

# Evolution of Chinese Patriotism from Past to Present

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## Abstract

Patriotism is the spiritual bond of the Chinese people and holds together all ethnic groups in China. It is generally characterized by upholding national unity, resisting invasion of foreign forces, maintaining national ethos of humanness and rightness, and cherishing Chinese culture. Patriotism evolves with actual conditions at different stages of development. In contemporary China, top leaders from Chairman Mao to President Xi Jinping put forward their views of patriotism and ideas to promote it. These insights deepen our understanding of patriotism and offer guidelines for how to integrate patriotism into making China a modern, strong, and prosperous socialist country. Patriotism for a new era enables the Chinese people to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and build socialism with Chinese characteristics.

## Keywords

Chinese Patriotism, Evolution, Chinese Characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

Patriotism is widely accepted as the feeling and expression of love for one's motherland. It is a civic virtue of every citizen. Patriotism, Berns (1997) argued, means love of country and a readiness to sacrifice for it, and to fight for it even at the cost of one's life. In ancient times, patriots were seen as those who love their country simply because it is their country. Macintyre (1984) suggests that patriotism implies loyalty to a particular nation. Patriotism is defined in *Cihai*, a semi-encyclopedia dictionary, as action and emotion that represent love for and loyalty to one's country (Cihai Compilation Committee, 2009). Clearly, patriotism in China and the West focuses on deep attachment and devotion to motherland, highlighting love, and loyalty.

Patriotism enables the cohesiveness and progress of the Chinese nation. It is the deepest attachment of the Chinese people to their motherland and one of the most fundamental components of Chinese culture. Chinese patriotism has developed over the past 5000-plus years from the pre-Qin Dynasty to the present. Strong patriotic feelings among the Chinese people have ensured China's survival in time of crisis and prosperity in time of peace and stability. A love of country and national pride unite the people to endure big challenges. Without shared patriotic beliefs and deep convictions, the Chinese people would have been unable to drive out Western aggressors and gain national independence and liberation.

In contemporary China, patriotism is a powerful spiritual force moving the Chinese people forward despite difficulties and hardships in the course of revolution, construction, and reform under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In the present era, patriotism is a key ingredient to realizing the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation. Patriotism evolves with the times, carrying new connotations at different stages of China's development. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, top leaders from Chairman Mao Zedong to President Xi Jinping have put forward their perspectives on patriotism and ideas to promote it. These insights deepen our understanding of patriotism and offer guidelines for how to integrate it into making China a modern, strong, and prosperous socialist country. President Xi Jinping has made insightful comments on patriotism in the new era.

## **2. Defining Features of Chinese Patriotism**

Historically, Chinese patriotism is characterized by four key components, namely, upholding national unity, resisting invasion of foreign forces, maintaining national ethos of humaneness and rightness, and cherishing Chinese culture.

The Chinese nation puts first national unity from antiquity to modernity. China consists of 56 distinct ethnic groups. And Chinese history features unity and solidarity by Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. Since ancient times, Chinese have upheld the maxim of harmony and brotherhood in dealing with racial and ethnic relations. This conviction has produced harmonious and peaceful relationship among Han and ethnic minorities. National unity is a precondition for solidarity among different ethnic groups in China. It is also integral to the tradition of Chinese patriotism. Integration of various ethnic groups and inclusiveness of different beliefs helped boost the influence and further development of patriotism. In the long history of China, Han Chinese in Central Plain and minority ethnic groups in bordering areas both hoped for national unity and fight against secession. They were fully aware that national unity is crucial to survival and development of the Chinese nation.

Most of the 5000 years history saw national unity of China. The short period of breakup witnessed monarchies established by Han Chinese and/or ethnic

minorities. These kingdoms generally identified with the Chinese nation. Ethnic wars in those days were fought for central authority to achieve national unity. Since the Opium War, revolutions have erupted one after another for the purpose of obtaining national unity, national liberation, and territorial integrity and sovereignty. Currently, the tradition of upholding national unity and battling secession shall be followed. It plays a vital role in furthering socialism with Chinese characteristic by realizing national rejuvenation and common prosperity.

