Analysis

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Gripped by Fear: China's Digital "Stability Maintenance" and Revanchist Emotional Nationalism

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Abstract

This article examines the substance and mechanisms of Chinese nationalism. It does so by probing the boundaries of the permissible in online discourse, and explaining how the uncompromising emotions expressed online interrelate with the patriotic messages that the government espouses. The party's obsession with maintaining social stability stems from a profound fear of the people demanding freedoms it cannot give. With a stagnating economy, China under Xi Jinping (习近平) has doubled down on the repression and propaganda levers. This means that constructing external enemies and keeping down projected traitors is deemed key. Yet a scenario where government censors, digital cheerleaders, or the covert police state are no longer able to "cool popular emotions" is no inconceivable possibility, and would mean a challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's rule that is entirely of its own making.

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Keywords

Digital nationalism, social stability maintenance, Chinese Communist Party rule, constructed foreign enemies

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Introduction

On 19 September 2024, China's projection of Japan and the West as the new old enemies of the Chinese nation (中华民族, *zhonghua minzu*) took another violent turn. On his way to school in the southern city of Shenzhen, a ten-year-old Japanese boy was stabbed to death by a middle-aged Chinese man. In the days before the incident, a widely watched video called for the school that the boy attended to be "expelled" from the country. The message in the video suggested that these are not high school pupils whose expatriate parents contribute to China's economy but a fifth column that is part of "the new colonies" occupying China (Fan, 2024). The killing is part of a disturbing emerging pattern of violent xenophobia in China. On 11 June 2024, four academics visiting from the US were stabbed in a park in remote Jilin City. Two weeks later, a knife attack at a bus stop occurred in Suzhou, near Shanghai, injuring two Japanese people and fatally wounding a Chinese citizen who bravely intervened. Yet, in the Orwellian "opposite world" that is today's China, it was not the perpetrator who was vilified on Chinese social media, but instead the hero who jumped the knife-wielding assailant. However, this caused a backlash. Party tabloid newspaper *The Global Times* (环球时报, *huanqiu shibao*, 2024), usually jingoistic, rejected these "extreme views labeling [the Chinese national] as a 'traitor' and praising the criminal act as patriotism." Platforms such as *Weibo* (微博), China's equivalent of Twitter, were required to issue statements against "stirring extreme nationalism."

Why does this virulent anti-Western and anti-Japanese sentiment that has led to actual offline killings keep recurring? What are the boundaries of the permissible in online discourse, and how do the uncompromising emotions expressed online interrelate with the patriotic messages that the government espouses? This article addresses these questions by explaining the substance and mechanisms of China's digital nationalism (Schneider, 2018). In the West, nationalism is generally understood as a mobilisation tool to "achieve societal cohesion against external adversaries" (Taliaferro, 2006: 491). In China, by contrast, nationalism is inwardly focused and aimed at both controlling the narrative and solidifying the nation around the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党, *zhongguo gongchandang*, hereafter the party or CCP) (Edney, 2014: 4). This is done by connecting to people's negative emotions (Callahan, 2015) and employing "historical statecraft" (Mayer, 2018). The overt and covert operations of the police state (警察国家机器, *jingcha guojia jiqi*) are a last resort, should these efforts at channelling negative emotions (about day-to-day discontent) towards constructed foreign foes fail. After all, without a ballet box to vent anger towards the status quo, and perceived injustices, this is Chinese people's only possible expression valve (Sun, 2011b). Drawing on Hall (2015: 4–6) and Chen Weiss (2014: 16–17ff), emotional nationalism is here defined as "by (decentral) party-state actors tacitly coordinated behavior of citizens (netizens) that projects an explicit emotional response toward other states based on a state-prescribed, nurtured version of the nationalist identity; all with the goal of strengthening support for the regime" (Stevens, 2025). Rooted in Chinese people's sense of grievance with respect to past foreign aggressions, the narrative that is sold to shore up popular support is based on

revanchism: restoring what was taken, materially (relative regional power) and immaterially (pride, status, and influence). If this top-down social mobilisation is successful, social stability, meaning no sizeable disorder in the offline realm, is maintained and thus regime security. Showing the granular complexities of how the party does this is the central aim of this article.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section examines how party legitimacy is sustained by coopting the public in a nationalist enterprise, and how that relates to the very capitalist demands in today's society. These demands have led to a sense of defeatism among China's younger generations. The second section nuances the emotional critiques launched against the government for not being ideologically pure or externally tough enough. When the demands of patriotic netizens and the government that nurtures those feelings do not align, that does not mean a complete rejection of the status quo per se. The third section addresses the nature of the "history issue" and the fact that Japan is the constructed enemy that the CCP needs, explaining how the influence interplay between government and society works in practice.

