuing to idolize the western system, many Chinese students have realized that it is not so ideal after all. Though few of these students are likely to claim that everything in China is perfect, they are becoming progressively more aware of the ways in which western society has failed, and they believe that China possesses a better foundation for creating a set of solutions for the challenges they face than simply trying to transplant western models back home.<sup>8</sup>

This realization is often accompanied by a certain amount of resentment for the west, due in part to the surprise from westerners that Chinese youth do not show a zealous appreciation for western culture and politics.<sup>9</sup> More and more Chinese youth feel that China has earned the right to be recognized and validated worldwide as opposed to held up as a bad example or a country in transition doing nothing more than following the 'rules' set down by those that industrialized first. Many of these young, internationally-aware Chinese find western arrogance off-putting both on a policy and personal level, particularly with regards to the United States. They are not willing to accept a position of submission to a culture that they do not believe is any more valid than theirs, and they are often rather vocal in calling for China to stand its ground on political and diplomatic decisions rather than making concessions to western sensibilities. The nationalism displayed by Chinese youth during the 2008 Beijing Olympics is a striking example of this kind of patriotic response to the international community and the 'globalization' of China.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed it is sometimes the case that Chinese youth who do not consider themselves particularly nationalistic to begin with may feel forced to take a more drastic stance on certain issues when faced with the attitudes of westerners. The manner in which many westerners see fit to bluntly attack certain aspects of modern China may cause young Chinese to put more effort into finding things to be proud of and defend in order to retaliate when the basic legitimacy of their country and culture is derided. There is the assumption that "the more biased international media coverage of China is, the more intense Chinese nationalism will become."<sup>11</sup>

The third and final major school of thought, both the most difficult to simply define as well as likely the most widely applicable, is a mixture of the first two; that Chinese students are not necessarily becoming more nationalistic or convinced of Chinese cultural superiority, but neither are they particularly impressed with all things western. Instead their international experiences are teaching them how to be more pragmatic and selective with what ideas and strategies they support. Arguably this tendency most likely begins at home; Chinese society has in recent decades made a significant shift from idealism to pragmatism both in the upper echelons of political leadership as well as among the common citizens. "Pragmatism here means a down-to-earth approach to problems and affairs. The meaning of ideas is to be sought in their practical result, and truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. Whether reality fits with the guiding political principles is not the ultimate consideration. Rather, whether the principles can solve existing problems is the main concern. Any principle is conditional. It may be doubted and judged by rationality."<sup>12</sup>

International experiences can do much to improve the ability of Chinese youth to think critically and comparatively, as well as providing an alternative with which to compare their own society in order to better uncover what is worth 'keeping' and what needs to be changed, and indeed perhaps also providing ideas on how to change it. "the more China's college students know about the political systems of China and the United States, the greater their liking for the U.S. political system. At the same time, the overall evaluation of the Chinese political

system was basically positive, particularly in terms of maintaining political stability.”<sup>13</sup> There are also aspects of both the U.S. and the Chinese systems that are generally disliked by Chinese youth; for example China’s method of electing its state leader, and U.S. foreign policy.

This school of thought argues that Chinese students are actively seeking to become global citizens who, while they may be at least in part defined by their ‘Chinese-ness’, are not limited by it or tethered to a certain way of thinking and viewing the world simply because of their cultural background. Studies suggest that “Chinese international students are actively shaping themselves through the process of transitions. The transformation occurring within each individual is multi-faceted, and their re-adapted learning skills largely overlap with their reshaped attitudes.”<sup>14</sup> For some facing the challenge of extensive engagement with the west is about personal or professional growth. For example as one Chinese student seeking to study abroad in the Eastern US stated; “I think if I pass TOEFL and study abroad, people will look at me differently. I feel I am more capable than those who cannot do this. I want to go to school to improve myself in some areas. If I stay home, it is a waste.”<sup>15</sup> This school of thought also reflects the idea that some of the attraction that Chinese students have for the west is due to their perception that learning about the west, or indeed learning *in* the west as is often the case, will provide them an important edge in the modern job market.<sup>16</sup> Their choice of major when studying abroad also seems to be based largely on what they believe will provide them with the best career prospects at the conclusion of their studies.<sup>17</sup> Thus their interest in engaging extensively with western culture is not necessarily based exclusively around personal admiration for said culture, though that is certainly an aspect as well in many cases.

