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Popular Nationalism: *Global Times* and the US-China Trade War

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Abstract

This article analyses the coverage of the current US-China trade war in the *Global Times*. Some scholars argue that official nationalism, which stress the unity of the Chinese people, is challenged by popular nationalism, which privileges the dominant Han ethnicity, and that official nationalism is forced to make concessions to popular nationalism. If this is true, then one would expect to find evidence in the coverage of international issues in a ‘popular’ official newspaper like *Global Times*. The newspaper’s coverage stresses negative features of the USA, but devotes considerable space to the damage that his policies are doing to ordinary Americans. It does not present China as the unique victim of US economic aggression. The coverage stresses broad international agreement for free trade, leaving the USA isolated in adopting protectionist policies. At least in this instance, state-led nationalism remains central and no concessions are made to popular sentiments.

This article examines coverage of the trade dispute between China and the USA in the Chinese-language edition of the ‘tabloid’ newspaper *Global Times* (in Chinese: 环球时报; pinyin: *Huanqiu Shibao*. Afterwards, *GT*), from its beginnings in early 2018 until the end of September in that year. This conflict, widely termed a ‘trade war,’ provides an opportunity to examine nationalism in the contemporary Chinese press. Since the chosen paper is a ‘central party organ,’ it can be taken to represent the official view of the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), albeit as expressed in popular form. It gives an insight into the nature of nationalism in contemporary China and the ways in which the government handles issues which have potentially explosive political consequences.

Nationalism has long been a significant factor in Chinese politics and there are differing opinions as to whether its contemporary form represents a genuinely popular assertion of identity *vis-à-vis* the outside world, or that it is essentially an artefact of CPC policy, resulting from a more or less conscious effort to consolidate regime legitimacy, given the atrophy of the official Marxist ideology in the face of the extensive marketization of the economy.

This paper therefore reviews how some versions ‘nationalism’ have been utilized in modern China. It examines the existing literature on nationalism in the Chinese media and situates the current study within that context. The methods employed are then explained and the main findings presented. In conclusion, the implications for theories of Chinese nationalism are discussed.

Nationalism in China

Nationalism in China has been an important factor in Chinese politics since at least the 19th Century, but it has changed its meaning over time (Liew and Smith, 2004; Harrison, 2001;

Chang, 2001). Consequently, there are debates between scholars as to how best to analyse its various manifestations (Carlson, 2009; Costa, 2014; Carlson and Costa, 2016). There is, indeed, an issue as to whether the term is appropriate in China. While the population is 92% Han, the state also contains 55 other officially-recognised minority nationalities and, in order to distinguish between the national identities of different groups and the uniform identity possessed by all citizens of the People's Republic, the government employs the term 'patriotism' to describe the sentiments evoked by the latter (Zhao, 1997:8; Guo, 2004:17-23).

Within this general framework, we can distinguish three phases of state nationalism in the PRC. From its establishment in 1949, the CPC leadership laid emphasis on what is often termed the 'victor narrative' of nationalism. Part of the CPC's claim to legitimacy was that it had achieved the central 'national' goals of ending the 'century of humiliation' by re-uniting the country and expelling the foreigners (Greis, 2004:42-53). In 1989 the CPC was able to retain physical control over the country, but faced an urgent need to find a new ideological basis for its rule, given that its claims to Marxism were increasingly unpersuasive. It turned to the propagation of a new form of nationalism, particularly through the teaching of 'patriotic' history (Zhao, 1998). As a CPC Central Committee document, cited by Wang, put it in 1994:

The objectives of conducting patriotic education campaigns are to boost the nation's spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride, consolidate and develop a patriotic united front to the broadest extent possible, and direct and rally the masses' patriotic passions to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Wang, 2008:790)

This new approach, the 'victim narrative', stressed the need to build a strong China in order finally to overcome 'national weaknesses' and end the continuing humiliation of China (Callahan, 2010).

