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Reconstituting China in a Time of Pandemic

Eric S. Henry

COVID-19 has rapidly reconfigured the lives of people around the world in a way that has deconstituted many of our previously familiar social relations. We have been forced inside, out of physical contact with one another, and the conventional formulae for interaction (a warm handshake, a kiss on the cheek) have been rendered not only invalid but also dangerous. It is therefore not surprising to watch as people attempt to reconstitute these relations in new forms. From online museum tours and book clubs to digital concerts, our interactions and networks of support have largely become virtual. Reconfiguration is also apparent as nations organize their responses to the pandemic. Liberal values of independence, in particular, have been deconstituted by new regimes of surveillance, emergency powers and market interventions by the state. If the nation truly is the fragile imaginary envisioned by Benedict Anderson, such actions strike at the core of its being.[1] During the period of recovery, citizens and states collaborate to reaffirm their camaraderie, ties to others and sense of national belonging.

My own vantage point on this crisis is through the remote observation of social practices in China, where the virus first emerged in late December 2019 and where it had the first national impact, and observation of the local Chinese community in my own city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in eastern Canada, based on interactions with Chinese friends and colleagues, and analysis of local Chinese social media. These media include forums on WeChat and local Chinese social media sites.[2]

The Chinese state's initial reaction was slow and bureaucratic. Once it recognized the severity and scope of the epidemic, however, many international observers were struck by the intensity of China's response. Whole cities were quarantined. A host of official and semi-official organizations, including police, neighbourhood committees and party organizations, began monitoring the civil population. And the full might of the state's considerable propaganda arm was recruited to enforce the restrictions. The crisis also played out among a variety of local Chinese populations here in Halifax. I paid close attention to both the long-standing overseas Chinese community and the community of more recent expatriate Chinese citizens. As the virus spread throughout Hubei province and other areas of China, preexisting tensions and conflicts among those who identify with China as a broad ethnonational formation were brought to the fore.

The nature of Chineseness has always exceeded the geographical limits of China proper.[3] To be Chinese has little to do with legal citizenship and more to do with a sense of cultural and civilizational affinity. It is linked to the everyday practices of language, ethnicity, food, kinship and ritual, and therefore encompasses the country of China itself; peripheral nations that share these practices, such as Taiwan and Singapore; and the vast

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and enduring networks of Chinese who have migrated overseas and still think of themselves as members of this greater whole. At the same time, this sense of a common culture and tradition has been exploited by the Chinese state for economic and political purposes and to smooth over the very real heterogeneity of its population. This leads scholars such as Kevin Carrico to label the Chinese nation a "fantasy-driven affective identificatory system," meaning that it actively cultivates an imagined collective identity for its citizens.[4] Such identificatory systems, Carrico argues, work best when they are perceived to be under threat of dissolution.

COVID-19 is just such an existential threat, and for many — both insiders and outsiders — it appeared to be one that could rip the Chinese nation apart. For instance, after the death of Li Wenliang, the doctor who first identified and brought attention to the new virus, many Chinese posted letters of anger to social media for the way he had been roughly silenced by government censors. Western media picked up on the discontent and reported stories of outrage and dissent, speculating that a popular uprising was imminent. Other stories noted the highly restrictive quarantine and containment policies that would curtail people's freedoms and, again, surely anger a restive population. On popular Chinese online message boards in Canada, many speculated about the "real" cause of Li's death, argued about his political stances toward Hong Kong and the Communist Party, and criticized him for leaking news of the virus to his friends and family before going public. The argument over whether Li was a hero or a traitor was, by proxy, a debate about the legitimacy of the Chinese state.

Writing of a cholera epidemic in Venezuela in the 1990s, anthropologists Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs argue that it "reshaped categories of citizenship and how social and political exclusion affected people's lives."[5] In Halifax, the COVID-19 crisis, not yet at its peak at the time of this writing, has exacerbated preexisting tensions within the local Chinese community. The political crisis in Hong Kong is instructive here. As the crisis raged throughout the summer and fall of 2019 as a result of proposed legislation that would have allowed criminal extradition to the mainland, it was largely experienced in Halifax through the differences between the expatriate and overseas Chinese communities. Although not mutually exclusive, the overseas Chinese are largely the product of early migrations from Taiwan and southern China, while expatriates are more recent professional or educational migrants. Overseas Chinese are therefore more likely to identify with Cantonese rather than Mandarin, although many can converse in both languages; are well integrated with the host community; and operate an array of businesses and services like restaurants and stores that cater to the Chinese community in general. Expatriates, in contrast, have more extensive social and business ties to mainland China, speak standard Mandarin and often plan to return home in the future. In response to the Hong Kong protests, some Chinese students in Halifax distributed stickers with the slogan "One China" for businesses to post, signaling support for the Chinese state and its narrative of unity. Overseas business owners felt pressure to align themselves with the political integration of Hong Kong lest they risk losing a significant portion of their business.

Those tensions set the stage for how varying Chinese groups in Halifax responded to the COVID-19 crisis in China. The early stages of the epidemic raised several issues for the overseas Chinese in Halifax. One issue was to forestall the identification of the illness with China (the so-called Wuhan flu) and the potential racism and shunning of Canadian Chinese businesses that this would entail. Local and social media were recruited into this campaign, advocating for the public to remember their status as local businesses rather than transnational ones. Another concern was to provide material and financial support for the people suffering "back home." Overseas Chinese businesses and associations were critical to organizing charitable collections and delivery of supplies and funds to affected areas in China.