Legitimacy Through Nationalist Cooptation

Though not as visible to the outsider compared to other present or past authoritarian states – the provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet being exceptions – government, party, and social institutions diligently monitor and control any form of organisation in the physical world that could potentially lead to large protests and social instability in China. This ranges from omnipresent facial recognition cameras to the elders that assist urban enforcers (城管, *chengguan*) as security volunteers (治安志愿者, *zhi'an zhiyuan zhe*). Donning a red armband, they are often strategically positioned in front of the gates of communities and play a critical surveillance role in cities' grid management systems (网格化管理, *wangge hua guanli*). Indeed, "maintaining stability" (维稳, *weiwen*) through "social management" (社会管理, *shehui guanli*) or "governance" (治理, *zhili*) is considered key to regime survival. That this required ever more attention from the party became clear in 2010. A year after China's turn towards an assertive foreign policy became visible externally, there were, according to noted Tsinghua scholar Sun (2011a), approximately 180,000 large protests nationwide. Correspondingly, the official internal security budget surpassed the external defence budget that year, the size and increase of which has led to a great deal of apprehension both in neighbouring countries and the West (Zenz, 2018). The severity of disorder and dissatisfaction with, safely, mostly local governments in that crucial period of change was notably corroborated in the 2013 five-year Work Report, with Wen stating that there was a "conspicuous increase in social conflicts" (*China Daily Editorial*, 2013).

This dissatisfaction with governance during the second Hu administration also extended to the internet. In fact, a lack of oversight and control over social media can be regarded as one of the main gridlocked issues that were to be tackled by a new, more forceful leadership (Miller, 2015: 10); a clear mandate to the stern, unbending persona of Xi Jinping. That public opinion matters in authoritarian China was driven

home in December 2022 in what came to be called the "blank sheet protests" (Perrigo, 2022), when students in Beijing and Shanghai aired their anger at pandemic restrictions after Chinese people locked in a building in Xinjiang burnt to death. Days after the demonstrations were put down, the careers of some of the promising students, who were located via their phones' signals, had been upended and Xi abandoned the zero-COVID policy. In just a month, a million Chinese people died due to a lack of preparation and vaccination (Du et al., 2023). That the fear among authorities has not gone away since was underscored in October 2024, when the security apparatus clamped down on social or political criticism expressed in young peoples' chosen costumes. The year before, people had dressed up as COVID testers and job advertisements (Wang and Xiao, 2024).

Besides the restrictions generated by its own propaganda narrative, the central leadership interprets the foreign policy latitude that it has chiefly by observing the opinions espoused and spread online, the data of which it uses to gauge general public sentiment, a practice called "online public opinion analysis" (网络舆情分析, *wangluo yuqing fenxi*) (Tsai, 2019: 734ff). Broadly speaking, it is the ever-expanding urban middle class that is the primary constituency the party needs to keep on board to maintain its rule and avoid the fate that befell the Soviet Union: Xi Jinping's dominating obsession (Yu, 2013). The most influential and potentially perilous demographic group among these urban middle-class netizens represents China's future: the post-Mao generations Y and Z. With pressures mounting in the workplace (fierce competition, with a "996" work culture), family (parents demanding grandchildren), and housing (unaffordable in the first-tier cities), the party has assessed their perception of their prospects as "gloomy" (Zhang, 2013). In large part, this is because of a stagnating Chinese economy that never really recovered from the three years of pandemic lockdowns, and the lack of economic reforms due to Xi's determination to put security before everything else. Tellingly, Xi used the character for "security" (安全, *anquan*) ninety-one times in his Work Report to the 2022 Party Congress. The economic downturn has eroded the party's post-Mao performance legitimacy. Recalling the leaked Li Keqiang (李克强) cable on "man-made economic data" (*BBC*, 2010), China's gross domestic product growth is not around the official 5 per cent. Rhodium (2024) puts the number for 2024 at 2.4–2.8 per cent, a normal annual growth number for a fully developed country, which China, however, still is not. Similarly, the official unemployment number for sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds of 18.8 per cent in urban areas released in September 2024 is likely closer to 25 per cent, following the estimated trajectory that China was on prior to the National Bureau of Statistics pausing the release of the data and then restarting it using a more favourable method (Fu, 2023).

