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## POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Development of nationalism in China

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**Abstract:** Nationalism in China emerged through historical experiences of greatness and humiliation. Until the 19th century, the Chinese were proud of its civilization and considered themselves as the centre of the world. Humiliation in the wars with Britain and Japan created new feelings of nationalism in China. The nature of the nationalism changed according to variation in its relation with western countries. This paper analyzes four stages in the development of nationalism in China, i.e. socialist-oriented state control nationalism, liberal nationalism, Patriotic Nationalism and cyber-nationalism. It analyzes major features of each stage, and the causes lead to change from one stage to another. It examines top-down and bottom-up aspects in the development of nationalist feeling and concludes that even though the communist party has major role in creating a civic nationalism through its restriction on media and education system, the Chinese people show highly nationalist feeling even in abroad where they can access international media.

**Subjects:** Asian Studies; Chinese Studies

**Keywords:** China; Chinese foreign policy; communist party; cyber-nationalism; liberal-nationalism

### 1. Introduction

Nationalism has been defined by Anderson (1983) as feeling of belongingness into an imagined community. Chinese nationalism emerged from diverse ideological sources, including Chinese



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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Nationalism is a feeling of belongingness into a particular identity. This identity may be ethnic, religious, linguistic or something else. Some States, such as India, constitute multiple identities. In such States, sometime majority community dominates in the shaping nature of the States and sometime some others factors act as integrating force among people. This paper seeks to understand the development of nationalism in China. It analyzes various factors which contributed in the origin and development of the Chinese nationalism. These factors include domestic aspects such as economic, political and social changes within China after communist revolution and international aspects mainly variation in its relation with western States.

traditional Confucianism, Marxism and Western liberalism. It has been affected by internal and external actors. Wars, civil wars, relation with western countries, leaders and intellectuals have a role in the development of Chinese nationalism. Even China has a history of thousands of years, Chinese nationalism is a new phenomenon emerged by “Century of Humiliation”. Defeats in opium war and war with Japan awaken Chinese from long sleep or ignorance. Chinese civil war was a struggle between two ideas of nationalism because CPC promoted left-oriented state nationalism, and Kuomintang argued for Han-centric ethnic nationalism. So after civil war Chinese nationalism was more inclusive state nationalism rather than exclusive ethnic nationalism.

Nationalism after 1949 can be classified in broader sense into four stages or waves. First one was leader (Mao) centric state control nationalism (1949–1976). The second stage (1976–1989) was more pro-western liberal nationalism. It represented a thirst to “learn from the west”. The third stage starts from the Tiananmen Square incident and lasts until China was elected to host the Olympics. It was an anti-west pragmatic nationalism. In last stage of nationalism, internet became a tool for this generation to express their nationalist sentiments.

In the first part of my paper, I will summarize historical context of the origin of nationalism in China. Then I will describe the different stages of nationalism in post-revolutionary China and will explain the reasons for these changes and special characteristics of each stage. Then I will analyse the different aspects of Chinese nationalism by examining bottom-up and top-down aspects and important of ethnicity in Chinese nationalism.

## 2. Historical background

From mid-1800s, Chinese people suffered series of military confrontation with West and Japan. The following period of hundred years was a period of humiliation. Before these defeats, Chinese people considered themselves as the centre of universe and foreigners as barbarians. The lost in opium wars precipitated China’s economic and military decline. Before these difficult times, China had neither an official name nor real national flag nor did it exhibit any of the elements that normally symbolize a nation state (Jiang, 2012, p. 48). Liang Qichao wrote “nothing makes me more ashamed than the fact our nation has no name” Liang (1959, p. 35) and Hsu (1956, p. 69) observed that Chinese people had no conception of what a nation-state might be until their defeat in Sino-Japanese war (Ibid., p. 48). These events awakened them from “great dream of four thousand years.”

