

“Being Chinese Means Becoming Cheap Labour”: Education, National Belonging and Social Positionality among Youth in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, the Chinese party-state has attempted to teach its youth how to think and speak about the nation through a “patriotic education” campaign waged in schools, the media and on public sites. The reception of these messages by youth of different social backgrounds remains a disputed issue, however. Drawing on a multi-sited field study conducted among rural and urban Han Chinese youth attending different types of schools, this article explores the effects of the patriotic education campaign on youth conceptions of the nation by examining the rhetoric high-school students employ when asked to reflect upon their nation. The study reveals that a majority of youth statements conform to the language and contents of the patriotic education campaign; however, there are significant differences in the discursive stances of urban youth and rural youth and of those attending academic and non-academic, vocational schools. These findings call into question the party-state’s current vision of China as a “unified” national collectivity. They highlight the existence of variances in the sense of collective belonging and national identity of Chinese youth, while underscoring the importance of social positioning and perceived life chances in producing these variances.

Keywords: nationalism; patriotic education; schooling; social positioning; vocational education; political discourse; China

In 2018, during a speech at Peking University to mark May Fourth Youth Day, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader and China’s president, Xi Jinping 习近平, declared that “Patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) is the source of morality and personal dignity ... We must understand the history of the Chinese nation, carry on the Chinese cultural genes (*Zhonghua wenhua jiyin* 中华文化基因), exhibit national pride and maintain cultural self-confidence.” He then cautioned that “Patriotism cannot remain a mere slogan: it means aligning your ideals with

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the future of the motherland, linking your life with the destiny of the nation, becoming rooted in the people and dedicating yourself to the country (*fengxian guojia* 奉献国家).”¹

Despite the platitudes that have become a hallmark of the CCP’s public jargon,² Xi’s remarks are significant in that they encapsulate the party-state’s current vision of China as a national collectivity and reveal the CCP’s ongoing attempts at shaping youth attitudes towards this collectivity. A central means through which the Party has sought to achieve this aim is the “patriotic education” campaign (hereafter, PE campaign). Implemented since the early 1990s through various media channels and public sites as well as in the nation’s schools, the PE campaign equates “China” with the “Communist Party” and the goals of the state with those of the nation.³ It further instructs youth that “a sense of pride in one’s own Chinese identity, and commitment to the unity, strength and development of the party-state” constitute core values that are “absolutely central to the individual’s sense of self.”⁴

How these messages are received by young Chinese people from different social backgrounds remains a disputed issue, however. Ethnographic work conducted in the 2000s has highlighted the multidimensional nature of youth nationalism in China.⁵ Yet, studies that document the views of Han Chinese youth towards their nation while attempting to identify the various factors that shape these views remain relatively scarce.⁶ Moreover, previous work on Chinese youth nationalism has mainly focused on urban students or those attending elite educational institutes in large metropolitan areas, while overlooking the effects of social background, type of school and geographical location within the country on youth attitudes. The present article, which draws on the results of a multi-sited field study conducted among rural and urban Han Chinese youth attending both academic-track and vocational-track schools, seeks to address this gap.

Building on the crucial observation that distinct social groups in China may adopt, internalize and elaborate dominant discourses in order to define themselves as legitimate subjects,⁷ the present study examines the rhetoric employed by urban and rural Chinese youth of the post-90s generation when asked to consciously reflect upon their nation. The analysis reveals that while a majority of students’ statements conform to the discourse and contents of the PE campaign, there are nonetheless significant differences in this respect between youth in the city and in the countryside, and between students attending different types of

1 “Xi Jinping xinzhong ‘zui shenceng, zui genben, zui yongheng’ de qinghuai” (Xi Jinping’s feelings concerning “the deepest, most fundamental, and most eternal”). *Zhongguo ribao*, 20 August 2018, http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-08/20/content_36790572.htm. Accessed 25 August 2018.

2 See Sorace 2017.

3 He and Guo 2000; Liu 2012.

4 Vickers 2009, 69.

5 Zhao, Dingxin 2002; Fairbrother 2003; Law 2007; Fong 2004; Nyiri and Zhang, with Varrall 2010; Cockain 2012; Liu 2012.

6 For noted exceptions, see Sinkkonen 2013; Qian, Xu and Chen 2017; Chen 2020.

7 Sorace 2017, 11; Tomba 2014, 14.

schools that prepare youth for divergent future careers. This finding in turn casts new light on variances in young people’s sense of national belonging and identity in contemporary China, while underscoring the potential importance of social positioning and perceived life chances in shaping these variances.

