



# The Patriotic Education Campaign in China and the Rise of Chinese Nationalism:

## A Comparison between Official Doctrines and Public Opinion

RUOXI DU



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### **Biography**

Ruoxi Du is an international student from China, currently working on a graduate degree in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Kansas. Ms. Du has researched and written on a number of East European and Central Asian issues, ranging from Central Asian energy resources to Chinese nationalism. This is her third publication for the Foreign Military Studies Office as a participant in FMSO-KU collaborative programs.

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## **Introduction by Ray Finch, FMSO**

*Over the past decade there have been countless reports describing the inevitable rise of China as a global power. As a key component of this growth, some commentators have posited that the Chinese political leadership will be tempted to stoke the fires of nationalism to deflect domestic criticism and solidify their control of power. One might assume that by restricting the free flow of information, the Chinese political leadership could manage the fires of nationalism at as a reasonable and constructive level. Is this true? In this brief study, Ruoxi Du examines some recent survey data surrounding Chinese propaganda efforts among young people and the level of nationalism in China today. As in all cultural studies, the answer becomes much more complex and tenuous after examining specific statistics.*

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By *Ruoxi Du*, University of  
Kansas<sup>1</sup>



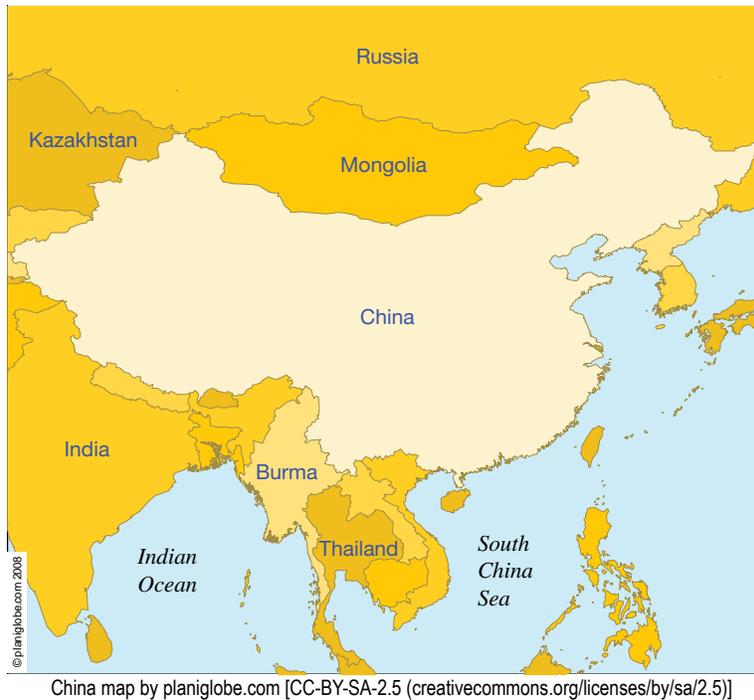
Chinese foreign students showing their national pride for the Olympics. Photo by Kordan Wooley via [http://www.uschina.usc.edu/article@usct?igniting\\_nationalist\\_fires\\_12522.aspx](http://www.uschina.usc.edu/article@usct?igniting_nationalist_fires_12522.aspx)

### Introduction

Chinese nationalism as a research topic has gained popularity since the 1990s, as its strength was rediscovered in the events of China's confrontations with external powers. In most recent years, the more assertive tone that China has adopted when dealing with its foreign affairs, as evident in the hardline stance toward Japan's detention of a Chinese captain in 2011 and the escalated water territorial disputes with Southeast Asian states, has further strengthened other regional and global powers' concerns about a potential new wave of Chinese nationalism, along with the country's elevating economic and political status in the international arena. Domestically, the dynamics of Chinese nationalism is a key issue in the relationship between Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party regime. Therefore, a better understanding of Chinese nationalism is important for both evaluating the impacts of China's rise in the world system and studying China's domestic politics. Although scholars in the field have conducted extensive research on Chinese nationalism, this topic's multi-layer and multi-faceted nature leaves great room for further studies.