Most importantly this third school of thought claims that rather than holding a single, strong opinion about the west or China, the mindsets of educated and internationally aware Chinese youth in fact involve the acceptance of dual realities, for example with regards to opinions on the US specifically, “two Americas exist in the minds of Chinese college students. One is a hateful, hegemonist United States, and the other is an advanced and developed United States, an object of yearning and desire. The college students’ patriotic, anti-U.S. sentiments are directed primarily at the U.S. foreign policy, and especially at the U.S. policy toward China. Their admiration and yearning are directed mainly at the U.S. domestic environment and the value concepts that reflect this environment. These two apparently diametrically opposite attitudes exist not only in the college student community but also in each individual college student. In other words, they often exist simultaneously in one person.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course an ideological ‘approval’ of democracy does not necessarily mean that Chinese youth have any of the zeal to implement it at home as described in the first school of thought. In fact, another aspect of this third school of thought is that Chinese youth believe that there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to political systems, and that while they may acknowledge the merits of democracy, they pragmatically also recognize that there would be issues in attempting to transplant such a system in China, and thus are not particularly keen on pushing for western-style democracy in China.<sup>19</sup>

The third school of thought is indeed the most reflective of the diversity of opinion not only with regards to the population of the younger generations in China as a whole but also the sometimes seemingly contradictory opinions of any given individual, though it could suffer from being too broad of an explanation; one that covers the entire spectrum of potential reactions from Chinese students and yet fails to meaningfully predict or describe any trends or patterns. In this context however it is possible to distinguish a few specific and crucial characteristics that define the psychological shift occurring in Chinese youth as they become more internationalized, as well as to draw certain conclusions as to what specific factors with regards to their international experiences are shaping these characteristics, and how differences in these factors are contributing to differences in the opinions of Chinese youth. The traditional method of gauging the opinions of the younger generation of Chinese people has tended to focus on the divide of ‘pro-western’ vs. ‘nationalistic’, though observation seems to suggest that neither is the most important issue for the majority of internationally aware Chinese youth, and that quite frequently these two apparently polar opposite stances exist in a sort of cooperation with each other, with young Chinese picking and choosing what parts of both ideologies they wish to embrace.

It is important to define in what ways Chinese students are making the conscious choice to intentionally engage with western culture. One major way in which Chinese students are encountering western culture, and also the most intensive one, is choosing to study abroad. In 2011, 339,700 Chinese students were studying abroad, making up about 14% of the world’s total of Chinese university level students.<sup>20</sup> Yet others are making the decision to stay at home but to enroll in educational programs specifically designed to give a simulation of an education gained abroad in the west. Multiple studies have indicated that students who seek out these programs are most satisfied with them when they are not significantly tailored to a ‘Chinese’ student body and are instead allowed to remain as authentic as possible with only minimal adjustments.<sup>21 22</sup> Others who are not fortunate enough to have such experiences or else choose to follow a different educational path while still desiring to interact with the western world are able to do so through the internet. Although it will not be extensively addressed in detail here, it is imperative to remember the

role that the internet plays in the life of the modern Chinese youth, particularly with regards to providing them with access at home to information about the west that is not put through the CCP's filter. Though there is still significant censorship in China, the internet inevitably allows 'unapproved' information to slip through the cracks, and is particularly accessible to technologically savvy young Chinese.

In examining this issue what factors are leading Chinese youth to choose to further their engagement with the west; either by choosing to study abroad, seeking out western-style education within China, or else simply attempting to further their knowledge of and engagement with the west through the internet or contact with internationals residing within China's borders, must be considered. Even with the Chinese government's extensive internet and news censorship the Chinese people are now more exposed to international issues and events than ever before without even seeking them out, so although it can be reasonably stated that Chinese youth who have intentionally sought out international experiences are more educated with regards to the west, it cannot be concluded that those who have not are entirely ignorant.