This policy has been enormously successful in developing popular patriotism. Chinese respondents proved the most 'nationalistic' of any of the 36 countries and regions surveyed in an international study, leading the next most nationalistic country, the USA, by

five percentage points (Tang and Darr, 2012). However, while it broadened the basis of CPC support, this new nationalism has developed an independent existence that is not entirely under governmental control (Greis, 2004:121). There have been many popular publications, unofficial and semi-official, that contain much more aggressive versions of Chinese nationalism (Barmé, 1995; Callahan, 2012; Hughes, 2011; Carrico, 2017). This popular consciousness has found expression in a number of ‘mass incidents’ when the actions of foreigners were perceived to have injured China (Chen Weiss, 2008; Chen, 2013; Wallace and Chen, 2015; Greis, 2004:13-20; Cheng, 2011). The possibility that popular nationalist sentiments might exceed their function of securing support for the government has been exacerbated by online technologies (Schneider, 2018). Although there are strong government controls on online discussion and, organization, young people sometimes use these new affordances to express extreme nationalist opinions and organize unauthorised popular mobilizations (Tai, 2015; Xin, 2011; Gorman, 2017; Lei, 2011; Yang and Zheng, 2012).

Some observers suggest that official state nationalism has entered a new and more aggressive phase in response to popular nationalism (Hughes, 2011; Zhao, 2013). Since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, it is possible to discern attempts to re-establish the internationally-dominant role of the Central Kingdom (Zhao, 2015; Zhao, 2018). The alternative view is that the CPC retains a ‘pragmatic’ attitude towards nationalism, being prepared to tolerate expressions of popular nationalism when these serve its ends, but also trying to defuse such outbursts if they threaten social stability or international policy goals (Duan, 2017).

In this context, the role of the media in articulating nationalism is particularly important. In any contemporary society, the media are one of the major mechanisms through which an idea of ‘the nation’ is formed and through which the relationship between a state

and its international environment is articulated. In the Chinese case, given that the government retains tight control over the media and the internet, the construction of nationalism in newspapers can be assumed to express, more or less closely, the official view of nationalism held by the ruling elite.

On the other hand, much of the media relies mainly on advertising for its revenue. More commercially-oriented newspapers are obliged to give at least some consideration to the views of their readers. It is here, if anywhere, that we would expect to find the tensions between the state nationalism of the CPC and popular nationalism ‘from below’ (Wang and Wang, 2014). One study comparing coverage of the USA in *People’s Daily* with that in the more commercially-oriented *Beijing Evening News* found that the latter was more negative in tone, a finding that could be explained by the fact that ‘the *People’s Daily* should remain closer to the official line, while the *Beijing Evening News* should be closer to audience demands’ (Stockmann, 2011a:282). In a separate study of press coverage in the run-up to popular demonstrations against Japan in 2005, the same author found that the commercialized *Beijing Youth News* was more negative towards Japan than *People’s Daily* and quotes a Chinese journalist as saying that for such papers ‘Commercialization means that they respond more to the demands of the reader’ (Stockmann, 2010:279). Once the demonstrations began, however, the government decided that they were a problem and instructed the journalists to stop negative coverage. This limitation was effective on both the official titles and those with a commercial orientation: all toned down their coverage (Stockmann, 2011b:183-84).

It is against this background that we investigated the coverage of the current US-China ‘Trade War.’ We selected the trade war because it was clearly the largest international issue facing China in 2018. However, although the trade war is of central importance to China, there is no evidence that it is a ‘hot’ issue similar to the anti-Japanese riots and other popular mobilizations. While we would expect intervention in editorial policy by the

government on such an important issue, there is no reason to suppose that there has been any kind of ‘recall to order’ as was evident in coverage of the anti-Japanese events.