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It is often assumed that the ideological void in the 1980s, as a result of the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, has caused a belief and identity crisis among Chinese people, which eventually led to the Tiananmen incident in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Chinese state nationalism has surged significantly. On one hand, the rise of Chinese nationalism should be understood in the context of the international society's ostracizing policies toward China after the Tiananmen crackdown and the later mistreatment from the United States. On the other hand, it was accompanied by the increase in the power of the state-led pragmatic nationalism, developed and promoted by Chinese political and cultural elites. In particular, the CCP launched a patriotic education campaign in 1991, which was directed at reestablishing Chinese people's political beliefs, loyalty to the communist state, and morality among the populace.<sup>3</sup>

While Chinese people's natural reaction to foreign pressures should certainly be taken into account to explain the recent development in Chinese nationalism, it is also important to evaluate the impacts of the CCP's official nationalist propaganda. Specifically, after two decades of the patriotic education campaign, can we now observe a higher degree of consistency between the

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2 Zheng, 44, 87; Zhao, 212.

3 Zhao, 223.

**“Nationalism can reflect both anti- and pro-regime support.”**

nationalist values indoctrinated in the state-led pragmatic nationalism propaganda and China’s younger generation’s nationalist views? In this study, I will analyze the content and effects of the CCP-led patriotic education campaign, in light of the nationalist views of China’s two generations with different levels of education based on a 2008 national survey conducted in China.

This paper proceeds as follows. I will first provide an overview of the patriotic education campaign of the 1990s and 2000s. In the second section, I will present the data reflecting Chinese public opinion on nationalism, extracted from the 2008 China Survey, and conduct descriptive analysis of the data. In the third section, I will come up with interpretations and explanations for the data, based on existing literature on Chinese nationalism. Finally, I will come to my conclusions about the connections and discrepancies between the patriotic education campaign and the development of Chinese mass nationalism.

## **Context and Content of the Patriotic Education Campaign in China**

“Nationalism can reflect both anti- and pro-regime support.”<sup>4</sup> Along with the post-Mao economic reform in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the significant decline of Communism ideology in the late 1980s, Chinese people experienced a “three belief crisis” (*sanxin weiji*): crisis of faith in socialism (*xinxin weiji*), crisis of belief in Marxism (*xinyang weiji*), and crisis of trust in the party (*xinren weiji*).<sup>5</sup> This crisis is believed to have evolved into a pro-democracy nationalist movement, which was not wholly supportive of the Communist Party regime, and have eventually led to the Tiananmen Square demonstration in 1989.<sup>6</sup>

After the Tiananmen incident, it became imperative for the Chinese leadership to develop and promote a new set of values to replace the obsolete communist dogma, based on which the

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4 Kennedy, 2009.

5 Chen, 1995.

6 Zhao, 1998.

CCP can maintain its political legitimacy. Since then, the pragmatic Chinese leaders have incorporated a pro-regime kind of Chinese nationalism into the CCP's propaganda programs. Specifically, the government launched a patriotic education campaign, which "elevated nationalism to the status of a spiritual pillar of the communist state."<sup>7</sup> This education campaign has been carried out at full scale in China since 1992, and it continues till today.

The patriotic education campaign in China has been most thoroughly studied by Zhao Suisheng. In his book *A Nation-State by Construction* (2004), Zhao summed up four major themes in this education campaign: China's unique national condition (*teshu guoqing*), linkage between the communist state and China's noncommunist past, the communist state as the defender of China's national interests, and national unity as a theme against ethnic nationalism.<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I will focus primarily on China's unique national condition as a key concept propagated by the patriotic education campaign.

China's unique national conditions, as laid out in many *guoqing* textbooks, were defined from several aspects, which make China different from other countries.<sup>9</sup> Here I identify three major conditions. First, "the Chinese people have made the right choice of socialism," and "only the CCP can take the leadership role in revitalizing the Chinese nation." Second, the Chinese nation owns "long history, flourishing culture, and glorious tradition." Third, "China is still at the primary stage of socialism," and that "socialist China strives to follow the road to reform and opening up."<sup>10</sup> The first condition implies that China is different from Western



Suisheng Zhao is Professor and Executive Director of the Center for China-US Cooperation at Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. Photo by University of Denver via <http://www.du.edu/korbel/china/people/index.html>

7 Zhao, 214.

8 Zhao, 223.

9 Zhao, 224.

10 Ibid.

***“To what degree are the doctrines of the patriotic education campaign, particularly those about China’s unique conditions, reflected in Chinese mass nationalist views?”***

industrial countries and that the Western-style democracy is not a realist choice for China. It also legitimizes the current authoritarian communist state. The second condition emphasizes the greatness of China as a nation and is associated with Chinese national pride. The third condition suggests that “Chinese communist leaders should be free to take whatever pragmatic approaches they deem necessary to develop the economy.”<sup>11</sup>

Given the explained concept of China’s unique condition, which has been extensively propagated in the patriotic education campaign, an important question to ask will be: to what degree are the doctrines of the patriotic education campaign, particularly those about China’s unique conditions, reflected in Chinese mass nationalist views?