One thing that is cited often by Chinese youth as a subject of admiration in western culture is freedom.<sup>23</sup> Although this and other primarily ideological pros seem to be some of the first positive aspects of western culture mentioned by the Chinese as well as what many westerners hold up as their good example to the world, recent trends have revealed that ideals such as personal freedom being of paramount importance and political ideas such as democracy are not the primary reasons why Chinese youth are drawn to western culture. Certainly there is an aspect of the 'cool factor'; that in their pursuit of modernization young Chinese adopt a follower attitude and seek to conform to the 'dominant' global culture. As one junior student from the School of International Studies at the Renmin University of China admits; "People my age are dazzled by advanced and innovative western products."<sup>24</sup> In social circles like hers, youth are considered unsophisticated and backwards if they are not able to converse knowledgeably about western celebrities and do not use western brands. Even so, it seems that the primary motivations of Chinese youth in becoming more familiar with the west have more to do with the economic benefits of becoming more internationally aware, as well as a perceived importance of becoming an international citizen.

A fitting word to describe this mindset is pragmatic; a term frequently used nowadays with regards to China and the Chinese people. Though one could certainly make a very convincing argument that the pragmatism of the younger generations of Chinese people begins at home, it also appears to be the case that international experiences are prompting them to become more pragmatic as opposed to more idealistic; whether that idealism be applied to utter confidence in Beijing or a devotion to a more western mindset.

One aspect of this pragmatic outlook of the younger generations in China is the importance they place on economic stability. When Chinese students studying abroad are considering whether to seek employment in the west or to return to China, "most people's biggest concern of going back is the cost of living, environment, and children's education. Freedom or democracy is seldom part of the discussion."<sup>25</sup> This is not what would be expected if Chinese students were thinking purely in terms of nationalism vs. adoption of western ideals. Instead what appears to be the case is that Chinese youth are more preoccupied with actual, practical, quality of life issues as opposed to larger ideological questions. The number of Chinese students returning home to work after studying abroad appears to be growing, and although the desire to 'give back' to their home country seems to play a part in this decision, it is largely driven by the economic opportunities in China.<sup>26</sup>

Chinese youth seem to care about political issues up to a point, but because they are not provided with the opportunity to participate in politics as those in democratic countries do, they have, to some extent, accepted that the political sphere is outside of their control and doesn't have much to do with their lives. "For most young Chinese, politics doesn't have anything to do with them. It's what affects them that interests them. [Beyond] that level they don't care."<sup>27</sup> As one webizen put it; "Unlike many intellectuals who like to talk about 'universal values,' 'conscious citizen,' 'rule of law' or 'social responsibility' when comparing China and the US, what I care about is everyday life."<sup>28</sup>

Many Chinese students who do choose to go home to China after studying abroad don't make the decision based on a yearning for their home country or culture, but because they want to take advantage of China's current economic boom. The consensus among those actively posting their opinions online seems to be that either particular talent or guanxi (roughly translated into English as connections or relationships, though neither represents the term with complete accuracy). If one has neither, then it seems more practical, from an economic standpoint at least, to remain in the west. One student claimed that it is only practical to go back to China if one's salary there would be 6 times their salary in the US. He was quick to acknowledge both sides of the coin with regards to China, also stating; "if you want to enjoy the good things in China, also be prepared to deal with the ugly."<sup>29</sup> Another webizen expressed a similarly pragmatic approach to the negative side of China, writing; "I really don't like those who use excuses such as environment, food safety, democracy or freedom of speech as reasons of not going back. All those

are just facts. We all grew up in China and have been living there for years. That is China. We all know what it is like. If you can accept, then go back. If you cannot, then don't."<sup>30</sup>

So what do Chinese youth think about the 'westernization' of China? One student interviewed stated the opinion that; "it is true that China is becoming westernized, but far from being 'TOO' westernized. The power of the traditional culture is still dominating in the daily life of the Chinese people, and it is still well-reflected in the behavior of the Chinese people and the relevant policies devised by the government. What is more, the traditional Chinese customs is still well-preserved respected and respected, especially in southern China."<sup>31</sup> According to the observations of another student, "Western influence is not that strong."<sup>32</sup> In addition, professor Fang Ning, an expert on Chinese youth at the Institute of Political Science under the Chinese academy of Social Sciences, believes that the western influence on morals and social values in China as reported by the media is exaggerated. For example, when asked what they liked about western films, most Chinese youth made reference to the psychological insights they could gain on human interaction from watching the films, as well as the technological spectacle of western special effects, rather than referencing the social and cultural aspects of the films.<sup>33</sup>