The newspaper we chose to study, *GT*, is a central-level party title, published as part of the same group as *People’s Daily*. It launched as the *Global News Digest Weekly* in 1993, and adopted its current name in 1997. In 2006 it launched as a daily and today publishes six issues a week (Zheng, 2013:59-61; Global Times, 2019). It publishes both a Chinese-language edition and, since 2009, an English-language edition, supplemented in 2013 by a dedicated American edition. In 2007 it launched an online version, *Global Web*. Social media accounts, on WeChat and Weibo, followed in 2012 (Wu, 2018:224). Like its parent, it follows the official line on all important issues, including those of foreign affairs, but enjoys somewhat more freedom (Luqiu, 2018:25).

It is generally regarded as an unusual official newspaper, aimed not at an audience of party cadres but at a broader ‘popular’ audience and its editorial line tends to ‘focus on sensational rather than serious news coverage’ (Hatef and Luqiu, 2017:562). This strategy has been very successful and the paper has built a substantial audience (Wang and Wang, 2014:224; Zheng, 2013:61). The most recent figure for its print circulation is for 2017 when, according to its website, it was 2 million (Global Times, 2019). Its WeChat account has also been very successful and was one of the “Top 6” news account in China at the end of 2017 (Wang, 2018).

This paper explores the degree to which claims of convergence between official state-led nationalism and popular cultural nationalism are born out in the reporting of a major foreign policy issue in a newspaper that aims to present official policies in popular form. In pursuit of a popular audience, *GT* ‘is famous for its nationalistic and conservative voices, which to some extent reflects an official embrace of nationalism’ (Duan, 2017:891). Because

of its sensationalism and role as a mouth-piece for the CPC, *GT* has been criticized by some Chinese scholars and members of the public as being “in the camp of nationalism” and its chief-editor, Hu Xijin, is extremely controversial in China due to his expression of “left wing” opinions on social media (Yu, 2013:135) . This study uses material exclusively from the Chinese-language edition, since other studies demonstrate that there are significant differences between it and the English edition, with the former being more ‘patriotic’ (Edney, 2014:149). If the claims of such a convergence are indeed correct, then we would expect to find evidence to support them in *GT*’s representation of the trade war.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of all the articles covering the trade war in *GT* from January 2018 until the end of September of the same year. We first identified all articles pertinent to this topic from hard copies of the newspaper and then located them in electronic form on the internet. In total, we identified 436 relevant texts of all kinds: news stories produced by *GT* staff and correspondents; editorial pieces; commentary; and translations of articles from the foreign media. We included all of these items because, in order to determine the character of the coverage, we needed not only to know what was reported but how it was interpreted.

All of the relevant material was uploaded into the analytic software Nvivo. We conducted a pilot analysis to identify relevant themes and then coded all of the articles accordingly. We first examined the titles and leads in order to gauge the basic orientation of the articles. We classified the titles on the basis of the evaluative content, according to nine categories: negative towards the USA; negative towards China; negative towards both the USA and China; negative towards other countries; positive towards the USA; positive toward

China; positive towards both the USA and China; positive towards other countries; neutral. With regard to the leads, we identified nine nodes: authorship; evaluation; geographical dimension; historical dimension; US connection; Chinese connection; reporting on political leaders; industry involved; source. Having collected these data and established the broad outlines of the coverage, we then conducted a detailed analysis of a sample of 40 whole articles in order to explore more fully how they articulated the identified elements.

Findings

As Figure 1 demonstrates, coverage began slowly but from March onwards, when the trade war proper began, there was substantial coverage. Overall, news items constituted 43.2 per cent of the total, editorial material constituted 18.5 per cent, commentary was 23.1 per cent, and translations 15.2 per cent: that is, more than half of the journalistic content of *GT* is interpretative. The 101 articles classified as commentary were overwhelmingly from non-governmental sources. Only 20 were from the Chinese government while the remainder were from commentators from outside the newspaper. The largest single group was commentary by scholars, 60 out of 63 of whom were Chinese nationals, as against 3 foreigners: one American, one British and one Indian. All the commentaries had by lines with the names and institutional affiliations of their authors. The Chinese contributors, who were all male, came from 21 institutions. Nearly half were from elite universities like Fudan (17 articles) Renmin University (8 articles). Some were from “think tanks” close to the government, with 5 articles from the Institute of Modern International Relations, 3 from the Institute of Diplomacy and 1 from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The media quoted were predominantly from mainland China or Hong Kong. The 66 translations of foreign media displayed much more diversity: there were 31 pieces from US media, including *The New*