National unity is upheld while invasion of foreign forces is resisted. Patriotism united the Chinese nation to resist invasion of foreign forces. It worked as a deep conviction for the Chinese people who devoted themselves to their nation. Whenever China was invaded by foreign forces, Chinese people would spare no effort in defending their country. Resistance of aggression and defense of the motherland are essential ingredients of Chinese patriotism, as evidenced by opposing oppression of foreign countries and courageously resisting invasions of foreign forces. In the Ming Dynasty, patriotic soldiers and officers fought against and eventually defeated Japanese invaders, bringing back peaceful life to people in coastal areas. The 17th century saw Western colonizers invade Taiwan. Zheng Chenggong, a militarist and national hero in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, beat Dutch colonialists and recovered Taiwan as Chinese territory. Since the mid-19th century, Chinese people had courageously battling colonialism and aggression of Western colonizers and Japan. Lin Zexu, a national hero, suppressed the opium trade and confiscated opium in Humen. People in San Yuanli fought British troops. Zuo Zongtang, a Chinese statesman and military leader in the late Qing Dynasty, drove out Tsarist Russia in Xinjiang. Deng Shichang, patriotic captain of Zhiyuan warship in Beiyang Navy of the Qing Dynasty, died heroically in a battle during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894. During War of Resistance against Japan, Chinese people fought valiantly against Japanese militarist invaders. Resistance of these aggressions by foreign forces demonstrated strong Chinese patriotism and solidarity.

Whenever the motherland was invaded or violently threatened, the Chinese people never hesitated to defend and die courageously for their country. In ancient times, patriotism was represented by opposing ethnic repression. And it was shown by resisting invasion of foreign forces in contemporary China. Those patriots contributed much to their motherland and people's happiness.

The Chinese People, heavily influenced by Confucianism, have national ethos of humaneness and righteousness. The national ethos of a people, as [Lewin \(2016\)](#) noted, is the creed derived from shared values and traditions through which the nation views its past, present and future. It defines a nation's identity and integrates it into a coherent and cohesive social group.

The Chinese nation has long adhered to the principle of rightness. It has also valued national ethos highly. "Master Zeng said, Trust him as guardian to a six-foot orphan, charge him with the command of a hundred-league domain, he will preside over the most critical occasions and can never be diverted from his

course” (Confucius, n.d./2007: p. 55). A virtuous man would never compromise his principles. As the saying goes, fame and feat are transient, but ethos and spirit last forever. In the Western Han Dynasty, Su Wu, as a envoy of the imperial court, paid a visit to the bordering tribal confederation of Xiongnu, only to find himself held as a captive by the ruler known as the Chanyu. Su Wu refused to defect to Xiongnu and had been imprisoned for 19 years. His loyalty and patriotic action are highly respected. National ethos also lies in sacrificing one’s life for motherland. Confucius and Mencius both embraced the idea of humaneness and rightness. “The Master said, the man of high ideals, the humane person, never tries to go on living if it is harmful to humaneness. There are times when he sacrifices his life to preserve humaneness” (Confucius, n.d./2007: p. 107). Mencius (n.d./2009: p. 127) said, “...I will give up fish and take bear’s paws. I desire life, and I also desire rightness. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up life and take rightness.” Rightness tops the agenda of every superior man.

This devotion to sacrificing one’s life for humaneness and giving up life for rightness encouraged and enabled numerous men of high ideals and humane people to die for patriotic ideals. For example, Wen Tianxiang is a patriot who held posts in the Ministry of Punishment and in local government offices. When the Song Court was defeated, Wen was captured by the invading Yuan armies. He rejected flatly all the inducements offered by the Yuan rulers. While in the Yuan Dynasty military prison, Wen Tianxiang wrote famous Song of Righteousness. In Passing Lingdingyang, he composed famous verse. None since the advent of time have escaped death, may my loyalty forever illuminate the annals of history. Before execution, Wen (1280) said, “Confucius noted sacrificing one’s life for humaneness while Mencius insisted giving up life for rightness. Rightness and humaneness are mutually reinforcing. What is the purpose of reading classics? Loyalty and devotion to my motherland is a top priority.” Upholding rightness and humaneness motivates patriotic actions.

Patriotism means love for motherland and traditional culture. Chinese patriotism is also represented by cherishing Chinese culture and tradition. As Huaxia Chinese have been the vast majority of the Chinese nation, Huaxia culture is the core of Chinese culture. Men of high ideals and humane people are committed to safeguarding Huaxia culture. For example, Confucius commended highly the contributions Guan Zhong made to promote Huaxia culture. “The Master said, Without Guan Zhong, we would be wearing our hair unbound and folding our robes to the left [that is, China would have been invaded by foreign tribes and Chinese culture wiped out.]” (Confucius, n.d./2007: p. 99). Confucius applauded Guan Zhong for his protecting Chinese culture from aggression.