One 25 year old student from Nanjing claimed that his international experiences caused him to place more value on his own culture, stating "only by comparison can we get a deep understanding of our own culture and further cherish the merits of it."<sup>34</sup> He also expressed the opinion that both China and the west have things that they could learn from each other; "Apart from the science and technology, I think China learn more positive notions from the western countries. For instance, the awareness of environmental protection, the awareness of personal health and happiness, the awareness of caring for the others, and, of course, the strengths of the political system and social welfare system of the western countries. China is now facing serious problems regarding to the aforementioned aspects, and the issues are getting more and more tricky. So I think it quite necessary for China to draw upon something from the western countries. I think the western countries should learn from China in terms of; a) The awareness of taking care of the elders; this is the feature of the Chinese culture and the very element that the western culture-especially the American culture-unfortunately lacks. b) Frugality and the awareness of financial management. They are extremely important in an era of economic turmoil."<sup>35</sup> Another student interviewed from Shanghai stated, "After one year's study in US college, I find myself more objective towards everything-I won't make judgments before finding out truths. Also, I am more open to different opinions and suggestions. In short, I became more open minded and [have] more respect for diversity."<sup>36</sup> Such opinions clearly go beyond the simplistic notions of pro-western vs. pro-Chinese. The student from Nanjing expressed the opinion that "In an era of globalization, every one of us should be a 'global citizen' and we should get used to mobilization", and the student from Shanghai claimed that "it's always better for people to study/live in a different culture and know different people." Neither of these students seemed willing to take lightly the importance either of their native culture or of any other, or to claim one's outright superiority over the other. Another student stated; "I think they [nationalism and internationalism] can happen at the same time. Being nationalistic means they just support their own nations, but they can also support other cultures to some extent."<sup>37</sup>

Many young Chinese people are beginning to view 'true' pride in their country as the adoption of certain 'western' ideals. For example when asked by CCTV what their definition of 'patriotism' was, many Chinese respondents had unexpected answers. "I don't know what a patriot is, but do know what a patriot is not. A patriot wouldn't love the Party or its officials, wouldn't stay indifferent to his/her country being exploited by evil powers, wouldn't scream "Diaoyu Islands belong to China" and smash Japanese-brand cars...A patriot wouldn't tolerate smog-filled air and heavily-polluted environments. A patriot wouldn't drain his/her country's resources for immigrant funds."<sup>38</sup> One netizen commented. Other responses included "Being a patriot doesn't mean we should stay loyal to the ruling government unconditionally. Who'd love a regime that allows wide-spread pollution, inequality and corruption? To advocate democracy is to be patriotic." and "To be a patriot is to criticize the government's every single mistake so that the country's people can live better lives. The more unforgiving the criticism, the more patriotic."<sup>39</sup> In such cases it is obvious that the definition of patriotism is changing for many; becoming more than obedience to the government, and instead focusing on the bigger picture of loyalty to one's culture and history, as well as one's own conscience.

It is important not to make the mistake of assuming that simply because some of the criticisms being leveled at the CCP by the Chinese people are seemingly western in nature that it is an indication that the youth of China are in love with the west. Once again, though the western influence in the thoughts of the younger generations of Chinese as they become more internationally aware is undeniable, it is not necessarily the case that these western aspects are the sole defining factor in the psychological shifts occurring in the young, educated population of China today. Indeed one can point to many things native to China that have likely contributed to the idea that true patriotism comes from something more than loyalty to the current political regime; one only needs to look briefly into China's

history to discover ideas like the Mandate of Heaven that show the concept that there is the necessity for holding one's government accountable, and that one can, through negative actions, lose the right to rule.

Unfortunately, the optimistic picture of a young Chinese generation aspiring to be global citizens and synergizing the best parts of Chinese and western culture without an ideological conflict is only one side of the coin. The other side is less picturesque; in a sense it is the coexistence of both anti-western and anti-Chinese sentiments. Whereas the previous outlook discussed seems to represent a willingness to look at the bright side both with regards to China and the west, the flipside is exactly the opposite; a focus on what is worst about both cultures. Once again it is possible for both of these mindsets to be true of the same person at different times, but regardless it is still not a case of dealing with the opposition of nationalism vs. westernization. Rarely will Chinese students completely reject all forms of cooperation with the west or investment in the global system, but there is a common thread of Chinese youth, in particular internationally exposed Chinese students, resenting the 'China-bashing' that goes on in many western countries, both in the media and among their peers. These students generally do not espouse the notion that China is perfect, in fact many of them are just as displeased with the 'corrupt' and 'cowardly' motivations of their own politicians as they are with the anti-Chinese sentiments in the west.