As Zheng Yongnian has pointed out, the official discourse of nationalism could be rather different from popular nationalism.<sup>12</sup> Another scholar on Chinese nationalism, Peter Gries, has also emphasized the importance of the interactions between the Chinese people and the Communist Party.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in order to understand the significance of this nationalist propaganda education campaign, it is necessary to examine Chinese younger generation’s attitude toward nationalism, especially compared to that of the preceding generation, and in relation to different levels of education.

## **Survey Data and Descriptive Data Analysis**

To examine Chinese public opinion regarding nationalism, I will use data coming from the 2008 China Survey, a nationally representative survey conducted in 2008 as a collaborative project between the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University and the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University.

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11 Zhao, 225.  
12 Zheng, 88.  
13 Gries, 121.

The independent variables in my dataset are level of education and generation. Data regarding level of education can be obtained directly from the survey participants' responses to a question in the survey, "How many years of education have you had at each of the following levels?" The response ranges from "Elementary school" to "Doctoral degree." The three levels of education I will consider in this study are junior high school, high school, and college.

The operational definition for the second independent variable – generation – is defined by the respondents' birth of year. Age is a continuous variable from the survey and ranges from 18 to 92 years old. Since I want to compare the nationalist attitudes of Chinese students who receive most of their compulsory education in the 1990s and that of students who receive compulsory education from late 1970s to 1980s, I divide the measure into pre-campaign generation and campaign generation. I define the pre-campaign generation as respondents who were born from 1965-1979, and the campaign generation as respondents born in and after 1980.

The dependent variable is nationalist attitudes. In this study, this variable is defined by 5 nationalism-related questions in the China Survey: "I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world."; "Generally speaking, China is a better country than most other countries."; "How proud are you to be Chinese?"; "China should limit the import of foreign products in order to protect its national economy."; "China should adopt international standards when dealing with human rights issues domestically." Except for the question about the degree of pride of being Chinese, all other four questions are answered by a rank order response (5) that ranges from "(1) strongly agree" to "(5) strongly disagree." For the question about national pride, there is a rank order response (4) from "very proud" to "not at all proud."

The first two questions are to address the respondents' evaluation of China as a modern state, in comparison with other states in the world, and thus are most closely associated with the concept of state nationalism, which "defines the nation as a territorial-political unit and an organizational system to gather citizens of a given territory."<sup>14</sup>

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14 Zhao, 26.

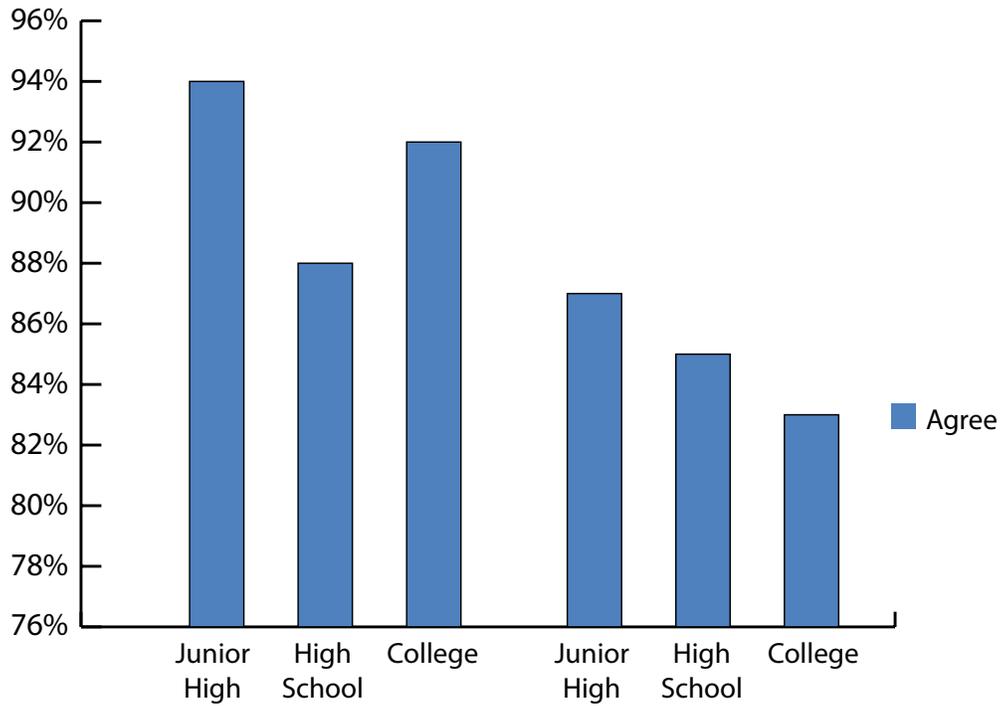
As shown in Table 1, Figure 1, and Table 2, Figure 2, generally, the percentage of respondents who hold positive views toward China, compared to other countries, is high, especially when asked about preferable citizenship. Between the two generations of respondents, less respondents of the campaign generation, compared to the pre-campaign generation, agree that they would rather be a citizen of China than of other country, or that China is better than most other countries. Within each generation, basically, the respondents' evaluation of China declines with higher level of education, i.e. respondents, who attended junior high school but did not continue education, tend to view China more positively as a country, while respondents with high school or college levels of education expressed less support to the statements in these two questions.

