
UNIT 11 RISE OF NATIONALISM*

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to explain:

- how the spirit of modern nationalism emerged in China;
- the components of early twentieth century Chinese nationalism;
- the role Japanese imperialism played in invoking a nationalist and patriotic movement in China; and
- the fall out of this reinvigorated nationalism.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit goes on to explain the factors that contributed to the growth of nationalism in China. We have already discussed how China had suffered at the hands of imperialist powers. As a consequence there emerged anti-foreign and anti-Manchu feelings. These subsequently strengthened the nationalist feelings. Manchu rule was overthrown by the 1911 Revolution. However, the question of foreign exploitation was still there along with rival factions and power struggles. It was in such a situation that the nationalist feelings started taking a definite shape and grew stronger. The discussion in this Unit revolves around these themes.

11.2 BACKGROUND

The idea of 'nationalism' or the concepts of 'nation-hood' or 'nation-state' entered the thought process of the Chinese people much later than it did in Europe. In fact, as the familiarity of the Chinese with the West increased these

ideas and concepts became clear and definite. For centuries the perceptions of the Chinese regarding their place in the world or what is called the Chinese world order, did not correspond with that of the rest of the world. However, these perceptions remained intact for centuries as the Chinese people lived in isolation from the rest of the world. Except for trade, the Chinese did not interact with countries which were geographically distant. With societies in its periphery the Chinese State had, what is known as the tribute relationship. Under this arrangement the smaller kingdoms paid tribute to the Chinese Emperor in the form of all kinds of gifts, in return they were spared subjugation by the Chinese empire. This was, from the Chinese point of view, an expression of superiority of the Chinese empire and Emperor over all others.

The traditional Chinese view of the world comprised of China i.e. Chung-Kuo or the central or middle kingdom and other nomadic societies on its periphery. In other words, the Chinese like many other civilized races, believed that they were central to the earth and human inhabitation. The Emperor was the 'Son of Heaven', who was superior not only to his Chinese subjects but also to all the people around the Chinese inhabited lands. The concept of a nation-state, with a clearly demarcated boundary had never existed for the Chinese until Western notions of international law were suddenly introduced or rather enforced on them. Among the shocks that the Chinese absorbed as a result of Western influence was this complete re-orientation of their ideas of the world order. The European notion of territorially demarcated, independent, sovereign states dealing with each other on the basis of equality, which was often superficial, was something now the Chinese had to come to terms with.

China's initial difficulty in accepting the European world order has led many scholars, like John King Fairbank, to label China as a Sinocentric nation. This means that the Chinese were victims of the xenophobia and suffered from a deep superiority complex vis-a-vis other countries and civilization. This viewpoint has, however, been challenged by others who give evidence against it, saying that if the Chinese had been so chauvinistic how could they have adopted and adapted Buddhism – a religion alien to them. Traditional ties between India and China show no striking indication of the Chinese being Sinocentric.

Debates aside, the spirit of Chinese nation-hood engulfed the Chinese nation since their defeat at the hands of Great Britain in the Opium War of 1840. Nationalism became a driving force in the Chinese political scene by late 19th century and the early 20th. In the following sections we will discuss how nationalism arose in China, how it manifested itself and what were the outcomes of its dissemination. As a background, the findings of the American Sinologist, Mary C. Wright, who is a well-known authority on early 20th century Chinese history have also been paraphrased.

11.3 NATIONALISM ON THE RISE

Nationalism in China meant three different though interrelated things.

- i) First, it meant opposing and fighting imperialism.
- ii) Second, it demanded the creation of a strong, modern and centralized nation-state which not only would push back imperialism but forward the country's new aspirations in its political, social, economic and cultural life.

- iii) Thirdly, nationalism meant the overthrow of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty. Of these three, anti-imperialism was of course to be the most prominent feature.