Expatriate Chinese, drawing on direct experiences of friends and family back home, were generally more concerned by the potential for the virus to spread. Online posts at the time drew attention to national policies in Canada that were presumed to be overly lax: Why was Canada proposing to repatriate its citizens from Wuhan if that brought risk of broadening the infection here? Why were travellers from China only being asked to self-quarantine rather than being sequestered somewhere secure? When one user posted on a message board that she had just returned to Canada from Wuhan and was eager for her children to get back to school, others responded demanding to know what school her children were in so that they could alert the authorities. Rumours circulated of travellers from China evading growing national travel bans by transiting through several countries before landing in Canada. And many posts speculated about which local individuals, particularly restaurant owners, might have returned to China during the New Year festivities.

The Chinese New Year, which fell on the last weekend of January in 2020, was a particular point of contention. Banquets, cultural performances, public celebrations and parades have long been promoted by the overseas Chinese community as an expression of solidarity and community strength. Online, however, most Chinese expatriates were shocked that the events were not cancelled. "Everything should be suspended!" wrote one. Another posted pictures from the Vancouver Lunar New Year parade with the simple comment, "The organizers did not think this out." After I was invited to a Chinese New Year gala to be held in my city, many Chinese acquaintances advised me not to attend, saying that the risk from attendees recently returned from the Mainland was too great. One joked that the New Year gala would just be Canadians eating fake Chinese food.[6]

The COVID-19 crisis, therefore, has sundered the ideal of Greater China as an ethnopolitical unity. Just as the virus has deconstituted the bodies of its victims, Canada's Chinese communities have been exposed as similarly fragmented. Questions such as what constitutes China and Chinese are deeply tied to social and political actions in response to the virus. The question of what responsibilities individuals have to "China" — whether that be local Chinese restaurants, suffering citizens in Wuhan or people fleeing the disaster by returning home — has promoted a range of responses and disagreements that can be largely understood through the lens of

identity, whether as an overseas Chinese or a sojourning Mainlander temporarily abroad.

But as the virus in China has slowly been brought under control — with new cases largely limited to travel from abroad at the time of writing — nationalist narratives that reincorporate Chinese as an ethnonational group have begun to circulate, often borrowing from media resources within China itself. These tend to emphasize the Chinese government's exceptional ability to marshal human, medical and technological resources in controlling the epidemic. Time-lapse video of a temporary hospital being constructed in Wuhan in one week was widely circulated. After drones were deployed to enforce quarantines and requirements such as wearing face masks outside, videos of these flights featuring humorous commentary by their operators ("Auntie, Auntie, what are you doing out? Go back inside!") were also widely shared and commented upon online. Local networks of Chinese have been validated and reaffirmed as supplies now arriving from China, such as face masks and sanitizer, are distributed through personal and online networks. Whatever their form, these actions and practices offer a reconstitution of the Chinese nation, as people assert their commonality, their membership in a privileged group of like-minded individuals all responding in the same appropriate manner to a crisis.

In these narratives, China and the Chinese are constituted by their collective ingenuity, discipline and strength in response to disaster. As one commenter wrote online, "I hope that all countries can appreciate how Chinese gave their lives and quickly put an end to the epidemic." Such nationalist narratives implicitly position themselves against another group, in this case the Canadians who have not responded to the crisis in the same manner. Canadians, it is often noted, still go jogging or play outside, do not wear masks and do not take care in public; they have not recognized the sacrifice made by China and learned to follow its example. One post, uploaded to a local Chinese message board on Feb. 8 by a user called Guiquan, made these differences explicit:

> Well there goes the Canadian Prime Minister personally into battle, so sweet and naïve. He's opening the country's doors, not respecting the sacrifices of China's frontline medical personnel, not following America's prudent disease-prevention response to immigration. Maybe Canada will be fortunate and can escape this disaster. Even if countless innocent lives are lost, and that's likely, Canadians will still act stoically, like paragons of silent tolerance, and still indulgently trust their government's actions. But in reality this world is already interconnected, from the economy, to politics, natural resources, manufacturing, hygiene and war. Canada really doesn't need to go on being naïve.

Gone are ambivalences about identity or the role of the state. Successful containment of the virus serves at the same time to restructure the imagined bonds of ethnonationalism. It sets apart those who have suffered and sacrificed against others who have not learned from them.

At this stage it is too early to predict how long the pandemic will play out, how many will become ill, how many will die. At some point, however, our period of social isolation will end and the relations we have with one another will be reconstituted, though per-

haps in a new form. Nations too will experience the virus as an existential threat as the crisis exposes for citizens gaps and inequalities over vulnerability, access to health care, financial security, and so forth. Narratives of common suffering, cooperation and togetherness will be the glue that slowly puts the nation back together afterward. In the case of China, despite the callous early actions of officials who sought to ignore the virus in the name of stability, the state will likely emerge from this crisis with more legitimacy and loyalty than before as people affirm their common identity, their sense of Chineseness.

Notes

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

2. Translations from Chinese were checked by a native speaker, but are otherwise my own.

3. Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Pres, 1999).

4. Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 152.

5. Charles L. Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs, *Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling during a Medical Nightmare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 58.

6. One possible reason for this is the different emphases in the overseas and expatriate communities. For Chinese Canadians, the Chinese New Year offers an opportunity for community building and networking, while for expatriates it is still primarily a family-oriented event.

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