The Confucian idea of cherishing Chinese culture is seen as the major source of patriotism. Gu Yanwu, a renowned scholar, distinguished between nation and Tianxia (literally meaning under Heaven). He argued that Tianxia refers to Chinese culture and its associated value system, and that every citizen shoulders responsibility for preserving and promoting Chinese culture and value system. Gu

Yanwu's idea was widely accepted and practiced. The Opium war of 1840 marked the start of China being plunged into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country. The early 20th century saw patriotic scholars like Liang Qichao and Deng Shi propose the concept of Chinese national culture or ancient Chinese civilization. These scholars rightly noted that Chinese national culture depends on the Chinese nation and that Chinese national culture prospers thanks to a unified nation. As [Deng \(1906\)](#) put it, "those who love their country also love traditional Chinese culture". They sought to defend their country by promoting Chinese national culture. Attachment to and identification with Chinese culture is a key component of Chinese patriotism.

Chinese patriotism is characterized by peace and inclusiveness. It is also part of core values of Chinese culture. Chinese people hold in the highest esteem those who devote themselves to and even sacrifice their lives for their motherland. In contrast, those who betray their motherland and national interests come to no good end. In contemporary China, patriotism has built on the ideal of the Chinese nation, defending a unified multi-ethnic country while fighting against the invasions of Western imperialists. Since patriotism is the duty and virtue of every Chinese citizen, all Chinese people are obliged to raise national awareness and attachment.

In the present era, patriotism is integrated into building socialism with Chinese characteristics. It provides strong spiritual bonds and motivation, uniting the Chinese people in their efforts to win great victories for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

### 3. Evolution of Patriotism with the Times

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, patriotism has evolved in different stages of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Top China's leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have defined patriotism with insightful statements.

Chairman Mao Zedong elaborated on patriotism in *The Role of the Communist Party of China in the War of Resistance*. As he put it ([Mao, 1938/1991: p. 520](#)), "the contents of patriotism depend on historical context. Japanese aggressors and Hitler have their version of 'patriotism'. We have our understanding of patriotism. Members of Communist Party of China must resolutely oppose the so-called 'patriotism' embraced by Japanese invaders and Hitler. Members of Communist Party of China must integrate internationalism into patriotism. We are patriots and internationalists. We defend our motherland and fight against foreign invaders." Chairman Mao rightly noted the essence of patriotism. Patriotism, he argued, varied according to different classes, races, and historical contexts. Chinese patriotism differs in nature from patriotism shared by the Militarist Japan and Nazi Germany. It constituted a unity with internationalism. Then Premier Zhou Enlai clarified patriotism. "Our patriotism is socialist and people's democratic, which is in sharp contrast with capitalist chauvinism. So-

cialist patriotism is not narrow-minded nationalism but patriotism reinforced by national internationalism-oriented self-confidence.” (Zhou, 1956/1984: p. 91). The first generation of leadership, directed by Chairman Mao, adopted a Marxist approach to patriotism and identified key features of proletariat patriotism in a particular historical context.

After the reform and opening up was launched in 1978, Deng Xiaoping-led second generation of leadership adapted patriotism to a new historical landscape while retaining key idea by the first generation of leadership. Deng Xiaoping’s contributions to patriotism are fourfold. First, patriotism contained national self-esteem and national pride. He pointed out that “Chinese people have their own national self-esteem and national pride. They regard as the highest honor love for motherland and devote themselves to the construction of socialist motherland. They view as the biggest shame harm of dignity, reputation, and national interests of socialist motherland” (Deng, 1982/1993: p. 3). Secondly, Deng Xiaoping emphasized that motherland played a vital role in helping development of its individuals. “People support human right, but what should be noted is the right of a nation. Just as a person has dignity, every nation has its dignity. Those developing countries like China cannot stand on their own without national self-esteem and national independence” (Deng, 1982/1993: p. 331). Patriotism includes national pride and sense of belonging.

Thirdly, love of motherland means embracing socialism. “Some say that rejecting socialism is not necessarily unpatriotic. How can motherland be so abstract? What do they love if they do not embrace socialist motherland led by the CPC? Chinese in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as well as overseas Chinese are not required but are expected to support socialism. They cannot oppose new China under socialism. Otherwise, what does love of motherland mean?” (Deng, 1983/1994: p. 392). Patriotism, Deng argued, means upholding socialism and the leadership of the CPC.