Nationalism, Education and Identity

Scholarship on nationalism widely agrees that national identity, defined as “the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders,” is a powerful form of social membership.⁸

Although identities are necessarily fragmented and indeterminate, “national (ist) projects of self-formation” around which identifications may revolve can nonetheless crystallize strongly at times,⁹ inciting military conflicts and inspiring individuals to sacrifice their lives in battle or at least to care about the welfare of fellow citizens whom they have never met. These powerful attachments are not based on primordial or natural affinities. Instead, they must be imagined by the individuals living within a given set of borders.¹⁰

This act of “imagining” does not happen by itself. It requires “hard, continuous ... creative ideological and political labour on the part of intellectuals and nationalist leaderships.”¹¹ In a process Louis Althusser has famously termed “interpellation,”¹² ideological state apparatuses such as the school address individuals and constitute them as representatives of fixed categories, including those of class, ethnicity and nation.¹³ To achieve the continual production of “the people as a national community,”¹⁴ state schools may forcefully suppress all differences between individuals or instead relativize these differences and subordinate them to the idea of the nation.¹⁵ This is the case not only in regards to ethnic, religious or linguistic differences but also to socio-economic gaps between members of a given national collectivity. Indeed, “class” and “nation” are not necessarily in opposition to each other, since the category of social class often serves as a powerful trope in the continual construction of the nation.¹⁶ The attributes of a particular class are frequently extended to the nation, while the measure to which an individual or group fulfils this class criterion ideally governs admissibility to the national community.¹⁷

8 Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 19.

9 Beni 2011, 267–68; see also Hall 1996.

10 Anderson 1983.

11 Eley and Suny 1996, 23.

12 Althusser 1971.

13 Herzfeld 2016[1997], 35; Sorace 2017, 11.

14 Balibar 1991, 93; see also Gellner 1983; Ramirez and Boli 1987.

15 Balibar 1991, 94.

16 Duara 1995, 12.

17 Ibid.

Acknowledging the link between national and class identities is particularly important in the ongoing discussion concerning the state of nationalism in an era of heightened globalization. One of the key issues scholars of nationalism have debated is whether national identities and meanings are currently eroding in favour of global or “post-national” citizenship.¹⁸ Alternatively, does the recent worldwide proliferation of ethnic conflict and nationalist sentiment demonstrate the increasing importance of national identities, so that individuals feel simultaneously “part of the world” and “part of their village”?¹⁹

The answer to this question largely depends on the social positioning and actual – or perceived – life chances of the individuals in question.²⁰ Thus, membership in cosmopolitan networks and culture is crucially conditioned by class position and elite privilege at the “local” level, as “some people are given the freedom and confidence to experience cosmopolitan ‘belonging’.”²¹ Conversely, people’s felt need to make public claims concerning their membership – and devotion – to the national collective may increase when their overall position within the local social system is non-dominant and relatively deprived, as is the case for instance with lower-income, lower-education groups.²² In this article, I consider the usefulness of these theoretical insights in the case of China, a country that in the past four decades or so has experienced both increasing (re)integration within global markets and widening socio-economic gaps as well as a noted revival in popular nationalist sentiment.

Youth Nationalism and the State in 21st-century China

As a political and cultural entity, China stretches back two millennia, yet a majority of scholars agree that the idea of the Chinese “nation” as an “imagined community” did not emerge until the late 19th century when nationalism rose as a response to imperialism and modernity.²³ Nationalism was one of the core founding values of the CCP, and it continued to serve as one of the key sources of loyalty to the state after the socialist revolution of 1949. Under Mao Zedong 毛泽东, however, the salience of nationalism was shrouded by an overlay of revolutionary ideology. With the demise of socialism in the post-Mao era, particularly since the 1990s, nationalism arguably remains the one bedrock of political belief shared by many Chinese citizens and enjoys ever-greater prominence in CCP propaganda efforts.²⁴

In light of this development, a flood of publications on contemporary Chinese nationalism has appeared since the 1990s. One dominant theme in these

18 Falk 2000; Hannerz 2002[1989]; Trouillot 2001.

19 Hall 1996, 343; Appadurai 1990; Calhoun 2003.

20 Barrett 2007; Kaplan 2006; Weiss, Hilde 2003.

21 Calhoun 2008, 443.

22 Huddy 2001; Sela-Sheffy 2004; Shayo 2009; see also Hardin 1995.

23 Kim and Dittmer 1993; Fong 2004; Zhao, Suisheng 2004.

24 Unger 1996, xi.

publications is the blatant “statism” that arguably sets Chinese nationalism apart from ethnically based nationalist aspirations elsewhere in the world.²⁵ Scholars have suggested that this so-called “state-led nationalism” has been employed by the CCP to bolster its legitimacy after the events of 1989, to “shore up against the onset of consumerist decadence and individualism” and to “reinforce social cohesion in the face of rapid social and economic change” and amid widening inequality.²⁶

The main vehicle for engineering this ideological state project has been the waging of a coordinated campaign through various media and public sites, as well as through the education system. Despite several rounds of revisions, the new curriculum introduced to Chinese schools since the launching of the PE campaign generally presents the image of a strong state capable of redressing past grievances, resisting current and future foreign intrusions, and wielding a high degree of influence in the international arena, at least on a par with other major powers. While introducing class-neutral notions of citizenship, school textbooks of the 2000s also draw a clear distinction between those who “belong” to the Chinese nation and those who do not. The criteria determining national belonging further derive from an essentializing and homogenizing vision of Chinese culture based on Han traditions and a pseudo-biological construction of nationhood, often represented in PRC textbooks through the idea of the nation as a “family.”²⁷

