Preface

The purpose of this study on Chinese nationalism is to reveal an essential continuation between the culturalism of the imperial period and contemporary Chinese nationalism. Contrary to the popular notion that nationalism replaced Confucian culturalism in China, this study reveals that culturalism has permeated the notion of nationalism in China today. How this culturalism has determined Chinese nationalism in the context of sweeping changes like the collapse of the Soviet state, the introduction of post-Mao reforms in China, the Tiananmen movement and China’s growing integration with the world has been critically examined in this thesis. A broader identification of the Chinese state with culture and civilization, rather than merely with political ideology, provides us with a set of different definitions of nation, nationalism and nationalities as these concepts relate to China.

In fact, instead of trying to fit China’s understanding of nation, nationalities and nationalism into the Western perspective, this study has argued that the “theory of a civilizational state” best explains the Chinese experience. Chinese nationalism then, essentially follows the paradigm of cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism “imagines” the nation to have a distinctive civilization based on a unique history, culture and territory. Its primary concern is the regeneration of a nation as a distinctive cultural and moral entity. This concept of a civilizational state carried the notion that culturalism though different from nationalism, was not incompatible.

This thesis emphasizes that Chinese nationalism is the product of its own historical experiences of culturalism, imperialism and Marxism-Leninism. None of the factors alone explains the rise of nationalism in China today. Therefore, what exists in
China today is an amalgam of culturalism and nationalism that gives a completely new twist to the meanings of nation, nationalities and nationalism.

The study at the outset will focus on the prevailing Chinese domestic debates on the three terms- nation, nationalities and nationalism in opposition to the Western debates on these terms. By understanding the intricacies of the debate the study will attempt to move away from the Euro-centric definitions and thereby deal with Chinese experiences of the terms and concepts. This is treated in the chapter two of this thesis.

The third chapter seeks to explore how in post 1950 the definition and development of Chinese nationalism complicated the views on minorities, their rights to secession and their assimilation with the Chinese State. The chapter places the Chinese notion of human rights within the development of Chinese nationalism and discusses the way in which a specific understanding of human right impacted on the Tibetan’s demands for self-determination. The chapter finally establishes how Chinese nationalism changed as a consequence of its contest with Tibetan nationalism and the discourse on human rights and the manner in which this affected the PRC’s policies towards Tibet.

The fourth chapter analyzes how the Chinese State perceives the Uyghur movement in the light of its own definitions of nation and nationalism. The chapter argues that Uyghur ethnic identity was defined in its encounters with Chinese Han nationalism. However, due to the fragility of the Uyghur movement, it faced a severe challenge to its survival in the context of a unitary Han nationalist state ideology where minority identities are hard to sustain and increasingly submerged if not suppressed. At the same time, the persistence of the Uyghur problem in China challenges the notion of
Chinese nationalism today and portrays its weakness as an ideology meant to integrate the diverse nationalities into China.

The fifth chapter attempts to investigate the aspect of hybridity central to the identity of the Chinese diaspora. Diaspora with its typical characteristics of transnationalism and extra-territorialism not only challenges the idea of the territorially bound modern nation state grounded in sacrosanct concepts of state sovereignty but also reifies the notion of the nation state. In the context of diasporic identity the chapter looks at how the Chinese State defines its notion of nationalism. By understanding the Chinese State’s policies towards the diaspora and by exploring the diaspora’s notion of Chineseness, the chapter establishes the relation between the Chinese diaspora and nationalism in China.

In the concluding chapter, Chinese nationalism has been viewed as restorative yet pragmatic and cautious in nature. It is a blend of both state and popular nationalism. However, popular sentiments are never allowed to grow to the extent of jeopardizing the national interest of China. In fact, nationalism is employed as a tool in Chinese politics in order to strengthen the Party and reinforce the ideology of socialism in China. China propagates patriotic nationalism as it is a value-free concept and seeks to bind people to the cause of the survival and development of the nation. However, it remains to be seen how effective Chinese nationalism will be in the context of the challenge of sub nationalist forces. As of now China’s challenge remains to create a common national identity for both majority and minority populations in China.