Young people themselves describe their state as one of "involution" (内卷, *neijuan*), feeling exhausted, anxious, and stuck in an unwinnable competition, something that has led to the counter-culture phenomenon of "lying flat" (躺平, *tangping*). More recently, "letting it rot" (摆烂, *bailan*) and giving up, or "running away" (润学, *runxue*) to a Western country were added to Chinese netizens' lexicon. With regard to their beliefs and worldview, young people in China not only hold extreme views when it comes to

their "deep love" (热爱, *re'ai*) for the country, they have also found ample ways to influence the public sphere via digital platforms such as Weixin (微信, a WhatsApp-like app with more functionalities), Douyin (抖音, this is the limited Chinese edition of ByteDance's TikTok, suggesting that the CCP knows how harmful the algorithm can be to youths' mental health), Youku (优酷, Alibaba's version of Youtube), Xiaohongshu (小红书, literally "Little Red Book," an Instagram-like "lifestyle bible"), and Weibo (微博, Jiang, 2012: 52). What is more, in sharp contrast to the generations that went through the immense social upheaval and poverty of the Mao years during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, China's one-child "little emperors" (小皇帝, *xiao huangdi*), pampered and unfamiliar with the world outside of China, do not hold back when expressing discontent. The difference with the current generation of leadership could not be greater. The party-state is currently run by the austere sent-down youth (知青, *zhiqing*) generation, whose belief system was formed during the Cultural Revolution. In part, this explains why they are resorting to an updated application of the old-school Marxist–Maoist methods they know best but which are alien and outdated to young people, furthering the generational schism.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the old guard conveyed the significance of the conditioning function of messaging in the Information Age. As articulated in a 2010 CASS Society Blue Paper, they recognised that a "new opinion class" has the ability to "gather consensus, transform emotions, induce action, and influence society within a very short period of time" (Qiang, 2011: 221). They have since tried to manage it. With obvious historical precedents in mind, most critically the 1989 pro-democracy protests, the elaborate digital censorship of the Chinese state blocks references to any form of social protest in the physical world (King et al., 2013). "Social governance" enforcement is determined by outcome and impact, not necessarily by content. A striking case in point was the August 2018 arrest of dozens of young Marxist activists after they had practised what the party had preached. In what is known as the "Jasic incident," they travelled to Shenzhen, Guangdong, to join in workers' protests that tried to push through their demand to form a labour union to improve working conditions and pay (Yang, 2019). Their crime was the now familiar "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事, *xunxin zishi*), which is the successor to the crime of "hooliganism" of the Mao era (流氓罪, *liumang zui*). Further, the boundaries of the permissible can shift over time, and punishment can be applied retroactively to fit the political needs of that time. This is something Hebei artist activist Gao Zhen, one of two brothers who are known for their art criticising Mao by ridiculing him, found out in September 2024. Arrested for "insulting revolutionary heroes and martyrs" (Marsh, 2022), Gao was unaware that Xi's "historical nihilism" (历史虚无主义, *lishi xuwu zhuyi*) (see Lim, 2018) edict of January 2013 had put him at odds with local security cadres a decade later.

Beyond organising for protests offline, a degree of political expression is allowed if one stays away from the usual sensitive topics—the three T's, the F, and the X: Tibet, Taiwan, Tiananmen, Falun Gong, and Xinjiang – and from the very top leadership in Beijing, which explains the Great Firewall blocking of the outspokenly liberal *New York Times*, which has published several exposées of the families of top leaders,

but not of the more measured *Financial Times*. More reserved news websites can also be blocked from time to time due to national (party-state) events or sensitive anniversaries. Another exception is the situation where the surge of a particular topic on social media platforms has the potential to spiral out of the party's control. When the censoring of unwanted content does not suffice because of the sheer size of comments posted and the speed of the topic gaining traction – it is becoming one of the top trending topics – the party's "distractive cheerleading" strategy of flooding discussion platforms with unrelated positive posts is activated. During the first weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, low-level government and party officials recruited online trolls of the so-called "50 Cent Army" (五毛党, *wumao dang*) tried to suppress the story of Dr Li Wenliang's (李文亮) warning about the virus and then his death (Zhong et al., 2020).