11.3.1 Resistance to Imperialism

In the early years of the 20th century, “recovery of Sovereign rights” became the watchword for every enlightened Chinese. By the end of the 19th century Western terminology like “National Sovereignty” and “Sovereign rights” appeared in official documents. They became an integral part of Chinese vocabulary in a few years time. Since the Opium War, China had been subjected to foreign attacks, each of which ended with an unequal treaty. China had to pay indemnities to the victorious powers and grant privileges, rights and even territorial concessions. The Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 exposed China’s complete weakness; she could not refuse anything to anybody. The immediate aftermath of this war saw the period of ‘Scramble for Concessions’. After the eight-nation expedition to crush the Boxer Rebellion, one sees in China uncontrolled pillage by several imperialist powers. Despite China’s physical incapability to prevent encroachments, there was a far greater determination at this time to strengthen the country and reclaim all that had been lost. The sixty years of indignity had to be countered.

Chinese officials, in the first decade of this century reasserted their claims to sovereignty and not just suzerainty over Tibet in order to contain the British: Russia had occupied Manchuria but after its defeat by Japan in 1905 its power weakened. The Chinese did not waste time. They increased the pace of emigration to Manchuria and restructured the administrative apparatus there, with the aim to block Japan’s expansion. As Russia had now turned its attention on Mongolia, the Chinese reacted by asserting full sovereignty over her dependency. This was done by:

- encouraging the flow of Chinese into Mongolia,
- instructing local officials to counter Russian influence,
- setting up a Chinese type administration under able and modern minded officials, and
- by sending out Chinese garrison troops.

These measures taken by the Chinese government were prompted by a widespread and in turn fear that China might be partitioned.

The general public also reacted sharply to Western and Japanese intimidation. The local and national press discussed the issues. Demonstrations and meetings were held in many areas including foreign bastions of Shanghai to denounce the intentions of foreign powers. Songs and theatrical shows depicting the atrocities of the British in India and the French in Indo-China, were common in South China. Posters and other kinds of publicity material were used to spread the message of Chinese nationalism.

The more turbulent protests were the anti-American boycott of 1905 over the

'Exclusion Act' and the anti-Japanese boycott over the TatsuMaru case in 1908. These boycotts showed that Chinese merchants and workers were prepared to make material sacrifices in order to achieve their nationalist objectives. Cancellation of special foreign rights and abolition of extraterritoriality were the common demands of the revolutionaries, the reformers as well as the Manchu government.

11.3.2 Nationalism and Nation-building

Nationalism was not only anti-imperialist but it also implied a triumph over provincialism and regionalism. As part of the reforms attempted by the decaying Manchu rule, provincial assemblies were set up all over China except in one province. These assemblies became a forum for debate and discussion and brought together the patriotic people. This provincialism, as one noted author says, "facilitated the rise of nationalism", discussion of many local issues led to national issues concerned with resistance to imperialism. For example, when the Self-government Association of Guangdong province objected to the visit of a British river patrol, it led to the challenge of the entire treaty system. Similarly, local merchants' desire to expand their trade led to a demand for a uniform national monetary system. Nationalist fervour led to a need for nation-building, demanding that China becomes a unified, strong nation.

11.3.3 Anti-Manchu Sentiments

The Qing dynasty which ruled China from 1644 was racially different from the Han Chinese who comprised 94 per cent of the nation's population. They belonged to the numerically small race of Manchus hailing from the province of Manchuria. As the dynasty began to weaken, anti-dynasty feelings came to be expressed in ethnic terms. When revolutionary nationalism engulfed China, one of its components was Chinese ethnic opposition to alien Manchu rule as reactionary in domestic policies and cowardly in foreign affairs. Many Han Chinese believed that because a non-Han dynasty was ruling the country it did not have the will and passion of the Han people and so meekly gave into subjugation.