Fourthly, enough knowledge of Chinese history offers momentum for development. When receiving a visit by Xie Guomin, head of Charoen Pokphand Group, Deng Xiaoping said, “I am Chinese and have much knowledge of the history of China invaded by foreign forces. When I learn about the decision by the Group of Seven to impose sanctions against China, what comes to my mind is the image of the ‘Eight-Nation Alliance’ invading China in 1900. All countries except Canada in the Group of Seven, tsarist Russia and Austria constitute ‘Eight-Nation Alliance’ that invaded and looted China. Some knowledge of Chinese history offers momentum and motivation for boosting China’s development” (Deng, 1982/1993: p. 357). Chinese people should study the history of their nation and work hard for national revival.

In light of new historical context, the then-president Jiang Zemin put new connotations into patriotism. He put forward his idea on patriotism in the speech on Patriotism and the Mission of Intellectuals. As he (Jiang, 1990/2006: p. 121) pointed out, patriotism is contingent on historical contexts. It varies in dif-

ferent stages of national development. Our patriotism reveals the deep attachment of Chinese people to their motherland. It consists in defending national independence, promoting national development, and safeguarding the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people. He added, “in the new democratic revolution, patriotism is represented by efforts to toss out the imperialists and their local agents, including the feudal landowners and the comprador capitalists, in order to build a democratic and independent country. Currently, patriotism concerns devotion to socialist modernization and reunification of China” (Jiang, 1990/2006: p. 121). In contemporary China, patriotism, socialism, and people’s democracy are actually two sides of the same coin. He called upon Chinese people to boost national self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-reliance, contribute to socialist modernization, and promote reform, stability and solidarity. On the other hand, we are to resolutely fight against those who harm national unity and undermine socialism.

The Patriotic Education Guideline issued in 1994 focused on issues such as the basic principles, major contents, approaches and related government agencies. In the 6th plenary session of the 14th CPC National Congress, the then-president Jiang Zemin took patriotic education as part of socialist spiritual civilization. He maintained that patriotic education was intended to boost national pride and confidence. Chinese people must value the national independence and sovereignty for which thousands of martyrs paid with their lives. The younger generation felt compelled to acquire much knowledge over Chinese history and civilization while defending national dignity and interests (Jiang, 1990/2006: p. 582). In the report to the 16th CPC National Congress, Jiang Zemin noted that national spirit is the pillar for a nation to survive and thrive. The 5000-plus years of China’s history witnessed the formation of a great national spirit featuring unity, peace, courage, diligence, and self-reliance.

Jiang Zemin’s statements reaffirmed that patriotism varies in different stages of development as it rests on a particular historical context. Patriotism involves protecting the fundamental interests of the broadest masses of people while maintaining national independence. CPC members are the most remarkable patriots, as is evidenced by stories of strife and struggle for their motherland.

Patriotism was later seen by then president Hu Jintao as the core of socialist value system. The 6th plenary session of the 16th CPC National Congress reviewed and adopted the CPC Central Committee’s Decision on Some Major Issues Concerning How to Build a Socialist Harmonious Society, which designated as part of core socialist value system sinified Marxism, ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics, patriotism-oriented national spirit, reform and innovation, and the socialist concept of honor and shame (Literature Research Office CPC Central Committee, 2008: p. 661). At the 100th anniversary of the Revolution of 1911 in 2011, then president Hu Jintao associated patriotism with the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The 100 years from 1911 to 2011 suggests that patriotism is the core of the Chinese national spirit, mobilizing and



unifying Chinese people of all ethnic groups to strive for the revival of the Chinese nation. The love for motherland is a glorious patriotic tradition of the Chinese nation. All the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation share the same goal of seeking a happy life and developing China into a powerful nation in the world. They should bear responsibility for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. On the road to revival, Chinese people shall uphold patriotism, strengthen ethnic unity among all Chinese, enhance bonds among Chinese at home and abroad, and consolidate the broadest united front. All Chinese people work together and work hard for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Patriotism, Hu insisted, is the pillar of Chinese national spirit and of core socialist value system, helping boost national morale and pool the wisdom and strength of Chinese people to strive for national rejuvenation. He rightly noted the unity of patriotism and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Increasing globalization makes the world a global village. This trend poses challenges to patriotism. Some people have a blurred idea of loyalty, identification, national pride, and traditional culture, resulting in a crisis of cultural, historical, and national identification. President Xi Jinping urged the people to foster a right view on nation, state, culture, and history while boosting people's sense of dignity, pride, and identification, and of belonging to their own country (Xi, 2015a).