No Monolithic Patriotic Base

The most vocal of these online nationalists are sometimes referred to as "Little Pink" (小粉红, *xiao fenhong*). Today, they often promote the party's emotional calls to rally against "hostile foreign forces" to prevent, for instance in 2014, an alleged US-fomented "color revolution" in the former British colony of Hong Kong (*China Daily Editorial*, 2014). Notwithstanding some praising Mao – neo-Maoists who are often referred to as *Maofen* (毛粉, literally "Mao fan") – it is important to mention that few people at present believe in communism as a viable socioeconomic doctrine. While rhetorically still in vogue, the party's rather cryptic "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (中国特色社会主义, *zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) propaganda is rarely understood. This is the case because saying you do not understand would in itself signal non-compliance and thus deviance; in Marxist societies, one does not question. Neither are the ideological underpinnings of the slogans and messages believed or paid attention to, for that matter. That is, other than the party members now forced to spend considerable time on the *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国, "learning to strengthen the country," with a play on the words "learning from," or "study" Xi) app for indoctrination into Xi Jinping Thought. In their private study sessions, the 99 million strong CCP members mimic the correct language of the day to instrumentally display "party spirit" (党性, *dangxing*), reaffirming compliance with the central leadership over demands that shift in time. This pertains to an ideational caveat advanced by Goldstein and Keohane (1993): "ideas can have an impact even when no one genuinely believes in them" (p. 20).

Nonetheless, "routine cynicism and contempt" in society for all things party and ideology do not necessarily mean an overall rejection of the status quo, and the benefits that the party-state system provides (on this internalisation as a coping mechanism see Pieke, 2009: 3). A dislike of the party does not stop citizens being immensely proud of China's resurgence; they reject the corruption and nepotism while still being content with long-sought domestic stability. The fact that most consumers of the CCP's vocabulary know that China is in fact not communist anymore explains the emergence of alternative voices in society promoting their originally socialist causes; New Left (新左派, *xin*

zuopai) voices such as Wang Hui (汪晖) of Tsinghua University and Pan Wei (潘维) of Peking University. Receptive thereto are the losers of globalisation and Deng's Reform and Opening Up: the elder people who grew up with the notion of an "iron rice bowl" (铁饭碗, *tie fanwan*) for life, and the legions of underpaid internal "migrant workers" that work under bad conditions in the hospitality industry in the first-tier cities.

Digital nationalists' references to the (rejuvenation of the) "Chinese nation" reveal how the slogans the government espouses feed into their vocabulary and action, creating ethnic "Han nationalism" (Hu, 2023). Indeed, "Chinese nation" is more accurately translated as "Han race," with some "Hansplaining" netizens displaying overt feelings of Han superiority and anti-minority sentiment (Leibold, 2010). The main difference between popular nationalist sentiment and similar government rhetoric, however, lies in the intensity of the nationalist fervour expressed online and the extent to which and immediacy with which they advocate achieving the great rejuvenation in practice. Moreover, there is a whole range of actors mediating between the cue provided by state media and a virulent popular narrative forming online, not to mention the digital technologies and social psychology that are involved (Schneider, 2018: 5–6). When digital nationalism does spill over into the physical public domain, this leaves the government attempting to quell these unintended effects in such a way as not to invoke (further) claims of being soft on national "core interests" (核心利益, *hexin liyi*). Netizen dissatisfaction with the party's handling of matters of sovereignty has the habit of fomenting a much "wider dissatisfaction with the party's inability to resolve some of the socio-economic dislocations caused by the [decades of reform]" (Weatherley and Zhang, 2018: 13).

Nevertheless, the pro-government netizen base is far from monolithic. In fact, they generally have ideas different from the government when it comes to China's interests and foreign policy positions, depending on the particular case involved (Shen and Breslin, 2010: 8). The government also does not engineer the periodical reactive outbursts of public anger that constitute China's emotional nationalism; it would rather (preemptively) deflect its own shortcomings by bending public discourses towards "positive energy" (正能量, *zheng nengliang*) (Shi, 2013; Yang and Tang, 2018). In fact, even the standard-bearer of party-friendly nationalistic content, former *Global Times* editor with 25 million Weibo followers, Hu Xijin (胡锡进), can get cancelled. In July 2024, Hu interpreted the conveyed economic line (路线, *luxian*) incorrectly, praising the role of the private over the state-owned sector (Buckley, 2024). Crucial to understanding the interplay between state and society, nationalist sentiment is instead fueled indirectly via the party-state's propaganda outlets, and more fundamentally cultivated through public education and social institutions such as the Chinese Communist Youth League (中国共青团, *zhongguo gongqingtuan*) and, most importantly, the party at the local level. The repetitive messages that are, quite unavoidably, consumed daily, are therefore best understood as cognitively reinforcing the pre-existing ideational values and beliefs nourished since Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin introduced their Patriotic Education Campaign in the early 1990s. This programme was aimed at combatting the spiritual vacuum that they believed led to the June 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and in other major cities. Xi's 2013 command to revamp youths' "belief" (信仰, *xinyang*) in the