Seeking perhaps to redirect youth protest towards “the foreigner” as an enemy and an external “other,”²⁸ contemporary Chinese textbooks also emphasize the need to remember earlier suffering at the hands of the West and Japan in order to prevent the loss of Chinese identity through foreign intrusions. They present the CCP as the faithful guardian of the “glorious legacy of China’s ancient civilization” and encourage youth to accept the need for strong government controls over society in order to maintain the country’s continuous stability.²⁹ Under the current leadership of Xi Jinping, students are taught that in order “to fulfil the China Dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦)” of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing* 中华民族的伟大复兴),” they must work hard to ensure that China becomes a rich and powerful country.³⁰ Notably, with China’s rising global clout in the 2000s and the launching of a more assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping, the current PE campaign places less emphasis on the theme of Chinese “victimhood” (as was the case in the 1990s), and instead underscores China’s triumphant transcendence while urging

25 Guang 2005; Wu 2008.

26 Vickers 2009, 80. See also Zhao, Suisheng 2004; Callahan 2007; Hughes 2006; Wang 2011; Weiss, Jessica Chen 2014.

27 Vickers 2009, 73, 80; see also Yi 2008.

28 Callahan 2006, 185.

29 Vickers 2007, 366; see also Callahan 2007; Wang 2011.

30 Callahan 2017, 253.

Chinese citizens to exhibit both “pride and agency” in their dealings with the world.³¹

Although a majority of scholars agree that nationalism has displaced socialism as the dominant ideology in PRC textbooks and class teachings, the assumption that youth nationalism is therefore a top-down phenomenon or that the youth necessarily receive the PE messages without question has nonetheless been challenged on several grounds. A growing number of studies show that while the PE campaign may have started as a state-driven propaganda effort, the opening up of popular media to market forces in the early 1990s has allowed nationalist discourse to spread beyond official control.³² Moreover, popular expressions of nationalist sentiment on the streets and in the virtual public sphere allow individuals to sidestep or modify dominant versions of nationalism and even to convert public opinion into political action.³³

Ethnographic studies further document that high school and university students in China’s relatively affluent coastal cities may regard the nature of their attachment to the nation as different to the relationship they had been taught at school, calling into question the idea that love for “the Party” (*zhengdang* 政党) equals love for the nation and the “country” (*guojia* 国家).³⁴ Among these elite urban youth, nationalistic impulses may rise to the fore when it is perceived that China is insulted or threatened, yet individual professional and pragmatic concerns remain paramount.³⁵ Arguably, urban young Chinese of the reform era have become eager consumers in the global marketplace and see themselves as members of an “imagined community composed of ambitious, well-educated people worldwide.”³⁶

These are valuable observations, yet their applicability to youth of non-urban backgrounds or those of lower class backgrounds in the city remains unclear. Some studies, for instance, characterize China’s over-zealous patriotic youth as urban college students.³⁷ Others suggest that youth who exhibit ultra-nationalistic attitudes hail from rural backgrounds and are often less educated and less financially prosperous than their urban elite peers.³⁸ The latter observation reminds us that unlike elite youth in the city, those who reside in the countryside or second-generation migrant children in urban areas are less able to cultivate global, cosmopolitan lifestyles. Young people from these two groups are also excluded from the new normative figure of national citizenship currently

31 Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018, 337; Bhattacharya 2019, 247

32 Barmé 1995; Deans 2005; Guang 2005; He and Guo 2000; see also Naftali 2018.

33 Gries 2004; Nyíri 2009; Breslin and Shen 2010; Xu 2007; Zhao, Dingxin 2002; Zhao, Suisheng 2013; Zhang, Yinxian, Liu and Wen 2018.

34 Liu 2012, 62; see also Fairbrother 2003; Fong 2004; 2011.

35 Rosen 2004; 2009; Zhao, Dingxin 2002.

36 Fong 2004, 644; see also Rosen 2004; 2009; Law 2007; Nyíri, Zhang with Varrall 2010; Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008; Liu 2011; 2012; Cockain 2012.