This is not to say that the Manchu rulers stayed completely alienated from others. On the contrary, the Qing court comprised of vast numbers of Han Chinese and the civil service of the country which linked the empire to the remotest areas, was predominantly Han. What is known as the Sino-Manchu elite, ruled China. This group had both reactionaries and reformers in it and also fiery anti-imperialists and compromisers. There was, however, also a common belief that the emperor-system itself was inadequate and so one must not over-emphasize the ethnic issue. A simple anti-Manchu feeling did exist but it was more prominent in certain small geographic areas and in those wings of the revolutionary organizations which did not demand social upheaval. Similarly, some secret societies and overseas Chinese communities raised the slogan: "overthrow the Manchus, restore the Chinese."

The intensity of anti-Manchu feelings varied across time and place. In many instances this negative notion emerged first to be transformed into a more positive spirit of nationhood. One thing is sure that anti-Manchuism did not unite the Chinese so much as did anti-imperialism.

- 1) Explain in about ten lines what you understand by Chinese World Order.

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- 2) Write in brief about the nature of nationalism in China.

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11.4 NATIONALISM IN THE EARLY POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

With the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the anti-Manchu component of Chinese nationalism obviously became redundant. However, the other two factors namely anti-imperialism and an urge for nation-building became even more pronounced. In the early years of post-Qing China, there were two major political forces on the scene:

- one were the militarists, Yuan Shikai being the leading military man in politics, and
- the other was the secret society turned political party i.e., Guomindang (GMD).

Apart from these two organized political groups there were a host of revolutionary organizations with not much say in the national politics and numerous modern intellectuals. Though influenced by western education, they were ardent nationalists. This nationalist upsurge could not be ignored by those in power particularly since 1916 i.e. the period after Yuan Shikai's death. By 1917 China had entered the World War and had been given indications of high hopes for offering major national benefits if she emerged as one of the victors in the war. In the early bargaining period with German Minister Reinsch, not only loans but matters related to the Boxer Indemnities were also discussed. With Japan too, negotiations were so designed to advance the Chinese position. This included China's desire to reassert her authority in Manchuria and outer Mongolia. The other aim perhaps was to bring about a relaxation of pressures from Japan, who, in the war, was an ally. China clearly desired that it wanted to be treated as an equal member in the community of nations.

11.4.1 The Shandong Question and the May Fourth Movement

After the War China's first and foremost expectation was to recover all rights and privileges formerly granted under the "unequal treaties" to Germany and Austria. Particularly, it desired restoration of complete sovereignty over Germany's "sphere of influence", Shandong. German rights in Shandong as stipulated in the 1898 lease were for ninety-nine years. Sovereignty, though given up

temporarily in favour of Germany, was expressly reserved to China. Logically therefore no successor power could enjoy greater rights than Germany. The original agreement, moreover, mentioned that Germany may not transfer its leasehold to any other power, abandonment by Germany should legally lead to reversal of all rights to the sovereign authority, i.e. China.

Japan's imposition of the Twenty-one Demands on Yuan Shikai's government introduced a new element into this legal position: by formal treaty China had committed itself to accept any disposition of German rights in Shandong that might be agreed upon by Germany and Japan. The Chinese protested that the agreement was forcibly imposed on China and therefore not binding. In International law, this agreement had no validity even though in 1915 US Secretary of State Bryan had implicitly said that US stood on China's side against Japan. President Woodrow Wilson too had stated in his speeches that in the territorial settlements during the peace negotiations, the interests of the populations should be taken into account and it should not be a mere adjustment or compromise between rival powers. Naturally, China hoped that at the peace conference the United States would support its claim for restoration of the Shandong peninsula. However, when the Peace Conference began in Paris in January 1919, which eventually resulted in the Treaty of Versailles, the Japanese became confident of having Shandong's sovereignty transferred to them. They held that Shandong's position had been confirmed not only by the Sino-Japanese agreement of 1915 but also by the British, French and Italian agreement in 1917.