**Table 1: I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country**

	Born 1965-1979			Born 1980-1990		
	Junior High	High School	College	Junior High	High School	College
Agree	94%	88%	92%	87%	85%	83%
Neutral	3%	7%	4%	6%	8%	7%
Disagree	3%	5%	4%	7%	7%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(742)	(221)	(52)	(454)	(183)	(42)

Source: 2008 China Survey

**Figure 1: Rather be a citizen of China than of any other country**



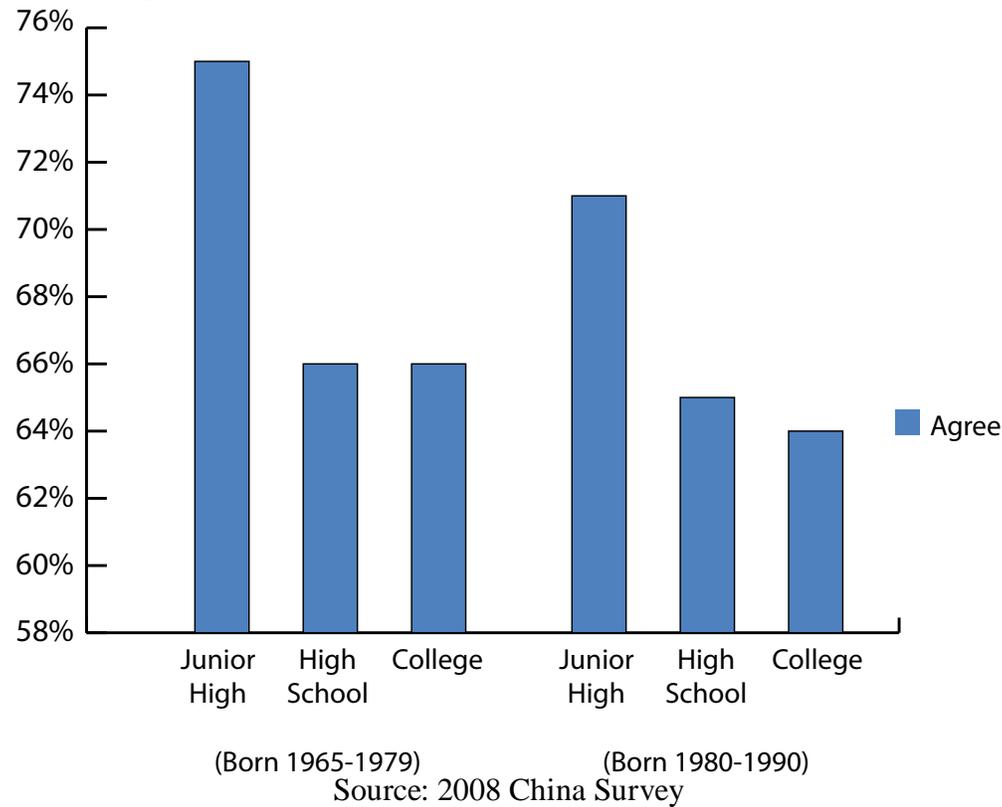
(Born 1965-1979) (Born 1980-1990)  
Source: 2008 China Survey