York Times and *The Washington Post*, while there were 10 from the UK. The next most prominent contributor was the Czech Republic, with five articles. The commentaries in *GT* display a range of sources, but more than 80 per cent were of Chinese origin. Some are certainly very closely linked to the CPC. For example, Yang Guangbin is a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Committee of 13th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (a high official position) as well as the Dean of the School of International Relations in Renmin University. Some, like Wu Xinbo, Director of the Centre for American Studies at Fudan University, also work as consultants for the CPC. We do not know the political status of all of these commentators, but it is reasonable to assume that they are all more or less closely aligned with the official policies of the Chinese government.

[Figure 1 about here]

Moving to the substantive content, four major themes emerged from the coverage: a much greater stress upon the problems that the USA would encounter in the course of the trade war than emphasis upon the strengths of China; a stress upon the effects of the trade war upon ordinary people rather than upon the actions of state leaders; an attempt to articulate the conflict in terms of the USA against the rest of the world; and an effort to place contemporary events within an historical perspective upon previous trade wars.

Critiquing the USA rather than praising China

The majority of headlines, 74 per cent, sent a strong signal of their orientation by incorporating evaluative language. The most common evaluation was negativity towards the USA, which accounted for 186 articles, or 43 per cent of the total. Examples include 'America will certainly lose if it takes on the whole world in a trade war' (7 March), 'America is acting like an alien, it is selfish and ignores history' (28 March) and 'America is

very wrong and stupid to start a trade war' (25 July). A positive evaluation of China was less common, occurring in only 19 per cent of items. Examples included 'China is confident in its ability to fight a trade war from start to finish' (26 March), 'China has had a positive response from the whole world by standing against America' (8 April), and 'The trade war has enabled Beijing to make new friends' (17 September). 26 per cent of articles expressed a neutral evaluation, for example 'America and China are equal competitors in trade' (18 January). A very similar picture emerged from the leads, of which 40.6 per cent were negative towards the USA and 22.3 per cent contained positive evaluations of China.

The dominant tone of the entire corpus was highly critical of the USA as instigator of the conflict and there was a firm positive account of a China confident in its ability to survive, and even win, the struggle. There were no articles critical of China. While criticism of China, often by Donald Trump, was reported, it was always followed by China's response. The closest coverage got to questioning the likely outcome of the war was a recognition that both countries had considerable strengths. Representations of the US government focused on its role as the instigator and aggressor in this conflict. China, on the other hand, was always reluctant to fight, but prepared to fight hard if it was obliged to.

State leaders and common people

The negative coverage of the USA focussed on the US government's actions, and those of President Trump in particular. In common with the stress upon critiques of the USA rather than praise for China, Donald Trump is mentioned much more often than Xi Jinping. Of the 157 leads that mention either state leader, Trump is mentioned in 146 of them, as against only 11 for Xi Jinping.

Headlines mentioning Trump were negative. Examples include ‘Trump is Feuding with the Treasury in Criticizing China and Russia’ (18 April), ‘European and American Alliances Beat Trump Up’ (2 June), ‘Trump’s Win Theory is Derided as Naive’ (6 August) and ‘US Auto Giants Say No to Trump’ (11 September). By contrast, headlines mentioning Xi Jinping come in two forms: some, like ‘The World Looks Forward to Xi’s Bo’ao Speech’ (10 April), mention his name in the headline; others quote him without mentioning his name directly in the headline, for example ‘China: Opening Policy Has Nothing to Do with a Trade War between China and US’ (12 April). Unsurprisingly, all mentions of Xi are entirely positive.