In late January the Shandong question came up, with the Japanese demanding the peninsula and the Chinese rejecting it. The Japanese delegation produced at the Conference, secret commitments of France, Britain and Italy to Japan and more crucially documents showing the Chinese government's secret assurances to Japan. A secret agreement signed by the Peking government confirmed the Chinese acceptance of Japanese proposals for the financing, construction, and joint operations of two new railways in the province of Shandong. These revelations, consequently, made the Chinese case weak and prejudiced right from the beginning.

In April, as the negotiations were going on; China presented two memoranda to the conference. One demanded the abrogation of the May, 1915 treaty and related agreements with Japan. The other proposed the following:

- 1) Renunciation of spheres of influence or interest,
- 2) withdrawal of foreign troops and police,
- 3) withdrawal of foreign post offices and telegraphic agencies,
- 4) abolition of extra territorial jurisdiction,
- 5) relinquishment of leased territories,
- 6) restoration to China of foreign concessions and settlements, and
- 7) restoration to China of tariff autonomy.

In other words, China was demanding from the international community a dilution, if not a complete annulment of the unequal treaties. Both the memoranda were rejected by the conference as being outside its terms of reference. Nevertheless,

these demands reflected the Chinese concern for its dignity, propped up by a strong wave of nationalism.

On April 30, 1919 when the Shandong question was brought before the Council of Foreign Ministers (of USA, Britain, France, Italy and Japan) the American delegation proposed that rights on Shandong first be transferred to all five powers, who would eventually restore it back to China. Japan rejected this while Britain, France and Italy were committed to support Japan. The United States too failed to hold on to its position strongly, partly because it did not want to confront its European allies and partly because of its involvement in Siberia along with Britain and Italy. The final decision was that all German rights in Shandong should be transferred to Japan. This, on the one hand was a humiliation for China, but on the other strengthened nationalist feelings.

11.4.2 Intellectual Response and Public Outcry

The intellectual climate had changed in China significantly since the Twenty-one Demands. Beginning in 1915 new ideas and beliefs began to sweep the major urban centres and we have discussed these in Unit 9.

The new intellectual atmosphere created the setting for a major event. Ever since the Shandong issue had been raised at Paris in January, the articulate and politically aware public followed the matter with close and growing interest. The Shandong deal violated the spirit of a just peace settlement; it also outraged the new spirit of nationalism among China's youth. The decision of Paris on April 30, 1919 caused an explosion in China which came to be known as the May Fourth Movement (discussed in Units 8 and 9) which was led by students and intellectuals.

On May 4, a little after noon, about three thousand students of thirteen institutions assembled at the Tienanmen Square. From there they began to march, despite warnings from local police, to the Legation Quarter. Guards refused their admission into the Quarter, students then turned towards another direction. Their slogan was, 'To the house of the traitor'. They identified the 'traitors' as Premier Duan Qirui and his corrupt and unprincipled associates. They attacked the residences of many of them. They set fire to one of their houses and mercilessly beat up another. A third one who had fled to the safety of the Legation Quarter submitted his resignation that very day.

This event acted as the catalyst for a nation-wide movement of protest that had been long in the making. Immediately after many students began to organize demonstrations, strikes, business stoppages, and an anti-Japanese boycott movement. In this the merchants, business people and lower middle class sections of Chinese society supported them. They demanded together that the Chinese delegation at Paris be instructed not to sign the peace treaty. The government banned the parades, speeches and dissemination of literature but it could not prevent the upsurge. On June 3, a new massive demonstration took place in Peking, when a thousand students were arrested. On June 5, the students demanded the dismissal of three officials, alleged to be pro-Japanese. The next day all arrested students were released. The regime also dismissed the three offending officials and on June 12, the entire cabinet resigned.

As the day for signing the peace treaty at Paris drew nearer, the Chinese delegation was without any precise or clear instructions. The conference rejected

its proposal to sign it with reservations. Finally, when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, the Chinese delegation, still without any official directive, stayed away. It was only on July 10, after the Chinese government had assessed world sympathy for China's position and the strength of domestic resentment did it issue orders to its delegation not to sign the treaty.