37 See, e.g., Zhou, Yongming 2005; Liu 2012; Yang and Zheng 2012; Wallace and Weiss 2015; Weiss, Jessica Chen 2019.

38 Tang, Hong 2010; Nyíri 2009, 6; Sinkkonen 2013; Tang, Wenfang, and Darr 2012, 820; Zhou, Min, and Wang 2017; Chen 2020.

epitomized by urban middle class civilities.³⁹ This is the case not only because they are thought to lack the cultural skills or “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) considered necessary for successful membership in an idealized national collectivity but also because their access to education and urban residence often remains blocked by enduring structural inequalities caused by lingering household registration (*hukou* 户口) barriers.⁴⁰

Several recent studies argue that these structural conditions – and China’s growing socio-economic divides more generally – have produced distinct values and attitudes among youth who hail from relatively marginalized sections of society.⁴¹ Vanessa Fong’s ethnographic work among urban youth of the “post-80s” generation finds, for instance, that city youth from poorer backgrounds tend to define the concept of *suzhi* in terms of “patriotism, morality, and good citizenship” in contrast to their peers from well-off families, who often associate the concept with a “cosmopolitan” attitude.⁴² Meanwhile, a more recent study conducted by Ling Minhua among second-generation migrant youth in Shanghai records a sceptical attitude towards the PE campaign discourse among migrant youth of the “post-90s” generation, and speculates that this stance reflects a sense of alienation from mainstream propaganda because of personal encounters with *hukou* discrimination in the city.⁴³

Building on this previous work, the present study seeks to explore how Han Chinese youth of the post-90s generation choose to construe the national collectivity, while paying particular attention to the role of social and educational background in shaping these choices. Based on the assumption that nationalism is best understood not merely as a product of official discourse but also as a process of continual “imagining” and “performance” on the part of individuals,⁴⁴ I examine the rhetorical strategies youth apply in their attempt to position themselves vis-à-vis the nation. I further consider the extent to which students from different socio-economic backgrounds and different types of schools either employ or reject the hegemonic discourse of the PE campaign; their possible motivations in doing so; and the implications of these findings for our understanding of the forces shaping Chinese youth nationalism today.

Methodology and Research Questions

The present article draws on field data collected in 2012–2015 as part of a broader study on education and national identity formation among Han Chinese youth of different social backgrounds. The original study consisted of

39 Tomba 2014.

40 Anagnost 2004; 2008; Lin 2011; Murphy 2004; Sun 2002; Jacka 2009; Woronov 2009a; Kipnis 2007; Hansen 2013; Hansen 2015.

41 Woronov 2011; 2016; Xiong 2015; Ling 2015; 2017; Pun and Koo 2019.

42 Fong 2007, 87.

43 Ling 2017, 733.

44 See Woronov 2007; Fong 2004; Cockain 2012.

written surveys as well as in-depth, ethnographic interviews. For the purposes of this article, however, I focus on students' written responses to open-ended survey questions.

The survey population included 856 senior high school students (aged 16–18; 52 per cent of whom were female and 48 per cent male), attending four schools in the relatively affluent, globalized city of Shanghai and two schools in the rural hinterland province of Henan. The Henan participants (N = 259) were attending two academic-track schools, i.e. schools that prepared students for the University Entrance Examination (*gao kao* 高考) at the end of Year 12. Notably, however, a majority of Henan students' parents had attained only nine years, or fewer, of education and worked as either farmers or manual labourers. The two Henan schools were located in a prefectural-level city in the northern part of the province. However, more than 80 per cent of study participants hailed from villages and neighbouring rural townships. Owing to the considerable travel distance between their hometowns and the school, many boarded at school during weekdays, returning to their villages only on weekends and holidays.

Shanghai participants (N = 597) attended schools of two main types: academic and vocational. Like the Henan study participants, students in the Shanghai academic high schools (N = 234) also received preparation for the *gao kao*. However, their parents had local urban *hukou*, at least 12 years of education (53 per cent of the mothers and 65 per cent of the fathers attained higher education) and were employed as either white-collar workers, professionals, private entrepreneurs or high-ranking managers in state-owned, privately owned or foreign enterprises.

The remaining Shanghai participants (N = 363) attended two vocational-track schools in the city. Vocational schools are generally considered inferior on the Chinese educational ladder since they are required to admit local urban *hukou* students who have failed to gain admittance to academic high schools. In Shanghai, however, migrant youth who lack a local urban *hukou* are exclusively channelled into vocational high schools regardless of their academic abilities.⁴⁵ Notably, second-generation migrants without a local urban *hukou* constituted 40 per cent of the Shanghai vocational school sample. Unlike their peers in the academic high schools, the vocational school respondents did not receive any preparation for the *gao kao*.⁴⁶ Instead, they were offered training in electronics, car repair, cooking, hairdressing and beauty salon work. A majority of these students hailed from families of relatively lower socio-economic backgrounds. Only half had parents who had attained more than nine years of education, and among the remaining half, very few had attained more than 12 years of schooling. A majority of students' parents were employed in low-paying jobs in the service sector or as manual workers.

45 Ling 2017.

46 In most cases, vocational education students will not even be allowed to take the *gao kao*. Although the Ministry of Education instituted a "self-study" version of the *gao kao* for students who do not complete regular, academic high school, sitting this exam requires several years of self-study preparation, and pass rates are negligible. See Woronov 2011, 85, 88.