The present era sees deepening of reform and opening-up. Patriotism for this new era focuses on developing and upholding a right idea of culture, history, nation, and state. It is characterized by the unity of love for motherland, attachment to socialism, and support for the CPC leadership. A correct view on history takes the approach of historical materialism. It respects history by recognizing the accomplishments made by the CPC, the PRC, and the Chinese people. This right view is a common thread running through past, present, and future. It enhances the Chinese people's pride and confidence. Patriotism compels the Chinese people to safeguard the fundamental interests of their country.

Since the 18th National Congress of CPC in 2012, president Xi Jinping has given new interpretations of patriotism for a new era. He offered a new definition and clarification of patriotism. In 2014, addressing a seminar on literature and art, Xi (2015b) underscored the irreplaceable role of patriotism. Patriotism is the most fundamental and profound element of core socialist values.

While presiding over the 29th group study by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Xi noted patriotism for a new era in a comprehensive and systematic way. His contributions are fivefold. First, patriotism is indispensable to realizing the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation for a new era. As Xi pointed out, patriotism for a new era helps realize the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation. We shall uphold the spirit of patriotism and promote reform and innovation as the spirit of the times to offer spiritual momentum and powerful spiritual force (Xi, 2015a). This statement recognized the value of patriotism for a new era, that is, realizing the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation.



nation of the Chinese nation. He also noted the unity of the Chinese dream and patriotism for a new era. Secondly, Communist Party of China is leading force of patriotism. “Communist Party of China is the most important practitioner and upholder, viewing as its historic task the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Over the past several decades, Chinese people of all ethnic groups, led by Communist Party of China, united and motivated by patriotism, have worked together in the historical stages of revolution, construction and reform” (Xi, 2015a). Thirdly, patriotism gives the most powerful force to the Chinese nation. It is the core of the Chinese national spirit. Patriotism is deeply embedded in the Chinese nation, bonding Chinese people of all ethnic groups and inspiring them to strive for the prosperity of China. “Over the 5000-plus years of history, it is the tradition of patriotism that ensures the Chinese nation withstands numerous risks and tests to make enormous achievements” (Xi, 2015a). Patriotism is deeply rooted in the national spirit of China, promoting comprehensive development and prosperity.

Fourthly, patriotism demonstrates characteristics associated with the new era. The unity of patriotism and socialism should be highlighted. The unity of patriotism, love for CPC and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is a defining feature of patriotism in contemporary China. Patriotism calls for safeguarding national unity and enhancing solidarity among different ethnic groups. Upholding patriotism contributes to high-level reform and opening-up.

Fifthly, Xi reiterated the importance of patriotic education. Patriotic education should be integrated into the whole process of national education and socialist spiritual civilization. It is intended to raise people’s awareness of patriotism by commemorating historic events, holding traditional festivals, and building demonstration bases, among others. Patriotism should become a firm conviction shared by all Chinese people.

The notion of the Chinese dream breathes fresh life into patriotism for a new era. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, the CPC has been committed to realizing the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese dream is aimed at a strong and prosperous state, national revival and well-beings of the people. It follows basic principles of patriotism in a socialist country. It also contributes to individual and national development. “The Chinese dream is as much the dream of every Chinese as it is the dream of the whole nation. It is a dream for both state and nation, and is also a dream for each Chinese including the youth” (Xi, 2013/2014: p. 49). The youth were called upon to forge ahead in the front rank in the course of realizing the Chinese dream. Patriotism enables young people to be loyal to their country and the people, to have national pride and cultural confidence, and to closely link their ideals to the future of the nation.

Patriotism provides a powerful spiritual force. It rallies together the Chinese people from past to present in embracing national pride in Chinese culture, safeguarding national unity, and achieving prosperity and success. It offers spiri-

tual nourishment for the Chinese people. Patriotic education is therefore imperative for people of all age groups. Chinese youth, for example, have benefited mentally and spiritually from that training. Extensive patriotic education helps establish a firm belief system, which is vital to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Patriotism is deeply rooted in the minds of the Chinese people and holds together the unity and solidarity of various ethnic groups in China. It is the core of the ethos of the Chinese nation, inspiring sons and daughters of the Chinese nation to strive with one heart and one mind for the prosperity and development of their motherland.

Patriotism bonds and motivates the Chinese nation on its way of development. It is the deepest attachment of the Chinese nation as well as a core component of Chinese culture. National interests come before individual and collective gains. Individuals are required to take national interests as a top priority, enabling commitment, devotion, and loyalty to as well as responsibility for their motherland. Chinese patriotism means identification with and love for Chinese history, culture, and China's socialist system. It is represented by national pride and confidence among individuals. Patriotism leads to relentless efforts to defend and empower motherland. It is one essential component of core socialist values.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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