**Table 2: China is a better country than most other countries**

	Born 1965-1979			Born 1980-1990		
	Junior High	High School	College	Junior High	High School	College
Agree	75%	66%	66%	71%	65%	64%
Neutral	9%	10%	12%	9%	10%	14%
Disagree	16%	24%	22%	20%	25%	22%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(728)	(218)	(50)	(450)	(183)	(42)

Source: 2008 China Survey

**Figure 2: China is a better country than most other countries**



The third question asks the respondents how proud they are to be Chinese (Table 3, Figure 3a, and Figure 3b). In the previous two questions, China was referred to as a modern civic state, a unitary polity and an international player. In this question, however, the respondents were asked to evaluate their national pride of being “Chinese,” the exact meaning of which is left to the respondents themselves.

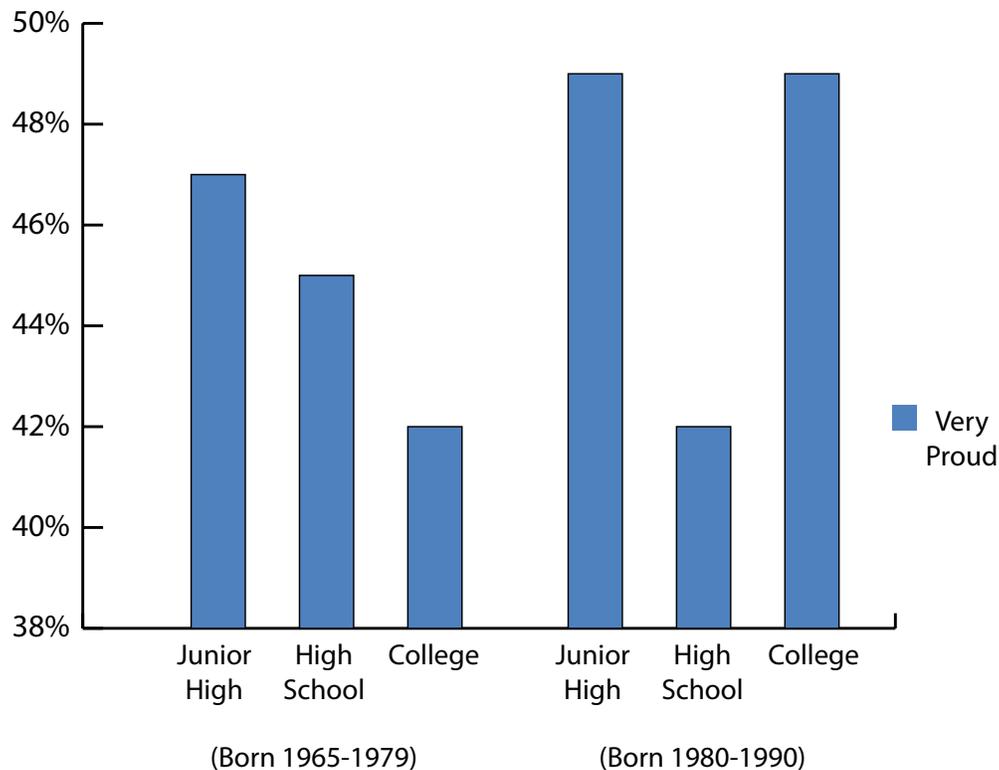
This vagueness and complexity is reflected in the data results as well. Unlike what we observed in the first two questions, there is no pattern that can be easily summarized from the respondents’ answers to this national pride question. Generally speaking, the percentage of respondents feeling very and quite proud to be Chinese is higher among the younger campaign generation than among the pre-campaign generation (Figure 3b), a result contrary to that of the previous two questions.