The critical theme with regard to Trump is continued in the body of the articles. In the story ‘Trump Criticized for Offering Farmers a 12 Billion Dollar Subsidy’ (26 July), the journalists used the four sentences of the lead to describe Trump’s action. It reports that the majority of American farmers reject it, and Republican Congressmen from farm states are highly critical of the policy. It quotes Ben Sasse, a Senator from Nebraska, to the effect that ‘The trade war that Trump started cut off farmers’ feet. Now he plans to spend 12 billion US dollars on gold walking sticks for them.’ The article goes on to cite Geng Shuang, the spokesman of Chinese Foreign Ministry, who stressed that there can be no winner in a trade war. If the United States is determined to start a war then will only hurt its own people.

By contrast, there is a very strong, detailed, and sympathetic, emphasis on the negative consequences of the trade war for ordinary people. More than 30 per cent of articles represented the trade war and its effects on the American and Chinese people. Of these 95 out of a total of 144 dealt with US people. The articles develop three major themes in discussing the reaction of American people: they don’t want a trade war; they are worried about a trade war; and they will suffer in a trade war. A long list of the sectors of the US economy that are likely to suffer, from medicine to shipping, is covered. Particular attention is given to US farmers. Among those mentioned in articles were pig breeders from Iowa, soya bean farmers

from Nebraska, apple farmers from Washington State and a wine producer from California. One article from 3 April, titled ‘American soya bean farmer attempts to influence Trump to stop war with China through advertising’, concentrated on soya bean farmers as representative of ordinary Americans. The article reports the lobbying efforts of the farmers, leading with ‘When the trade war became increasingly serious, anxious American soya bean farmers purchased advertising time on the very TV channel Donald Trump watches frequently in order to persuade him to stop.’ The article describes the advertisement, aired in prime time, with its stress upon a ‘representative’ farmer, who says:

Today I farm 5000 acres of land. Most of it is planted to corn and soya bean. I support the Trump government, but I am extremely worried about current policies on trade and tariffs. China is our largest soya bean customer [and a trade war] makes us very vulnerable. My farm, and those of many farmers like me, will become the first victims of the trade war.

The article contains an interview with the Chairman of the US Soya Bean Exporters Association, confirming that this farmer’s concerns are very likely to be born out in practice. According to him ‘America should care about the losses hundreds of thousands of farmers are likely to experience if we face retaliation from our largest customer.’

In a similar vein, the paper gave a whole page to a composite report from five journalists discussing how ‘The fire of the trade war has grilled American farmers’ (9 April). The article paints an idyllic picture of life on an apple farm near Seattle and stresses the importance of the Chinese market to this enviable prosperity: The director of international marketing in the Washington Apple Commission is quoted as saying ‘the Chinese have saved our local Red Delicious apples.’ According to Zhang Zhibin, sales manager of the Auvil Fruit Company of Washington State, the price of apples would fall by half if the farmers lost the Chinese market as a result of Trump’s trade war. The page also contains a piece locating agriculture in the context of American history and culture, and showing how agricultural exports have played an important role in US international policies. The last section of the

page details farmers' opposition to Trump's policies and their attempt to recruit political support to end the dispute, recounting how their main weapon is not campaign contributions but the threat to withhold their votes from candidates who support the trade war. It quotes Chuck Grassley, the US senator from Iowa, saying 'According to history, countries that want revenge on America often target agriculture. Almost all states have agriculture projects, so agricultural difficulties will hit 100 Senators in Congress'. Senate candidate Kevin Cramer, running in North Dakota, wrote on Twitter that he had contacted the Secretary of Agriculture to urge him to act quickly in order to protect farmers' interest. Overall, the page gives a comprehensive picture of agriculture, its place in the economy and society of the US, and how the trade war will damage the industry and the individuals who work in it. It shows how the war is pushing a group normally sympathetic to Trump into organized opposition designed to save their livelihoods. Within this big picture, however, there is a very strong emphasis upon the experience of individual Americans and the ways that the trade war is threatening their lives.

