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Understanding China’s “Angry Youth”

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Two things that China Beat has been tracking since we began are Chinese nationalism and youth attitudes in the PRC today (those interested in these issues might check out Alec Ash’s recent posting that addresses youth nationalism in regard to the 5/8 anniversary).

It’s no surprise, then, that we were interested in learning more about an event at the Brookings Institution that brought these topics together (Evan Osnos mentioned his participation at his blog).

So we turned to Teresa Wright, one of the people who shared the stage with Osnos at the panel, to fill us in on the discussion that took place. She is a professor of political science based just up the road from UCI at Cal State Long Beach, and the author of The Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Activism in China and Taiwan, a book of special relevance just now, since it includes an analysis of the Beijing demonstrations and massacre of 1989, as well as a close look at Taipei unrest of the early 1990s. Here’s her take on the roundtable:

By Teresa Wright

Two weeks ago, an event at the Brookings Institution explored the proclivities of China’s post-1980 (bashi hou) generation of young people—a group that often is characterized as “angry/indignant” (fennu) and anti-foreign.

Just how angry are China’s young people, and toward whom or what is their anger directed? What do their attitudes tell us about China’s political trajectory, and how should the citizens and governments of other countries respond?

The overall message of the event was that Western anxieties about China’s so-called “angry youth” (fenqing) are overblown. For behind superficial images, such as those of young Chinese aggressively defending the CCP’s Tibet policy in the spring of 2008, lie complex configurations of attitudes and values that defy simplistic characterization.

As emphasized by Kai-Fu Lee, president of Google Greater China, the apparent “anger” of Chinese youth can just as accurately be viewed as “energy” or “confidence.” Further, as noted by panelists Stan Rosen, Xu Wu, Evan Osnos, and myself, along with displaying great love of country (aiguo, or patriotism) and sometimes nationalism (minzu zhu yi), young people in China are vocal advocates of “liberal” values such as freedom of expression and outspoken critics of corruption within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They are not knee-jerk apologists for the CCP.

Yet at the same time, they feel unjustly slighted by the international community. As Xu Wu put it, Chinese youths are like a “double-edged sword with no handle”—a force that can cut in a number of directions, and that is not controlled by any single individual, organization, or interest. In addition, panelists emphasized that many of the most vocal fenqing in China today—such as Tang Jie, producer of the widely-viewed video, “2008 China Stand Up”—are extremely well-educated and intelligent. Their anger and indignation cannot be dismissed as the product of ignorance or brain-washing.

In terms of how foreigners should respond to China’s youth, the lesson is something that some Americans (and other Westerners) may not want to hear: rather than treating China’s young people as misguided individuals in need of enlightenment, we need to accept them on their own terms, and with respect. Many Chinese today—both young and old—have a sense of pride, a feeling that China is finally “getting it right.”

What is emerging in China—culturally, socially, economically, and politically—looks different from the conception of “modernity” that many Westerners hold dear. Rather than criticizing China, its
government, and its people for failing to aspire to this Western model of modernity, we need
acknowledge their successes, and accept that their developmental goals and destination may be
different from our own.

When I articulated these final thoughts during the question and answer session at the event, I wasn’t
sure how the audience would respond. As soon as the event concluded, two young Chinese students
studying in the U.S. approached me. They emphasized over and over again how grateful they were for
my comments, as if it was the first time that they had heard a Western “pundit” voice such thoughts.
Perhaps by starting from an attitude of respect rather than condescension, we may be able to defuse
the angry indignation of China’s fenqing, and open the door to more fruitful dialogue.

Tags: Chinese nationalism, fenqing