The students on the 'happy' side of the coin are focusing on a 'best of both worlds' idea where both cultures can learn from the other, and on the other hand the less sunny side of the coin is prompted by just as much mistrust in their fellow Chinese as with westerners. Chinese youth regularly view their politicians as corrupt and believe that their political system needs reform, but that does not mean they want the west's 'imperialistic' or 'predatory' influence shaping that reform. They also regularly express skepticism with the capabilities of the Chinese people on a whole, often arguing against pure democracy since they fear putting the future of China into the hands of the uneducated masses. "Nobody believes that democratic elections for the country's [China's] leaders can cure all [their] problems. It is not just the government that balks at the prospects of turning over the levers of the Chinese state to 800 million rural residents with primary-school educations."<sup>40</sup> At times the mistrust seems to run even deeper than simply skepticism in the capabilities of uneducated masses to vote intelligently and responsibly though; as one netizen put it; "Absolute democracy in China will look like Culture Revolution – Chinese people go to extremes very easily."<sup>41</sup>

And finally, personal, one-on-one experiences must be acknowledged, as they play an important role in shaping the opinions of Chinese students and thus, though complex and difficult to pin down, should not be ignored. One large predictor of whether Chinese youth are more likely to fall on the optimistic or the bitter side of the 'coin' is deeply personal; a reminder that relying on the model of 'pragmatism' to predict the opinions of the youth of China cannot be absolute. Just as a student who has trouble feeling accepted and integrated and is confronted with almost daily China-bashing in her host country can grow to feel more sentiments of aggressive nationalism and view people skeptically as opposed to optimistically, another student who feels that her peers make a genuine effort to understand and include her may be confronted with the same anti-China propaganda in the media, but is able to shrug it off as the misguided opinions of a few people and instead hold a more optimistic view of maintaining a deep sense of pride in her country while also acknowledging positive aspects of western culture.

One student from Shanghai studying in North America at the time of this writing stated that her experiences abroad have been better than she expected, and that she believes that the people she has encountered in the US so far are more polite and friendly than people in China. She outlines her positive feelings towards her reception in the US with the following words; "Maybe it was a little bit hard for me to start a conversation with western students at first. However, as long as I stretch my comfort zone and be more outgoing, people care about my opinions and are glad to talk to me...A lot of western students are either learning Chinese or extremely interested in Chinese culture. I feel like as a native Chinese, it's my responsibility and pleasure to promote Chinese culture and raise people's awareness of China."<sup>42</sup> Another student from Nanjing claimed; "I think it is, to some extent, much easier to get along with the western students. Compared with most of their Chinese counterparts, the western students are more frank, open-minded and tolerant. We always communicate in a straightforward way instead of beating around the bush-which is a common way of communication in China and other East Asian countries. And they are in general more tolerant and flexible when it comes to grappling with conflicts and problems. I think the westerners are more polite and they are more friendly as well. The overall inner-quality of the westerners is definitely higher than their Chinese counterparts. Although I haven't studied abroad, but according to my experiences of communicating with the westerners and my traveling experiences abroad, it is better than I expected. I managed to learn more than I expected and I have made a lot of friends."<sup>43</sup> Clearly these students have encountered a largely accepting and friendly community, and it has impacted their opinions in a positive manner, as opposed to Chinese students studying abroad who fail to integrate and reset the boundaries of their comfort zones, and thus end up feeling alienated and put-down and are more likely to develop negative feelings from their international experiences. As stated by Qing Gu in an article for the *European Journal of Education*; "the experience of studying abroad is a personal journey which may