After opium war defeats, Chinese elites began to develop a “saving the Chinese” and of “rich nation and strong army” mindset among people (Lijun & Kia, 2010, p. 5). May 4th movement (1919) of students and the May 30th movement of working class were both cause and effect of this developing nationalism. The Japanese invasion of Qingdao and the Versailles peace conference that agreed to transfer of Qingdao to Japan caused an outpouring of nationalist feeling among educated people. Many slogans have arisen from May 4th movement like “Return our Qingdao!” “Boycott Japanese goods!” “Protect our countries soil!” and “China belongs to the Chinese!” Dr Sun Yat-Sen put forward national survival as the theme of Chinese nationalism. He formed a nationalist party (Kuomintang). The Japanese aggression during the 1930s and 1940s brought nationalist sentiment to the much larger proportion of the population rather than political elites.

There was ideological different before 1949 in the concept of nationalism among leaders. Liang Qichao criticized the idea of ethnically or racially defined national identity. He put forward idea of “great nationalism” that would encompass the several ethnic groups in China. Torbjorn Loden observed this notion of “Chinese nation” was later made use of by the communist movement (Suresh, 2002, p. 14). Sun Yat-Sen’s idea was based on ethnic identity. For him, race and state had the corresponding relationship in ancient China. China’s Marxist-Leninists have defined people by reference to social classes. Class entered nationalist discourse as a critical category and an alternative to citizen and race (Ibid., p. 15). Chinese civil war was a clash between two models of nationalism.

### 3. 1949–1979-MAO'S period

During the liberation war, CPC had constructed a feeling against imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and feudalism. These ideas help CPC to build a socialist-oriented state nationalism after the civil war. It tried to create a sense of nationhood among all citizens. It was a great achievement of CPC to create a multinational PRC even though the Han Chinese constitute approximately 93% of the population and remaining non-Han communities are divided, according to the official report, among 55 minority nationalities (Ibid., p. 15). State nationalism includes all PRC citizens irrespective of their nationalities. Mao has played a major role in uniting people. It was under Mao; China became a major world power, and many Chinese stopped feeling ashamed and humiliated at being Chinese. PRC's international conflict was another important factor which provoked nationalist sentiment like the war with US lead force in Korea in 1950–1951, Sino-Indian border war of 1962, Sino-Soviet border clash of sixties and Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

### 4. 1979–1989-liberal nationalism

The wave of nationalism that began with Deng's modernization policy of the 1970s lasted until government's crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 1989. The theme of this nationalism was to seek China's rise through "learning from the west". Following US President Nixon's visit to China, the relation between two countries was strengthened. During the 1980s the relation with Japan also was normalized. PRC replaced the Republic of China as a permanent member of U.N Security Council. Just like external condition domestic environment also was supportive of liberal nationalism. During the 1980s, the mainstream voice of Chinese government was reformists. They were facing a "crisis of faith" among people after Mao's period. The liberalist approach was also an attempt to avoid mistakes of Cultural Revolution under Mao's leadership.

The feature of this wave of nationalism was its pro-western attitude. Mobo Changfan Gao considered it as a repeat of May 4th movement of 1919. He says that "By the early 1980s, a great surge of re-introducing the West had started, bringing some liberalization of Western philosophy, political thought, and literature. It was virtually a re-start of the May Fourth Movement. Despite four decades of anti-traditional theory, practice and rhetoric under CPC rule, the Chinese literati considered the existing so-called socialism in China to be influenced too heavily by the Chinese feudalistic tradition so that a large dose of Westernization was still necessary. Hence, the remnants of the May Fourth Movement had to be picked up again and enlightenment gave precedence if China was to have any hope" (Gao, 2004, pp. 44–45).

During this period, many western classics were translated into the Chinese language. Chinese people saw a new horizon of liberty and freedom. Chinese intellectual also produced enormous publications focusing on Western politics and culture. The series of book "Marching towards the future series", edited by liberal scholar Jin Guantao, published 74 volumes within a period of 5 years from 1984 to 1988 (Lijun & Kia, 2010, p. 7). The American-led Western countries also displayed a great amount of goodwill to China. The Chinese media scheduled the programmes to introduce western society, politics, and economy to the Chinese audience. Both CNN and BBC became important channels to Chinese youth to understand about the democratic experience of West.