As noted in previous studies conducted worldwide, asking direct questions about abstract concepts such as “national identity” or “national belonging” in personal interviews often leads to bewilderment, silences or even outright evasiveness on the part of informants.⁴⁷ Conversely, “quasi-automatic replies” to direct survey questions may get researchers closer to respondents’ “raw, pre-thought understandings of the nation.”⁴⁸ Following this insight, the written surveys consisted of the following open-ended questions:

“What does ‘China’ make you think of?” (*tidao Zhongguo, ni hui xiangqi shenme* 提到中国，你会想起什么?)

“What does it mean to be ‘Chinese’?” (*zuo yige Zhongguoren, yiweizhe shenme?* 做一个中国人，意味着什么?)

Surveys were administered to students during class.⁴⁹ Students were nonetheless instructed to freely write down their own associations, thoughts and feelings and were assured of the anonymity of their questionnaires. The response rate to the questions was higher than 95 per cent across the sample, and a majority of students chose to write one or more separate phrases, and in some instances, one or more complete sentences.

Students’ written responses were analysed by drawing on both content and discourse analysis. Content analysis consisted of encoding students’ replies into three main categories: (a) factual statements without any expression of praise or critique; (b) positive statements which offer praise or declare attachment, affection and commitment to the nation-state or its people; and (c) negative statements expressing criticism towards any given aspect of the nation-state and its people. Drawing on discourse analysis, students’ responses were further examined with the aim of locating recurrent themes and common patterns and comparing these themes and patterns across different types of schools and geographic locations. Finally, the analysis mapped links and interactions between these common themes and patterns and the dominant rhetoric of the PE campaign, while paying special attention to the use of stock phrases which also appear in PRC textbooks or official media.

The discussion below presents the main findings of these inquiries while focusing on the following questions. First, to what extent did students’ responses accord with or diverge from the discourse and themes of the PE campaign? Second, were there any significant differences between the type of responses supplied by students in Shanghai and in Henan or between students in the different types of schools (i.e. Shanghai academic schools, Shanghai vocational schools and Henan academic schools)? If so, how can we account for these differences and what do they tell us about the role of social positioning in the construction of youth attitudes towards the nation-state?

47 Fox 2017, 41.

48 Ibid.; see also Sela-Sheffy 2004.

49 Owing to the political sensitivity of the topic, participating classes were selected through non-random sampling.

“Being Chinese Means Winning for the Country”

In response to the survey questions (“What does ‘China’ make you think of?” “What does it mean to be ‘Chinese’?”), an overwhelming majority (97 per cent) of students in Shanghai and Henan alluded to public issues. About one-third of replies to the first question mentioned, for instance, national state symbols such as the “Five Star Flag” and the “national anthem” or iconic national sites such as “Beijing,” the “Forbidden City” and the “Great Wall.” A smaller share (less than 20 per cent) of replies cited modern historical events such as the “War of Resistance against Japan” and the “100 years of national humiliation,” referring to the period in which China was under invasion by foreign powers from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. An even smaller minority (8 per cent of all responses) mentioned names of public figures. The most common by far was Mao Zedong, followed by the ancient philosophers, Confucius and Mencius. Notably, very few responses (1 per cent of the entire sample) mentioned reform-era political leaders such as Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, Jiang Zemin 江泽民, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 or Xi Jinping. In fact, there were as many allusions to contemporary popular culture figures as there were to post-1978 leaders.⁵⁰

Notably, in response to the question, “What does it mean to be ‘Chinese’?” a large majority of replies (65 per cent of the entire sample) included at least one statement expressing a sense of attachment, affection or commitment to the national collective. Common examples included phrases such as “love for the country” (*aiguo* 爱国) and the word, “pride/proud” (*zihao/zi'ao* 自豪/自傲), as well as references to China’s rapid economic development and recent re-emergence as a world power after a century of “struggle” and “humiliation.” Some respondents opted for more elaborate statements of love and devotion to the country, including the following quotes, for instance:

Being “Chinese” means my home is in China, my fate belongs to China, and I carry a responsibility for China’s honour and disgrace;

Being “Chinese” means shouldering the responsibility for the country’s prosperity, allowing China to have a say in the world, and making sure Japan no longer treats China with contempt;

Being “Chinese” means fighting for the country;

Being “Chinese” means putting the interests of the motherland before your own;

Being “Chinese” means you must make a contribution to the country;

Being “Chinese” means working hard to build the motherland;

Being “Chinese” means dedicating yourself to the country.

It could be argued that students chose to make such patriotic statements not necessarily because they upheld these notions, but rather because they assumed these were the “correct” answers to a survey administered in class. That said, it is also worth noting that only a small minority (about 10 per cent) of all survey

50 Popular culture figures mentioned by students included Chinese martial artist, actor and filmmaker, Jet Li; Hong Kong filmmakers and martial artists, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and the Shanghai-born retired NBA basketball player, Yao Ming.

responses associated China or being Chinese with the CCP. Although “love for the country” and “love for the Party” constituted equally significant parts of the official public script of the PE campaign, very few students chose to speak the lines that were expected of them in regards to the Communist Party. Of the ones who did, Henan students formed a clear majority.