CCP should be seen as doubling down on this indoctrination since childhood (*Xinhua News Agency*, 2013), as should the 100,000 "New Era Civilization Practice Centers" (新时代文明实践中心, *xin shidai wenming shijian zhongxin*) that have been established since (Batke, 2022).

History, Emotions, and International Discord

Controlling the media and information space, the bouts of fury directed at Western countries and Japan are often initiated by party-state propaganda reporting on real-world events (Pugliese and Insisa, 2017: 104ff), events that are hyped up via online celebrity commentators, such as Fudan University professor Zhang Weiwei (张维为). Picked up from Weixin or other social media, netizens then amplify the propaganda prompts. Needless to say, the stringent frame of reference in the nation's collective psychology, often called in the West an "echo chamber," and the interplay with state propaganda aimed at "the external other," is greatly enhanced by the limited availability of alternative sources in the Sinophone information landscape. Communication apps such as WhatsApp are either banned or made to work poorly. Whether Chinese people get their news from party-state outlets like *People's Daily* (人民日报, *renmin ribao*) and *CCTV* (中央电视台), unofficial media organisations that do not stray too far from the party line, such as *China.com* (中国网) and *Sina* (新浪), or rely on nominally private outlets with large party or state shareholders, such as *Caixin* (财新) and *Caijing* (财经), all is either generated, approved, or (self)censored by the party-state's vast propaganda apparatus; steered, at the very top, by the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department (中共中央宣传部, *zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuan bu*).

These messages are especially effective when they are tailored to people's negative emotions, such as is the case in anti-Japanese messaging that generates the proclaimed "hurt feelings of the Chinese people." In the summer of 2023, for instance, in a coordinated and sustained fashion state media for months hyped up fears surrounding the announced release by Japan of radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima power plant, prompting netizens to vent their rage. The scientific judgment of the International Atomic Energy Agency that it was safe did not matter. "Get off the planet, Japanese devils (日本鬼子, *riben guizi*)!," a comment by OurBigBrotherMao read. Another commentator wrote: "Folks, you know what to do next, right? There are 1.4 billion people" (Gao et al., 2023). The angry (government-steered) demonstrations at the Japanese Embassy in Beijing against Japan nationalising the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 provide a similar example. Of course, propaganda messages are more likely to be believed when they hold a factually correct core. In this case, there was nuclear-contaminated water and that water was about to be released into the Pacific. One can easily imagine being concerned when the government claims that it is harmful to public health. Yet, even when a message tells the whole truth – with political spin – the broader point concerns the motivation for amplifying an incident. This brings us to the observation of Selznick (2014). Doctrinarily, he argued, Marxism has an intrinsic need for an enemy (Selznick, 2014: 19). In China's case, this enemy (敌人, *diren*) of