Ordinary Chinese people, by contrast, are mostly represented as not being directly threatened by the conflict. One example concerns a group of commercial artists in Dafen Oil Painting Village in Shenzhen, who earn their living exporting oil paintings. Titled 'Artists in "Oil Painting Village" are dealing with the coming trade war very calmly' (19 July), the article shows how they are shifting their production to the burgeoning domestic market in response to declining demand in the USA and Europe. Another article, titled 'The Trade War and Braised Pig's Feet' (3 August) makes another unlikely link with the trade war. Vendors of a cooked pigs' feet delicacy are interviewed to explain why they are not concerned about the impact of the trade war on their business. One is quoted as giving a nationalist spin even to this small part of the Chinese economy: 'I believe that local pigs' feet are more delicious and healthier than frozen pigs' feet imported from abroad.'

A more aggressive note, linking the trade war to Chinese history, is the story ‘Trade war: China looks to the future’ (8 August). An 84-year-old retired history teacher, Ye Sufang, is quoted as angrily responding to the trade war: ‘It looks like the foreigners are coming to bully us again, but this time we are different. Our country is stronger, our leader is determined, and China is not going to be held back.’ The story ends with the comment that ‘according to her, in the view of ordinary people, this time China is strong enough to fight the Westerners.’

Very interestingly, while the stories illustrating the plight of ordinary Americans are sourced mostly from *GT* journalists, all of the above three stories about the calm determination of the Chinese people are translations of articles that first appeared outside mainland China: *The South China Morning Post*, *The Straits Times*, and *The New York Times* respectively.

The USA versus the world

Despite the fact that the trade war is a dispute between the USA and China, *GT* frequently broadens the meaning of the conflict, stressing that this is not a bilateral struggle but involves the whole world. The USA and China are the most frequently mentioned countries but the other countries and entities are spread around the globe: the EU, Latin America, Japan, Korea, India, Thailand, Canada and Vietnam are all mentioned. There is a constant tendency to demonstrate that there are trading difficulties not only between the USA and China but between the USA and many other countries. For example, when Asian stock markets fell in June, *GT* published an article whose lead called Trump a ‘Global Public Enemy’ (19 June). In support of this view the article cited sources from 12 countries and areas talking about the impact of his policies on their lives.

Once again the chosen subjects tended to be ‘ordinary people’ rather than bankers or officials. For example, a 56-year-old woman from British Columbia in Canada, itself then involved in a conflict with the USA over the North American Free Trade Area, was interviewed about the current situation while doing her shopping. She was boycotting US products – everything from Whirlpool washing machines to American-grown strawberries. She told the reporter ‘I feel unhappy about what is happening right now, and the only way in which I can deal with it is to let my money do the talking.’ The same article gave another example from India, where people criticized America’s policies on tariffs. Some internet users even saw this as economic colonization, arguing that Indian people should boycott American products. Overall, *GT* pictures the trade war not as a conflict between China and the US but as a war between USA and the world. In this war, Trump and America are the enemy while China is on the same side as the other countries affected.

The other major consequence of broadening the issue to conflicts initiated around the globe by the Trump administration is that China can be presented not as a disturber of the status quo but its most determined defender, indeed as one acting not only in the interest of the Chinese and American people but even of US bankers. An article titled ‘Wall Street does not want trade war’ (4 April) exculpates China from any blame by quoting a Russian expert to the effect that ‘the trade war was not started by China but by Sinophobia.’ An identical point is made in an article on Trump softening his negotiating position (9 April) in which the Prime Minister of Norway is cited as saying ‘China, a country trying to build Communism, has become the major defender of free trade, while America has become the major threat to free trade.’