In comparison to Shanghai students, Henan teenagers were also more eager to offer statements conveying a strong sense of togetherness, shared values and a common fate. This sentiment found an expression through explicit declarations of the respondent’s own affinity by writing, for instance, “I am Chinese (*wo shi Zhongguoren* 我是中国人) and I am proud,” as well as by noting qualities such as “unity,” “solidarity” or “the ability of Chinese people to come together in times of natural disasters.” About one-fifth of all responses in Henan also included statements which related being Chinese to treating each other “kindly” like “one big family” (*xiang yige da jiating* 像一个大家庭). Such phrases resonated with the official rhetoric of the PE campaign and the current contents of students’ textbooks.⁵¹ In contrast, only 2 per cent of statements provided by Shanghai students alluded to these qualities as emblematic of either China or being Chinese.

Yet, another observable difference between the responses provided by students in Shanghai and in Henan related to the use of official stock phrases. For example, in reply to the question: “What does ‘China’ make you think of?” more than 70 per cent of Henan responses, but only 10 per cent of replies in Shanghai, included at least one of the following identical idioms: “a world-renowned culture” (*xiangyu shijie de youxiu wenhua* 享誉世界的优秀文化); “5,000 years of history and culture” (*wuqian nian de lishi wenhua* 五千年的历史文化); “China’s glorious history” (*Zhongguo de guangrong lishi* 中国的光荣历史).

Further, in response to the question, “What does it mean to be ‘Chinese’?” more than half of Henan students jotted down one of the following stock phrases: “winning for the country” (*weiguo zhengguang* 为国争光) or “striving for the great rejuvenation of the nation” (*shixian weida minzu fuxing* 实现伟大民族复兴). Such platitudes were also used by Shanghai students, but to a much lesser extent than in the Henan survey. Most importantly, a comparison of all the Henan responses with those of Shanghai students reveals that Henan youth were in general much more willing to express sentiments of love and devotion to the country in response to the survey questions. More than 90 per cent of replies in Henan included such statements, whereas in Shanghai the rate was considerably lower, standing at only 35 per cent of all replies. There was no considerable difference in this regard between vocational and academic school students in Shanghai.

To summarize, study participants from Shanghai were the least eager to verbally assert their commitment to the national collectivity and the PE campaign.

51 Vickers 2009, 73.

In contrast, students in Henan, an overwhelming majority of whom hailed from rural families of poorer backgrounds, were more willing to declare their dedication to the nation and assert their pride in China's accomplishments. Henan students were also more ready to employ the same stock phrases that appeared in their school textbooks and in the official discourse of the PE campaign. As the next section reveals, the differences between students in the two locations were equally visible when it came to respondents' willingness to make critical statements concerning the national collectivity. In this regard, however, there were some important distinctions between the sort of detracting remarks offered by students attending vocational and academic schools in the city.

“The Poor Are Poor, the Rich Are Getting Richer”

Shanghai participants were not only less inclined to align themselves with the discourse of patriotism, they were also more willing to make strictly dissenting comments in relation to this discourse. In Shanghai, 36 per cent of student responses in both vocational and academic schools were overtly critical rather than celebratory. While about one-third of Henan students chose to make unfavourable comments as well, a majority of rural participants nonetheless attempted to balance these with a more positive sentiment, by stating, for example:

China is a developing country and a political power, but it still faces many problems;

“China” makes me think of the heroic Red Army fighters, but also about some people who show no etiquette or morality;

“China” makes me think of willingness to work hard, friendliness, and filial piety, but also that the quality (*suzhi*) of people in today's society needs to be improved, and that traditional morality (*chuantong pinde* 传统品德) is lacking.

As illustrated by these examples, and as the overall analysis of Henan responses reveals, one of the main issues rural students tended to fret about was the lack of “morality” and the low level of “integrity” (*chengxin* 诚信), as well as the perceived problem of “indifference” (*lengmo* 冷漠) in contemporary Chinese society. Two other grievances, which notably were shared by students in Shanghai, concerned the problem of “heavy academic pressure” and the low “quality” (*suzhi*) of China's population. The latter issue echoes the mainstream media and government discourse of the past four decades, which (ironically) targets rural and migrant populations as those requiring “quality” improvement. Notably, in the present study, survey participants from both these target groups were as willing to reiterate the issue of “lack of population quality” as the Shanghai youth who hailed from elite backgrounds.