The new experience after a bitter period of Cultural Revolution and "crisis of faith in Chinese leadership" led the pro-western intellectuals to seek a glory China through a western model of democracy. During this period of 1980s, as Samuel Huntington said, the third wave of democratization was sweeping across the globe. The Tiananmen Square movement of 1989 was peak stage of this aspiration. The Chinese government also understood that the strong western democratic aspiration weakens the party and, therefore, the democracy might cause social chaos. As an end of this wave of nationalism, the Tiananmen Square movement cracked down by the government.

### 5. 1989–2001-patriotic nationalism

Tiananmen Square incident affected the relation between China and the West. A strong anti-western patriotic nationalism emerged in China. International sanction on China after this incident, Sino-Japanese disputes, China's unsuccessful bid for the 2000 Olympics, Various theories like "China

Threat” and “Clash of Civilizations”, Bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade and the collision of a Chinese F-8 fighter with an US Navy EP-3 spy plane near Hainan (Guo, 2004, p. xii). were the international reasons led to this patriotic nationalism.

As domestic factors, one of the most important structural change was changing the leadership of CPC. Reformers like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were replaced by conservative traditionalist leaders like Jiang Zemin. CPC recognized that the pro-western policy will weaken the party rather than strengthen it. Party published a collection of major leader’s speeches on patriotism to popularize an anti-western feeling. Yang Jiang (2012, p. 51) quotes Zheng to explain several factors motivated Chinese Government to promote Chinese nationalism including collapse of Soviet Union, Chinese re-evaluation of Western culture, and a society that was changing more quickly than prevailing ideology.

In September 1994, the CPC’s propaganda department issued an important document titled “The outline of the implementation of the education of the patriotism”. The 1991 March, General Secretary Jiang Zemin instructed the state Education Commission to initiate a nationwide program to improve education. An idea of socialist patriotism waved into existing curricular (Suresh, 2002, p. 21). Chinese history divided into different periods. Pre-modern history romanticized as “Five thousand years of Splendid Chinese history”. The period from Opium war to liberation (1840–1949) titled as “the humiliation of more than a century of invasion and the struggle to save the country from destruction”. This chapter stressed on evils of imperialism rather than feudalism. The chapter three on past liberation era, “The People Republic opens up for progress: Gigantic change in the Holy Fatherland for more than four decades”. According to Clausen the revised education program defined Chinese nationalist identity in terms of three constructs: Ancient civilization, anti-imperialist resistance, and great power status, (Ibid., p. 21).

Chinese intellectuals also started to criticize West and its influence on China particularly since the West wanted to impose stringent conditions on China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Jiang, 2012, p. 51). The book that represented this wave of nationalism, entitled as “China can say ‘NO’,” published in 1996. This book prophesized “anti-Americanism” among people. The authors of this book declared that “it is time for China to stand upright in world politics. One passage of book is “What forces can shake and destroy a great nation that dreads to build the Great Wall on top of mountains? There is none, and there could be none. After all, history has advanced to this moment, the moment that [the] Chinese cannot be humiliated or taken advantage of” (Suresh, 2002, p. 23). This book generated different kind of response from China and abroad. New York Times (4 September 1996) commented, “Anti-western nationalism sweeping China.” This book has a great role in strengthening nationalism in China. Another nationalist book “Unhappy China”, by Song Qiang (published in 1997), questioned the inflow of western culture. It referred on the materialism of his generation: “Cultural and Spiritual fast food has taken over” (p. 23) (Jiang, 2012, p. 51).

Chinese nationalists questioned western modes of democratization and theories of development. They believed the westernization is the cause of China’s national and cultural identity crisis. China’s modernization, they believed, should be separated from the westernization and the future development of China should rely on instead on “Chinesenization” (Ibid., p. 52).

During this period of 1990s, an anti-western new left, neo-nationalism emerged in China. China’s new nationalism was based on two conceptual understanding. One is post-colonialism, which enables the “New Left” to be more confident of China’s traditional past and recent past under Mao Zedong. This interpretation recognizes that the May Fourth movement in 1919 made many mistakes about China’s tradition and that the complete denial of the Mao era, including the Cultural Revolution, is invalid. The New Left argues that the success of the West should at least partly be attributed to the West’s aggressive and exploitative colonial and imperialist history, and that “Mr Democracy” and “Mr Science” are not the only source of Western power and wealth, as the May Fourth Movement argued or assumed. The other conceptual understanding is postmodernism, with which the New Left argues that the Western model of modernization is not the only model and that China should seek an alternative model (Gao, 2004, p. 44).