The lessons of history

This defence of free trade also has an historical dimension. An article titled ‘China Fights Back to Beat Washington’ (7 July) explained to its readers that Herbert Hoover’s signing of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930 managed, by imposing a wide range of duties on imported items, to provoke a trade war that exacerbated the Depression in the USA and, ultimately, contributed to the outbreak of World War II.

The paper also devoted attention to more recent trade disputes, particularly those between the USA and Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. An article titled ‘The lessons and experiences of the trade war between Japan and America’ (26 March) reviewed the consequences of the US’s use of Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act. In 1989, the Office of the US Trade Representative launched ‘Super 301’ against Japan because it judged that Japan had a closed market for computers, satellites, and forest products, and was thus an ‘unfair trader.’ That move pushed Japan to open its domestic market to the outside world. Again in 1994, the US imposed punitive tariffs on Japanese products entering American markets, again forcing Japan to make major concessions. These concessions led to serious economic problems in Japan and to Japanese companies investing directly in the USA to avoid tariffs. The lesson that the paper draws from the Japanese experience is that making concessions does not solve the problem of trade disputes.

Another article, ‘Why Trump does not excuse Japan from tariffs on steel and aluminium’ (22 May), makes a similar point. It analyses the ongoing negotiations between Japan and the USA and notes that, despite Abe’s efforts to build a strong relationship with the USA, Japan experienced what the article calls ‘humiliation’ and did not even win the same concessions that Trump was willing to extend to the EU. Japan is represented as dependent upon the USA, rather than as a partner, powerless to defend its own interests. The article also offers an explanation for this impotence in Donald Trump’s experiences with Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, when he decided that ‘Japan is systematically draining American blood.’

The article quotes a US magazine to the effect that ‘Trump never changed his view of Japan and today he holds the same view of China.’

Discussion and conclusions

The coverage of the trade war in *GT* is, entirely predictably, ‘nationalist’ in tone. The perspective underlying the editorial approach is unquestionably ‘Chinese,’ even when it is not primarily the open voice of the Chinese government, and there are selected voices, domestic and foreign, present. The perspective seeks to place the blame for the negative consequences of tariffs firmly upon the USA as aggressor and represents China as an entirely innocent victim. It follows a well-trodden propaganda path in concentrating its coverage on the demonstrable shortcomings, errors, and arrogance of its opponent. It devotes the majority of space to interpretative material rather than straight reporting and these items are strongly signalled as evaluative in both headlines and leads. In order effectively to make its overall points, the paper relies extensively on views expressed by non-nationals, translating many articles from foreign newspapers, mostly from the USA. The critical views expressed in these articles may be endorsed by *GT*, but they are published precisely because they are written by foreign journalists and cannot possibly be dismissed as official Chinese propaganda. The things they say, it is assumed, will be more persuasive partly because they come from independent sources.

The material also displays a characteristic reporting style frequently considered to be characteristic of ‘tabloid’ newspapers. While it addresses important economic, political, and indeed historical, issues, it attempts to do so as far as possible through the experience and voices of ‘ordinary’ people who embody the human consequences of the trade war. The ordinary US individuals in these stories are portrayed as fearing the consequences of the trade

war and attempting to change government policy. The blame for the trade war is placed upon the US government, and Donald Trump in particular. It is definitely not placed upon US citizens, who are victims of his misguided policies.

Chinese people are also portrayed using the same techniques, and in general they are represented as sanguine about the likely effect of the trade war. The major exception, Ye Sufang, does link to the history of western plundering of China. Her views reflect quite closely part of the ‘victim narrative’ that was heavily promoted in the 1990s, but she also includes an endorsement of a confident contemporary, China, which is well able to defend itself against imperialist aggression. She articulates, in moderate terms, the state nationalism of the Xi era, in which economic growth has given China the wherewithal to transcend its past as victim and play an independent role in world affairs. It is important to note, however, that the article in which she expresses these sentiments is a translation from *The New York Times*, not an original piece of reporting by *GT*. While the very fact of its translation is an endorsement of the politics of the article, it is not a direct product of Chinese reporting.