Somewhat surprisingly, considering that students completed the surveys in class, there were also critical statements regarding the party-state in both Shanghai and in Henan. Although admittedly these formed a very small minority of all responses, it is interesting to note the type of complaints raised by students of different backgrounds. Thus, Henan youth and Shanghai vocational students frequently expressed concern at the misconduct of state officials, illustrated in

statements such as: “‘China’ makes me think of too much government corruption” (*zhengfu de fubai* 政府的腐败); “too many corrupt officials” (*tanguan* 贪官); and “‘being Chinese’ means state officials take bribes and pervert justice” (*guanyuan tanzang wangfa* 官员贪赃枉法). One vocational school student in Shanghai wrote, somewhat sarcastically, “‘Being Chinese’ means you must be patriotic but have no idea where your taxes go every month or how come local officials have so much money. Where does it all come from?”

Curiously, students from privileged families in Shanghai’s academic schools were much less troubled by the problem of government corruption (or at least were less willing to refer to it in their statements). Instead, they were more concerned about issues such as the “lack of freedom of speech” and the country’s “weak legal system.” One Shanghai academic student simply wrote, “being ‘Chinese’ means living in a political dictatorship.” Notably, issues of civic rights were rarely mentioned in the Henan responses, and were also mentioned less frequently by Shanghai vocational school students. Vocational school students did not hesitate, however, to make politically biting remarks, such as:

Being “Chinese” means officials and politicians cannot lead by example;

Being “Chinese” means the government is extremely hypocritical;

Being “Chinese” means officials shield one another;

Being “Chinese” means officials put pressure on the people, but do not serve the people.

Another issue that Shanghai vocational students grumbled about was the economic situation. This concern was also on the minds of Henan students. Both groups complained about the difficulty of finding a job in a competitive society, the problem of low income and, in Shanghai, the lack of affordable housing. One Shanghai vocational student wrote, “Being ‘Chinese’ means you have worse living conditions than children in other countries,” while a Henan respondent stated, “Being ‘Chinese’ means you need to constantly struggle to get ahead in a materialistic society.” Although Shanghai academic school students, the majority of whom hailed from well-off families, also worried about the “high housing prices” and “intense job competition,” they were far less likely to voice disquiet about economic issues compared to their peers of lower-class backgrounds in the city and in the countryside.

Students from privileged families in Shanghai also did not express worry about the issue of social inequality, a topic that nonetheless recurred in the critical responses of both Henan and vocational school students in Shanghai. This particular concern was expressed by the recurrent phrase: “The large gap between rich and poor” (*pin fu chaju da* 贫富差距大) or simply by the repeated idiom: “unfairness/inequity” (*bu gongping* 不公平). Vocational school students in particular expressed a relatively bleak view of the contemporary economy and society. For instance:

Being “Chinese” means the poor are poor, the rich are getting richer;

Being “Chinese” means you have to struggle from the moment you are born;

Being “Chinese” means being despised and diminished;

Being “Chinese” means you are helpless;

Being “Chinese” means becoming cheap labour (*lianjia de laodongli* 廉价的劳动力);

Being “Chinese” means you become garbage (*laji* 垃圾).

Interestingly, students attending academic schools in either Shanghai or Henan did not share this pessimistic tone. While Shanghai youth were generally more willing to offer openly critical statements regarding the “nation” and even the party-state compared to those in Henan, it was the vocational school participants who expressed the strongest sense of resentment. As could be seen in the examples cited above, to these teenagers, the word “China” and the question “What does it mean to be ‘Chinese’?” prompted not only statements of pride, love or devotion to the country but also expressions of embitterment and disassociation with the national collective.

Discussion: Youth Social Positionality and National Belonging

Explicit articulations of the nation are not always a good predictor of people’s candid beliefs and habits.⁵² In other words, what Henan and Shanghai youth participants chose to say about the nation in the present survey is not necessarily the same as what they think. This caveat notwithstanding, the results of the present study do reveal an interesting tension between rural–urban and centre–periphery in youth verbal constructions of the nation.

In comparison to students in the globalized, economically prosperous city of Shanghai, teenagers in Henan were much more inclined to make statements expressing sentiments of love and devotion to the country. Regardless of whether rural respondents actually harboured these feelings, it is clear that they saw it was imperative to express this patriotic stance in the survey. They were also more willing to employ the rhetoric and stock phrases of the official PE campaign. In contrast, students in Shanghai were not as eager to declare their allegiance to the nation or use the discourse of the PE campaign. What accounts for the different discursive strategies of youth respondents?

Rural students in Henan hailed from communities that are symbolically as well as geographically peripheral in China. For these youth, then, the patriotic image could be considered a cultural asset. Rural youth may have chosen to appropriate the official PE discourse as part of their attempt to exhibit their competence as the natural bearers of the Chinese national collectivity. In contrast, academic school students in Shanghai, a majority of whom hailed from middle-class backgrounds, could arguably afford to be more critical regarding the Chinese collective identity and express stronger disillusionment with its official representation without risking their status. For the elite youth residing in Shanghai, a national economic and cultural centre, expressions of detachment from the nation were

52 Compare with Fox 2017, 41.

perhaps also regarded as a sign of social distinction and refinement, constituting part of cosmopolitanism as a form of cultural capital currently sought after by the urban middle-classes in China.⁵³

Students in Shanghai’s vocational schools also shared a critical stance towards the national collectivity with their middle-class peers. Interestingly, however, they adopted this stance despite their relatively marginalized social position within the city. The discursive choices of these teenagers, many of whom came from rural migrant families who had moved to the city in search of a better life, could be explained by their residence in a prosperous metropolis that prides itself on its global city status, as well as by a desire to rhetorically align themselves with middle-class values and civilities. However, what distinguished vocational school students in Shanghai was also their particularly sombre view of the nation compared to their peers in Shanghai’s academic schools and those attending academic schools in the countryside.