## 6. After 2001-cyber nationalism

A new wave of nationalism, which emerged in first years of 21st century, was mainly concentrated on Cyber Medias. YANG Lijun and LIM Chee Kia called it as the unhappiness of “Fen Qings”. Fen Qings refers to youths born after the 1980s who possess both a cynical and critical view of the world and express them freely on the internet (Lijun & Kia 2010, p. 13). The internet was the main tool of expression to this generation to express their nationalist sentiments. The people who born after the 1980s, known as Y generation, followed a consumerist culture. Ying Jiang described them as “the post-1980 generation in China is the first generation to grow up in a consumerist society and have the Internet, and many young people are spoiled at home because they are the only child. The current levels of reform and opening up have satisfied many of their curiosities about the world. Their everyday lives contain Western elements—Coca-Cola, Hollywood movies, iPods—and they appear to have little interest in participating in political changes. They form a generation for whom, since prosperity and personal freedom are achievable, democracy is not required” (Jiang, 2012, p. 54).

This generation was very proud of their nation. The rapid economic growth and rising status of China made them proud to be a Chinese. 2001 was an important year for Chinese people. In this year Beijing was elected to host the 2008 Olympics, Shanghai hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting, China successfully joined the WTO, and China’s national football team got a pass to the World Football Cup for the first time in China’s history. The China Economy Website called this first year of the twenty-first century the “Chinese year” and saw it as a very good sign for China in the new century. But the response of western countries wounded their feelings. In reality, many Western societies were not psychologically prepared to rationally accord China with that prestige. For more than a century, the Chinese had accepted this treatment because China was weak. Today, however, the Fen Qings feel it justifiable to demand more respect from the international community. When this respect is not given, the psychological gap between the expectation and reality stimulated nationalistic sentiments (Lijun & Kia, 2010, p. 14). There existed two psychological gaps among the Chinese, especially the youth. The first psychological gap is the imbalance between the Fen Qings’ expectation of China’s international status and the actual prestige accorded to China by the international community, especially the West. China’s economic growth had boosted the national pride of its people. The second psychological gap is related to the first but is different in several aspects. It is a psychological gap between the Fen Qings’ idealistic understanding of the international community and reality. To the average Chinese, the significance of hosting the Olympics is extraordinary. One of the main motives of hosting that event was to raise the international status of China. The Fen Qings mistakenly believed that the world would share their joy of fulfilling their Chinese dream. When massive anti-China protests broke out in many western societies, these anti-China voices became one of the most powerful sources of provocation.

The medium of expression of their nationalist feelings was social networks. They protested against the attitude of western though this new way. The 2008 anti-CNN campaign illustrates the latest Chinese nationalistic sentiment. The anti-CNN forum expressed high emotions after CNN’s coverage of Tibet and other Western coverage of the Olympic torch relay in 2008. These events enabled young Chinese people via MSN messenger to express both their love for China and their support for the Beijing Olympic Games.

## 7. Overseas Chinese

Nationalist feelings are not bounded within a territory. The overseas Chinese also expressed their nationalist feelings in this period. The Chinese Diaspora including students in the west was active in defending their country in academic and cyberspace. Their ability in English gave them more possibility to express their nationality feelings. The producer of the Youtube video, “Tibet WAS, IS, and ALWAYS WILL BE a part of China” (the hit rate reached a million in two days, and there were more than 10,000 comments) was a 22-year-old student studying in Canada. When the western media first produced inaccurate reports on Tibet, it was the overseas students who responded first on the internet.

## 8. Bottom-up and top-down approaches of Chinese nationalism

Some scholars argue that Chinese nationalism is driven from the bottom up and that the emergence of Chinese nationalism is the will of the people for the development of the nation.

Others believe that it is imposed from the top down by the state as an expression of the interests of the CPC. But it is difficult and exclusion of some realities to focus on only one of them. Because the development of Chinese nationalism was a result of an interaction between state and society and at same time the external forces also have a major role in creation of Chinese nationalism even though they might not intentionally act for this purpose like war and humiliation.