take different forms and have different endings. For some, this journey is filled with happiness, joy and enjoyment of personal, academic and social achievements, despite many ups and downs. For others, however, it is a bitter journey which ends in frustrations and failures.”<sup>44</sup> Even the previously mentioned student from Shanghai with her largely positive outlook, admits that she sometimes feels uncomfortable and disrespected by the stance that some westerners take on China; “Especially in two of my classes; environmental studies and politics. Professors always use China as a bad example.” Another example is illustrated in one student’s statements to the New York Times in the wake of a pro-Tibetan speech at the University of Southern California; “Before I came here [to the west] I’m very liberal. But after I come here, my professor told me that I’m nationalist. I believe in democracy, but I can’t stand for someone to criticize my country using biased ways. You are wearing Chinese clothes and you are using Chinese goods.”<sup>45</sup> From such statements one can clearly see how much the conflict of ‘pro-western’ vs. ‘nationalistic’ is a false dichotomy created by western misconception and does little to get at any meaningful and honest sentiments from the young people of China.

Qing goes on to claim that whether a student will have a positive or a negative experience studying abroad does not rest exclusively on cultural clashes though, stating “in each individual case, biographical, affective, cognitive and circumstantial variables come into play, with students’ previous language learning and aptitude impacted upon by their motivation, attitudes, anxiety, learning style and strategies, as well as by unpredictable elements such as location, type of accommodation, and degree of contact with native speakers”<sup>46</sup> Thus it is impossible to predict with absolute accuracy how such an international experience will impact any given student, though it seems safe to say that when these variables not relating directly to cultural difficulties are more favorable, it is more likely that even a student who encounters negative cultural experiences will be more likely to overcome them and come out of their international educational experience with a more optimistic outlook.

In conclusion, it must be kept in mind that in a country of over 1.3 billion people and with many more Chinese nationals studying, working and living abroad, it is difficult to make any accurate statement representing broad opinions, even when focusing on specific demographics of the world Chinese population. Even so, the evidence suggests that there are important trends emerging in the opinions of China’s younger generations, which predict the ways in which they will be shaping China in the future.

Often it seems that research directed at determining the opinions of internationally exposed Chinese students is framed in terms of either nationalistic, avidly pro-China sentiments, or a pro-western, ‘modern’ view of the world. These two ways of thinking are typically juxtaposed; seen as the two ends of a scale which must naturally exist in opposition to each other. The views of Chinese students are often plotted along this scale, though in reality the internationally aware youth of China do not necessarily view Chinese nationalism or pride in Chinese culture as being at odds with what they see as ‘pro-westernism.’ It is not so much an issue of where on the scale of polar opposites they fall, but of what things they are incredibly proud of from their native culture, and what things they are drawn to within western culture, and the fact that these things do not contradict each other. This acceptance of dual realities may not be an exclusively Chinese method of thinking, but nonetheless it has come to be an aspect that defines the mindset of modern Chinese youth nearly as much as pragmatism.

It is important to stop viewing Chinese sentiments in terms of a scale of nationalism vs. pro-westernism, and instead to move beyond this simplistic view and accept that often Chinese students can be avidly pro-Chinese and greatly admire the west at the same time without seeing a conflict in these ideals. Secondly it must be understood that, although it may seem antithetical to determining trends and popular sentiment on a larger scale, it is important to remember the individual aspect of developing opinions. The personal experiences of Chinese students have a large part in determining their later opinions on issues such as politics and to what they assign particular cultural value. Chinese students tend to often and sometimes indirectly judge the value of a culture by the perceived ‘quality’ of its people. This is yet another example of their pragmatic worldview; a society that produces good people must be a good society. But it is even more personal and specific than this; if a Chinese student living abroad, for example, feels that they are able to integrate to some extent with members of their host culture as opposed to being rejected, and, sometimes more importantly, they are not confronted constantly with China-bashing sentiments coming from an apparently biased media, they will be less likely to see the negative side of China-western relations. Such findings indicate that one of the most important aspects of cultivating a mutually friendly and beneficial relationship with China in the future is acknowledging the importance of the individuals who are reaching out to the west as opposed to assuming that China’s political actions are the single most important representation of the country. It is also important to remember that a single sentiment does not represent the mindset of the entire population of young, educated Chinese, and in fact may not even consistently represent the mindset of a single individual. Accepting that Chinese youth can simultaneously love and hate the west while also at once feeling both intense pride in and deep disappointment with their native country and culture is essential to

understanding how they truly view important issues of politics and globalization, and what kind of impact they will have on the trajectory of China as it moves into the future.

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