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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

China's Loyal Youth

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MANY sympathetic Westerners view Chinese society along the lines of what they saw in the waning days of the Soviet Union: a repressive government backed by old hard-liners losing its grip to a new generation of well-educated, liberal-leaning sophisticates. As pleasant as this outlook may be, it's naïve. Educated young Chinese, far from being embarrassed or upset by their government's human-rights record, rank among the most patriotic, establishment-supporting people you'll meet.

As is clear to anyone who lives here, most young ethnic Chinese strongly support their government's suppression of the recent Tibetan uprising. One Chinese friend who has a degree from a European university described the conflict to me as "a clash between the commercial world and an old aboriginal society." She even praised her government for treating Tibetans better than New World settlers treated Native Americans.

It's a rare person in China who considers the desires of the Tibetans themselves. "Young Chinese have no sympathy for Tibet," a Beijing human-rights lawyer named Teng Biao told me. Mr. Teng — a Han Chinese who has offered to defend Tibetan monks caught up in police dragnets — feels very alone these days. Most people in their 20s, he says, "believe the Dalai Lama is trying to split China."

Educated young people are usually the best positioned in society to bridge cultures, so it's important to examine the thinking of those in China. The most striking thing is that, almost without exception, they feel rightfully proud of their country's accomplishments in the three decades since economic reforms began. And their pride and patriotism often find expression in an unquestioning support of their government, especially regarding Tibet.

The most obvious explanation for this is the education system, which can accurately be described as indoctrination. Textbooks dwell on China's humiliations at the hands of foreign powers in the 19th century as if they took place yesterday, yet skim over the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s as if it were ancient history. Students learn the neat calculation that Chairman Mao's tyranny was "30 percent wrong," then the subject is declared closed. The uprising in Tibet in the late 1950s, and the invasion that quashed it, are discussed just long enough to lay blame on the "Dalai clique," a pejorative reference to the circle of advisers around Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

Then there's life experience — or the lack of it — that might otherwise help young Chinese to gain a perspective outside the government's viewpoint. Young urban Chinese study hard and that's pretty much it. Volunteer work, sports, church groups, debate teams, musical skills and other extracurricular activities don't factor into college admission, so few participate. And the government's control of society means there aren't many non-state-run groups to join anyway. Even the most basic American introduction to real life — the summer job — rarely exists for urban students in China.

Recent Chinese college graduates are an optimistic group. And why not? The economy has grown at a double-digit rate for as long as they can remember. Those who speak English are guaranteed good jobs. Their families own homes. They'll soon own one themselves, and probably a car too. A cellphone, an iPod, holidays — no problem. Small wonder the Pew Research Center in Washington described the Chinese in 2005 as "world leaders in optimism."

As for political repression, few young Chinese experience it. Most are too young to remember the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 and probably nobody has told them stories. China doesn't feel like a police state, and the people young Chinese read about who do suffer injustices tend to be poor — those who lost homes to government-linked property developers without

fair compensation or whose crops failed when state-supported factories polluted their fields.

Educated young Chinese are therefore the biggest beneficiaries of policies that have brought China more peace and prosperity than at any time in the past thousand years. They can't imagine why Tibetans would turn up their noses at rising incomes and the promise of a more prosperous future. The loss of a homeland just doesn't compute as a valid concern.

Of course, the nationalism of young Chinese may soften over time. As college graduates enter the work force and experience their country's corruption and inefficiency, they often grow more critical. It is received wisdom in China that people in their 40s are the most willing to challenge their government, and the Tibet crisis bears out that observation. Of the 29 ethnic-Chinese intellectuals who last month signed a widely publicized petition urging the government to show restraint in the crackdown, not one was under 30.

Barring major changes in China's education system or economy, Westerners are not going to find allies among the vast majority of Chinese on key issues like Tibet, Darfur and the environment for some time. If the debate over Tibet turns this summer's contests in Beijing into the Human Rights Games, as seems inevitable, Western ticket-holders expecting to find Chinese angry at their government will instead find Chinese angry at them.

Matthew Forney, a former Beijing bureau chief for Time, is writing a book about raising his family in China.

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