the people is construed as standing in the way of the party's projected "final stage of socialism": attaining the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation (中华民族伟大复兴, *zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) by 2049, which is the "Dream" (梦, *meng*) of the Chinese people. Once the party has identified the outside (外 *wai*, the same character is used for foreigner, 外国人, *waiguoren*) enemy, often progressive Chinese "traitors" (汉奸, *hanjian*, to the Han Chinese in-group) that are stated to (tacitly) collaborate with them by facilitating (Western) attempts to "spread rumors, slander and smear China" (散布谣言, 污蔑抹黑中国, *sanbu yaoyan, wumie mohei zhongguo*) are open to online attack (Chen, 2021; for the quote see Jia, 2022). More recently, though, as *Nikkei* research indicates, the designation of someone being 辱华 (*ruhua*), "disgracing the Chinese nation," and the online vitriol that follows, is now done more by true believers on social media than through cues by party-state affiliates (Asada et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the victim and trauma part of the CCP's (re)legitimisation narrative has a distinct historical dimension. It is anchored in the collective memory of the Century of Humiliation (百年国耻, *bainian guochi*). This period runs from 1839 to 1842, when China lost the First Opium War against Great Britain, until 1949, when Mao united the country under the banner of communism. This pertains to the "re-" in Xi Jinping's rejuvenation and makes being singled out as a contemporary enemy for past deeds inescapable, as through this "othering" these nations serve an instrumental purpose. Just like the descendants of landlords were cast as intrinsically guilty in Mao's time, so are the Western countries and Japan today culpable for the sins of their ancestors. Therefore, regardless of the overtures the Japanese government may make, figures like Wang Yi (王毅, 2016) will keep pointing to Japan as being "two-faced" (双面人, *shuang mianren*) for not solving the root cause of the "disease" (病, *bing*) in China–Japan relations: the asserted whitewashing of Japan's war past. What routinely sparks off a wave of anger on Chinese social media is a commemorating visit by Japanese cabinet officials to the Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo. It is a place that has religious buildings where soldiers who have died since the 1868 Meiji Restoration are enshrined, among which are Class A war criminals. This is undoubtedly a highly sensitive issue for many in China. Still, one may wonder whether perpetuating adversarial images of the Japanese people is worth jeopardising the China–Japan relationship and the corresponding regional economic stability.

As Callahan (2010) has pointed out, in addition to the history-based identity of victimhood, there is the revanchist proclaiming of Chinese superiority, a paradoxical combination he terms China's "pessoptimism." McGregor (2012: 27) has distilled the essence of the party's (re)legitimisation narrative well: "the party alone stands between the country and the kind of murderous, impoverishing instability that has engulfed China at numerous times in its history." Surely, this conveniently glosses over the three decades of self-inflicted terror under Mao Zedong. On the victor side of the narrative, Chinese propaganda messages nurture the "self-justifying historical myth" (Van Evera, 1994: 13, 26) of a grand CCP victory in the war against Japan. Nevertheless, as Mitter has detailed, space is increasingly allowed in public discourse for the vast role of the Kuomintang government in pinning down millions of Japanese forces on the Chinese mainland,

something which can be called a "second war" over China's collective memory (see Cheng, 2020). For example, on 3 September 2015, Kuomintang veterans were invited to join CCP veterans parading in Tiananmen Square. That the reintroduction of the Kuomintang in the historiography of the victory over Japan occurred in such a prominent manner is unsurprising considering the propaganda value it has in bolstering the People's Republic of China's connection to the Republic of China in Taiwan. This was illustrated by the cross-strait war of words over the legacy of the Whampoa Military Academy in June 2024. Which side had the right to hold the centennial commemoration: China, where the physical structure remained, or Taiwan, where the Whampoa "spirit" ostensibly travelled to after 1949, in the words of Taiwanese President Lai (2024)?

Conclusion

The analysis above explains the complex workings of China's digital "stability maintenance" – the old guard's obsession with preventing upheaval that may result in the party losing its hold on power – and how that relates to the revanchist emotional nationalism that it promotes in parallel. The party nourishes a potent adversarial nationalism from childhood that creates a predisposition that circulates within the closed-off Chinese information bubble, constantly reinforced by patriotic content. This can then be activated by projected external infringements on China's great power (大国, *daguo*) prestige and historical sensitivities, a narrative where the party-state invariably plays the role of hero and protector of the Chinese nation. Nonetheless, a scenario where government censors, digital cheerleaders, or the covert police state are no longer able to "cool popular emotions" (Reilly, 2013) and prevent sustained protests offline is no inconceivable possibility, as the Blank Sheet protests have suggested in a different context. As the quote captured by the British newspaper *The Guardian* of one of the protesters in front of the Japanese Embassy in 2012 illustrates, this is a risk of its own making: "the government has taught us to be anti-Japanese at school, so if they want us to stop it would be like slapping their own mouths" (Branigan, 2012). In sum, the Orwellian world that Xi has created is gripped by mutually sustaining fear: fear of the population desiring more freedoms, as they signalled in June 1989, and go further than "routine cynicism and contempt"; and, on the side of the urban middle class, a fear of losing out to peers in the intense competition for jobs, housing, and a happy family life, high pressure and anxiety that is now exacerbated by a fear of being on the wrong side of the ever-changing discursive red lines, narrowing an already limited release valve. Indeed, even in high-flying cosmopolitan Shanghai, the incontrovertible reality that no one is exempt from the unbending will of the party has now sunk in.

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