In two important respects, the material downplays the specifically ‘Chinese’ aspects of the trade war. Geographically, it emphasises the global nature of Trump’s attack on free trade, of which the conflict with China is only one part. China is presented as the champion of the free (trade) world against the USA. The second is the historical dimension, drawing the lessons from previous trade wars. Presenting the US as the instigator, both in the 1930s and in more recent confrontations with Japan, strengthens the case that there is nothing specific to contemporary China that provokes conflict. True, it proved impossible not to mention the ‘humiliation’ of Abe, but beyond that it is argued that even though he is a US puppet, he can expect little sympathy, understanding, or support from Trump.

It is hard to read anything but state-led nationalism into any of this. The issue is presented as one involving the defence of national interests against unprovoked aggression by a foreign government. Neither the aggression nor the response are grounded upon any notion of ethnic animosity between the US and China. On the contrary, the voices of the American people, even Trump supporters, are recorded as concerned with the threats to their livelihoods resulting from the conflict. Unlike the Chinese government, it is implied, Trump is not acting in the best interests of his own people. True, this state-led nationalism is more confident than it was in the days of economic weakness, but it still seeks to find friends and allies amongst those who are also suffering from US economic aggression. There is little or no trace of the kind of popular, ethnic, nationalism that some writers have detected creeping into official discourses in China. Perhaps the sentiments of Ye Sufeng, or the gloating over Japan's discomfiture, might be stretched to act as indicators of such a mood, but they are marginal to the overall tenor of the material.

The material we have analysed here concerns an issue of central importance to China's future and it was presented in a central party organ. *GT* is an official newspaper, but it is a *popular* official newspaper. Addressing not the cadre of the PCP but ordinary Chinese citizen, and addressing them using journalistic techniques designed to attract a wide audience, it shows no sign of accommodating to a definition of nationalism other than state-led patriotism. It is always foolish to compare the content of Chinese newspapers with those of western countries, which operate in very different economic and political circumstances, but in this case an irresistible, if unscientific, comparison presents itself. One cannot help but contrast the pragmatic nationalism of *GT* with the xenophobic, indeed often downright racist, populist nationalism that one finds in some newspapers published in developed bourgeois democracies. Organ of the rulers of an authoritarian state though it undoubtedly is, *GT* is outdone in its nationalism by too many examples of the "free press."

Note:

The fieldwork for this study took place in 2018 and the article itself was completed in early 2019. At that point, it appeared that a negotiated settlement to the trade war was imminent, but since then the situation has escalated and new issues have entered the frame. We have not been able to conduct a full study of *Global Times*' reporting of the latest phase of the trade war, and we are therefore not in a position to offer any firm conclusions as to the character and tone of recent coverage. A necessarily brief survey of material published over the last few months suggests, however, that whilst the paper has continued with many of the same themes as previously, important new elements have been introduced. *Global Times* increasingly expresses the direct views of the Chinese government and has recalled the history of the Korean War (1950-53) as an example of when the united Chinese people were able to prevent a US victory. Notable new themes include a critique of the US State Department Director of Policy Kiron Skinner's formulation of the conflict as an instance of a "clash of civilizations," and detailed reporting of the US government's attack upon the leading Chinese telecommunications company Huawei. Experience from the international press suggests that a fuller study would reveal a more assertive and nationalist tone has emerged as the conflict has intensified, although whether such a shift would entail that the official discourse will adopt elements of popular nationalism remains a matter of speculation.

Wenna Zeng and Colin Sparks, Shenzhen, 28 June 2019

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Figure 1: Number of articles in *Global Times* relevant to the trade war