**Table 3: How proud are you to be Chinese?**

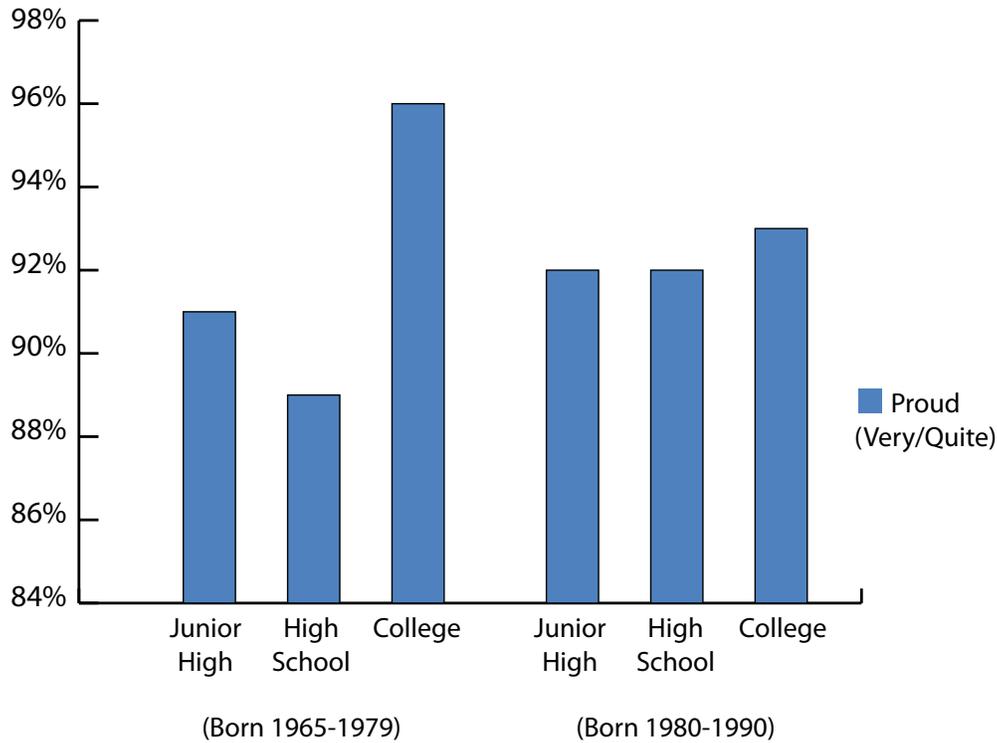
	Born 1965-1979			Born 1980-1990		
	Junior High	High School	College	Junior High	High School	College
Very	47.1%	45.2%	42.3%	49%	42.3%	48.8%
Quite	44.2%	44.9%	53.8%	43.5%	49.5%	43.9%
Not very	7.3%	10%	3.9%	6.6%	7.1%	4.9%
Not at all	1.4%	0.9%	0%	0.9%	1.1%	2.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(753)	(221)	(52)	(451)	(182)	(41)

Source: 2008 China Survey

**Figure 3a: How proud are you to be Chinese?**



**Figure 3a: How proud are you to be Chinese?**



Source: 2008 China Survey

The last two questions examine the respondents' views toward specific Chinese economic and political policies related to the international orientations of Chinese nationalism and China's national interests.

As presented in Table 4 and Figure 4, between the two generations, the younger generation is less supportive to the idea that China should limit the import of foreign products to protect national economy. Within each generation, the higher level of education the respondents received, the more objective they were to limiting the imports of foreign products.

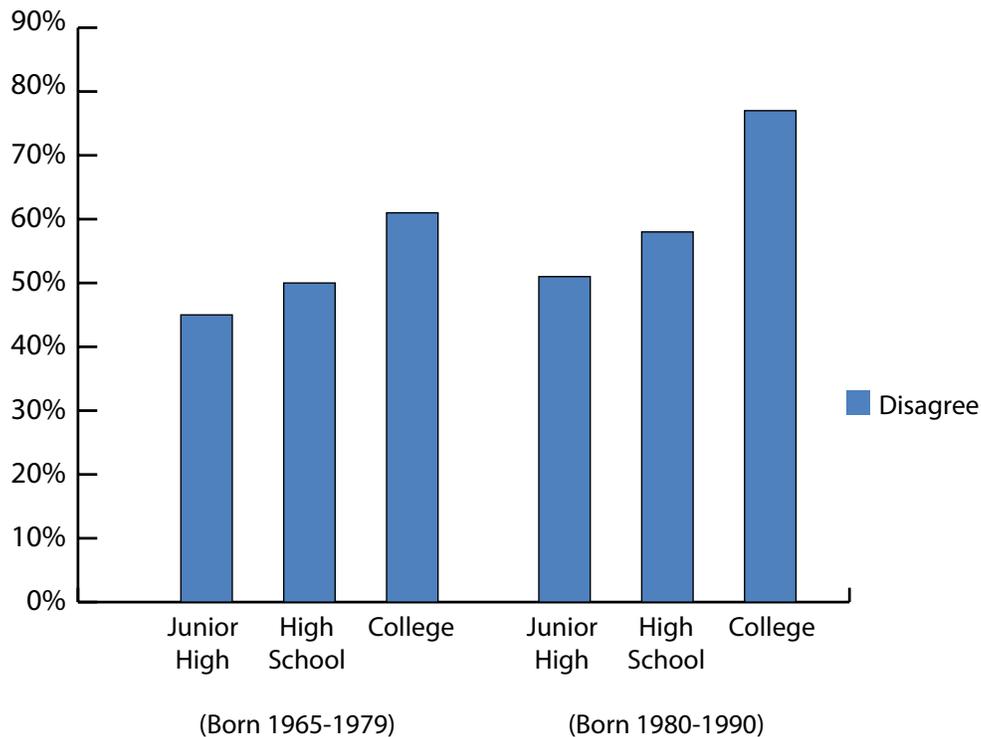
Regarding human rights issues, a slightly lower percentage of respondents among the younger generation disagreed that China should adopt international standards when dealing with domestic human rights issues, compared to that among the pre-campaign generation (Table 5, Figure 5). For each generation, the higher level of education the respondents received, the more anti-foreign standards attitudes we get when it comes to China's domestic human rights issues.