Recall that vocational school students were unique in their tendency to write self-disparaging statements, including phrases such as “being ‘Chinese’ means you become cheap labour” or “garbage.” A more useful explanation, then, for the particular discursive stance of vocational schools students may relate to the type of school they were attending. As noted earlier, vocational schools in China do not prepare their students for higher education but instead channel them into exploitative and often oppressive labour conditions.⁵⁴ The distinct educational trajectories and limited life chances of vocational school students may have therefore prompted them to express a bleaker vision of the nation compared to their peers in the academic schools, who held a more optimistic view of their future mobility chances.

In a recent study on vocational education in Nanjing, T.E. Woronov argues that students attending vocational schools constitute part of a new urban underclass in China, defined in part by their sense of failing to conform to mainstream ideal notions of “quality citizenship.”⁵⁵ The findings of the present study offer support to this claim. They indicate that vocational school participants may have recognized that their mobility chances were relatively limited. Whereas Shanghai academic school students were already part of an elite segment of urban society, and rural students in Henan’s academic schools were offered, or at least believed they were being offered, a chance at pursuing an academic degree and moving up the social ladder, vocational students in Shanghai were deprived of this hope. For these students then, “being Chinese” was associated not with pride or unity but with a sense of lack of self-worth and deep despair at their ability to overcome existing social divides in the future.⁵⁶

53 See, e.g., Schein 1999; Zhang, Li 2010; Henningsen 2012; Ren 2013; Farrer 2014.

54 Lan 2014, 261. See also Woronov 2011; Hansen and Woronov 2013.

55 Woronov 2009b, 108; Hansen and Woronov 2013, 246; see also Pun and Koo 2019.

56 A recent survey study among Chinese adults similarly finds that respondents of the post-80s generation who experience a sense of relative deprivation are “more reluctant to embrace nationalism as an identity.” See Chen 2020, 88–89

Concluding Remarks

The present study highlights the importance of considering Chinese adolescents' socio-economic backgrounds, geographic location within the country and type of school when assessing their attitudes towards the nation-state. While the article draws on the analysis of a limited number of survey questions, its findings nonetheless point to the significance of including marginalized populations (and not just the elite urban youth) in empirical studies of youth nationalism in China.

The relatively small sample size and the focus on Henan and on Shanghai – arguably China's most global city and one which may not be representative of other urban locations in the country – may limit the generalizability of this study's findings. Future studies carried out among larger groups of students in additional provinces of different socio-economic levels as well as in medium- and small-sized cities and towns across the country would help to address these limitations.

These caveats notwithstanding, the findings of the current study indicate potential restrictions to the power of the PE campaign to shape Chinese youth mentalities. If it is true that for the CCP, “official discourse and terminology are not merely descriptive; they are also meant to be exemplary and normative, authoritative and binding,”⁵⁷ then the reluctance of Shanghai study respondents to employ the terminology of the PE campaign could be construed as an indirect challenge to the party-state's authority. The results of the study further suggest that the combination of educational tracking policies and the inequalities of the *hukou* system may undermine the willingness of vocational school students and second-generation migrant youth in the city to align themselves with the “nation.” These variances in and of themselves call into question the party-state's current vision of China as a unified national collectivity.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant number 405/12) and by the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical Note

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⁵⁷ Sorace 2017, 7.

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摘要: 自上世纪90年代以来, 中国共产党一直试图通过在学校、媒体和公共场所开展的“爱国主义教育”活动, 教育青少年如何思考和谈论国家。然而, 不同社会背景的青年对这些信息的接受仍然是一个有争议的问题。本文对来自不同地域和在不同类型学校就读的城乡汉族青年进行了实地调研, 通过考察中学生对国家概念的反思, 探讨了“爱国主义教育”运动对青年观念的影响。研究表明, 大多数青年言论符合“爱国主义教育”运动的语言和内容。然而, 城市和农村青年以及学术和非学术职业学校学生的态度存在显著差异。这些发现凸显了当代中国青年集体归属感和国家认同感的差异, 同时强调了社会地位和所感知的生活机会在产生这些差异方面的重要性。他们进一步质疑党目前对中国作为“统一”的国家集体的看法。

关键词: 中国; 爱国主义; 教育; 民族认同感; 年轻人; 职业学校; 政治意识形态

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