The Top-down approach is mainly followed by western scholars those define Chinese nationalism as an expression of the interests of the ruling elite, that is, the interest of the communist state in Chinese nationalism. But according to the “bottom up” view, Chinese nationalism is eternal and objective; it reflects the people’s attitudes rather than the government’s interests. In other words, Chinese nationalism is not simply party propaganda because Chinese citizens now play a central role in how nationalism is conceived and develops. The Chinese, like all peoples, “have deep-seated emotional attachments to their national identity”. According to this view, CPC is less influential in creating nationalism. The basis for their argument is that although most overseas Chinese have access to different information and, therefore, are free from Chinese state intervention, there is no evidence that liberalism, for example, is more popular than nationalism among them. In 2003 and 2004, the anthropologist Vanessa Fong conducted research among young Chinese adults studying in Australia, Ireland, the U.K. and the U.S. Her findings indicate that despite daily exposure to everyday life in the West and Western media perspectives, students expressed a nationalistic Chinese attitude when interviewed about the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (Jiang, 2012, p. 57).

But this nationalist feeling from bottom level cannot be seen as independent from the influence of communist party. Because the patriotic education, which provided by the state from primary level has a major role in creating this feeling even to overseas people. But there is a connection between state and party in China. So the love of the country is also becoming the love of party. For example the two bids to host the Olympics: If a bid were successful (as it was in 2001), the glory would rebound to the Party; if unsuccessful (as in 1993), foreigners could be blamed for disrespecting the Chinese nation—and this, too, would pull the Party closer to the people.

According to Ying Jiang, the young generation’s nationalistic sentiments are ultimately formed through “the channel of consumer culture”. Nationalization through consumerism now is the wrapping up of the nationalistic sentiments in cultural products that the young generation consume, from pop songs to online games (Ibid., p. 60).

## 9. Important of ethnicity

Before 1949, Kuomintang promoted ethnic nationalism and Han community represented as “Chinese”. Modernism and Social Darwinism had influenced this nationalistic view in the 1920s and 1930s and the Chinese nation was created by the cultural assimilation of ethnic groups in the western and central provinces into the “culturally advanced” Han state. As I mentioned earlier, Sun Yat-Sen in his Three Principles of the People articulates an idea of a Chinese nation in which ethnic identity was the defining element. For him, race and state had a corresponding relationship in ancient China. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, China has been developing a single state out of a single race (Suresh, 2002, p. 14). While Sun Yat-Sen recognized five peoples of China: The Han, Manchu(Man), Mongolia (Meng), Tibetan (Zang) and Hui (all Muslims), his ultimate goal was to assimilate all the nationalities and unify China into one race, the Chinese race (Bhattacharya, 2003, pp. 364–365). But this ethnic nationalism was narrow and exclusive. The non-han community would be alienated from this concept of nation. The communist party put forward class centric nationalism. Mao tried to include every sect of society irrespective of their ethnicity against common enemies: Imperialism and feudalism. After liberation war, Mao could promote an inclusive state nationalism. 7% minority communities also treated as equal citizens of the country. So now ethnicity has no major role in determining the Chinese nationalism.

## 10. Conclusion

Chinese nationalism has passed through different stages. The feeling of “Chineseness” was mainly by the effect of continued humiliation by outsiders before and after 1949. The defeats by Japan and Britain and policies of Western countries against China and communism have played a major role in the development of Chinese nationalism. Firstly this strong “Chineseness” feeling was only among educated students and intellectuals. It spread to workers mainly after May 30th movement. The communist party has an important role in popularizing the nationalism. It was not narrow ethnic nationalism, but it promoted state nationalism including every ethnic group. CPC have influence in keeping nationalist feeling among people through giving patriotic education. But it is difficult to say the “nationalism” is a government’s tool to hide its drawbacks. The overseas citizens are also keeping high feeling of nationalism even they have access to western thoughts and reports. They are now, especially after 2001, proud to be a “Chinese” because of the rapid economic progress and increasing accessibility and influences of China among the international community.

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