**Table 4: China should limit the import of foreign products to protect national economy**

	Born 1965-1979			Born 1980-1990		
	Junior High	High School	College	Junior High	High School	College
Agree	42%	36%	36%	37%	31%	21%
Neutral	12%	14%	2%	11%	12%	2%
Disagree	46%	50%	62%	52%	57%	77%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(661)	(211)	(52)	(428)	(182)	(42)

Source: 2008 China Survey

**Figure 4: China should limit the import of foreign products to protect national economy**



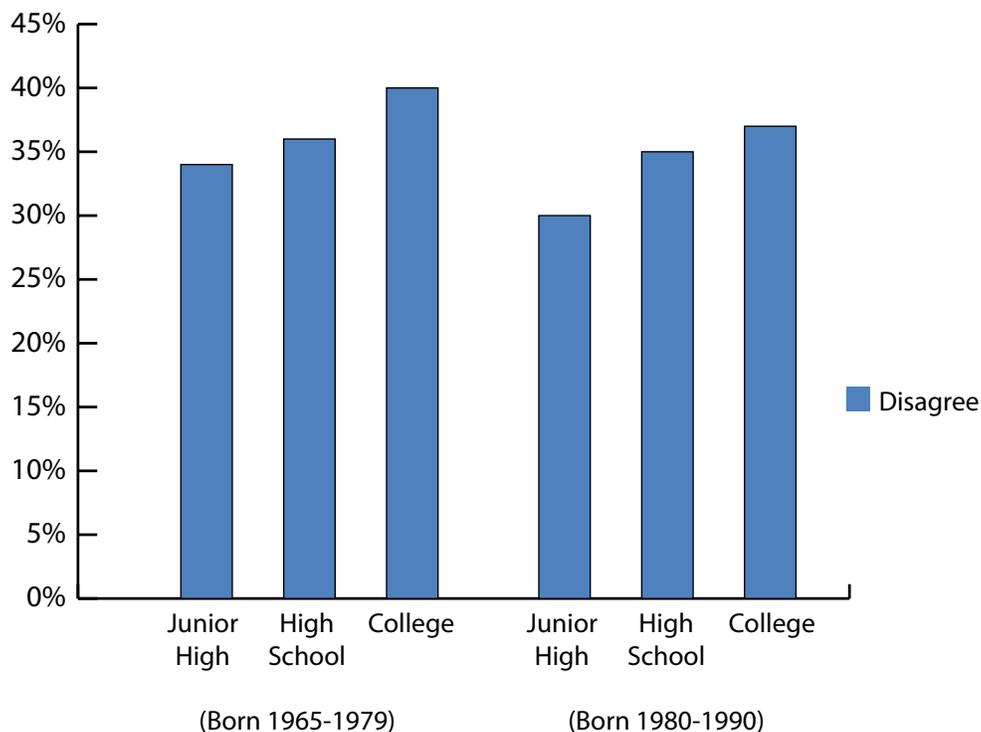
Source: 2008 China Survey

**Table 5: China should adopt international standards when dealing with human rights issues domestically**

	Born 1965-1979			Born 1980-1990		
	Junior High	High School	College	Junior High	High School	College
Agree	47%	43%	37%	49%	43%	49%
Neutral	19%	21%	23%	21%	22%	13%
Disagree	34%	36%	40%	30%	35%	38%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(584)	(194)	(52)	(382)	(167)	(39)

Source: 2008 China Survey

**Figure 5: China should adopt international standards when dealing with human rights issues domestically**



Source: 2008 China Survey

## Data and the Patriotic Education Campaign

Given the earlier analysis of the content of the patriotic education campaign and the survey data on the five questions related to Chinese nationalism, in this section, I will identify the trends of Chinese nationalism between the two generations as well as within each of the two generations but with different levels of education, and compare the different trends seen in different questions.

To recap, between the two generations, the younger generation, who, supposedly, should have received most direct influence from the patriotic education campaign, seems to be less supportive to Chinese state nationalism, compared to the pre-campaign generation, as reflected in their responses to the two questions about citizenship and country comparison. But the sense of national pride is generally stronger among the younger generation. When it comes to foreign trade policy, the younger generation holds apparently more liberal views than the preceding generation. Regarding human rights issues, responses from the two generations are basically the same, though the younger generation appears to be slightly more liberal.

In light of the concept of China's unique national conditions defined in the education campaign, we find that, in spite of the idea that China has a unique and legitimate socialist political system endorsed by the official nationalist campaign, Chinese people's evaluation of China as a modern political unit compared to other states has actually declined over the two generations. In the meanwhile, however, Chinese people's national pride, though vaguely defined, has generally risen. The younger generation's more liberal view toward foreign trade is consistent with the pragmatic economic policy demanded by the third unique national condition conveyed through the patriotic campaign. But, the slightest change in the two generations' attitudes regarding human rights issues reflects that Chinese public opinion tends to remain conservative on specific nationalism-related political issue, as opposed to economic policy.

After illustrating the trends of Chinese nationalism over the two generations, I will now

look into each generation of the respondents with different level of education. For the first two questions, support for general state nationalism within each generation lowers as the respondents receive higher level of education. For the question on national pride of being Chinese, the responses do not follow a clear pattern. For the last two questions regarding China's specific economic and political interests vis-a-vis foreign countries, we see that respondents with higher level of education tend to hold more liberal views economic issue but more conservative and nationalist views toward political issue such as human rights.

## **Conclusions**

Coming back to our original question, to what degree are the doctrines of the patriotic education campaign, particularly those about China's unique conditions, reflected in Chinese mass nationalist views? Based on the 2008 China Survey data and the analysis of the key concepts of patriotic education campaign provided in this paper, I come to the following conclusions.

First, despite that the Chinese leadership has been promoting state-led nationalism emphasizing the uniqueness and legitimacy of China's current political system, as opposed to that of other countries in the world, Chinese public's general evaluation of China, in comparison with other countries, has lowered over the two generations discussed in this paper. Within each generation, longer exposure to state education does not contribute to more positive view toward China either. Thus, it is insufficient to assume a strong wave of state nationalism among Chinese population in general merely based on perception of Chinese official nationalist propaganda. This also demonstrates that factors other than official propaganda (the patriotic education campaign in particular), must also have considerable impacts on the nature of Chinese mass nationalism in different ways.

Second, while the younger generation participants of the 2008 China Survey evaluate China less favorably as a modern civic state, they express stronger national pride (proud to be Chinese)

than the pre-campaign generation. This discrepancy reveals the complexity of Chinese national identity and Chinese mass nationalism, and emphasizes the importance to study the sources of Chinese people's national pride over generations, in relation to various forms of Chinese nationalism.

Third, in terms of specific economic issue relevant to Chinese nationalism, Chinese public opinion has become more liberal over the two generations, which is consistent with the doctrines of the pragmatic nationalism propagated by the CCP. Regarding specific political issue such as human rights, however, Chinese public opinion has not become nearly as liberal as regarding economic issues, which is also consistent with the official propaganda that Western-style democracy is not applicable to the situation in China. Within each generation, the longer the students stay in the education system, the more consistent their opinions are with the concrete economic and political ideas endorsed by the state-led pragmatic nationalism. Thus, regarding at least the two specific policy issues in the survey, we observe a more salient reflection of the pragmatic nationalist ideas promoted by the patriotic education campaign in Chinese nationalist attitudes.

Finally, these three points all indicate that, to acquire a better understanding of contemporary Chinese nationalism and its mechanism, further studies on both Chinese public opinion toward nationalism and the process of Chinese nationalism need to be carried out.

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