The turbulent events of June, 1919 gave birth to a number of organizations all over China with Peking University providing much of the inspiration. A Chinese Students' Union was established in mid-June at Shanghai. Another group was the New Youth Society with members of the Peking academic community. The spirit of nationalism that was prominent since the early years of the century received a strong impetus with the May Fourth Movement. Hence, to this movement is attributed the emergence of modern Chinese nationalism.

Nationalism since the May Fourth Movement constituted a break with old style foreignism centered on "sea-devils" and the "hairy-ones". Now was the beginning of a new impulse i.e. modern nationalism-from anti-foreigner to anti-imperialism. In most of the Asian countries there were voices for the abandonment by Europe and America of discrimination against the "non-white" people and acceptance of the principle of equality of nations and equal treatment for their nationals. We have also discussed earlier the threat which Warlordism posed to China's unity.

11.4.3 Warlordism and Threat to China's Unity

After Yuan Shikai's death instability and political disunity marked the Chinese scene. For quite a few years South China had a separate government. Efforts to unite the government at Peking with that in the south failed. Various warlord factions dominated the Peking government at different times. Some other provinces and also parts of provinces were under the control of warlords off and on. This internal strife seriously jeopardized the unity of China. Interestingly, all those who mattered in politics including the militarists always supported the unification of China although none was willing to give up his personal power to achieve the purpose. Regionalism and provincialism became obstacles to Chinese nationalism. For example, one warlord governor even raised the slogan "Guandong for the Guandongese." But the currents of nationalism, discussed in the earlier sections saved China from a catastrophe like partition.

11.4.4 Spill-over Effects of Chinese Nationalism

The May Fourth incident became the May Fourth Movement, for out of shame, anger and disgust came the motive force and potential for revolution. The movement was a catalyst that united large-scale organization – students, labour, merchants, and guilds. In that sense it reflected the integrity of the nation. It brought New Culture to all Chinese intellectuals, and it also promoted revulsion of the West. World War I and its aftermath had made it clear that China no longer had to feel culturally inferior. If a war fought loudly for moral principles was to have an immoral resolution, then the West could explain its own sickness, when it could spare time for diagnosing China's ills. Authors like LiangQichao, through their writings built up China's ancient pride. This was yet another assertion of Chinese nationalism.

In addition, to this renewed sense of pride in their "Chineseness" there were more immediate reasons for turning from the West. By a coincidence of history

the resurgent Chinese revolution was to come into contact with the new Russian Revolution. Although Western officials in China had been sympathetic to the May Fourth Movement in some respects, Western businessmen regarded it as an off-shoot of the new radical Bolshevism. In 1919 the authorities in the International settlement expelled the movement from their area. This action by those who preached democracy and claimed to be the champions of it, further aroused suspicion in Chinese minds and brought them closer to the Soviets. In March 1919, the Soviets had renounced Russian rights and privileges in China. It created a very favourable attitude among the Chinese towards the new Soviet State. In the beginning many Chinese intellectuals were not interested in Bolshevik theory but they believed that in communism the Russians had come upon a weapon whereby to combat militarism and imperialism. In Marxism-Leninism, therefore, some Chinese eventually saw their nationalist aspirations as fulfilled. Later on when Marxism came to be accepted by a sizeable section of intellectuals, nationalism had remained its very important component.

From France came not only returning students with the utopian romantic revolution and the rights of man, but also the tens of thousands of labour volunteers who had served in the war. These were not from working class background but students from not too well to do families. The racial discrimination, language difficulties, harsh treatment, and poor pay they had experienced in France had taught them the value of uniting and organizing. The New Culture Movement itself fell apart but the nationalism it generated strengthened by the day.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Briefly outline the phase of nationalism in the early post-revolutionary period. Answer in 10 lines.

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- 2) What were the effects of Chinese Nationalism? Answer in 100 words.

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11.5 LET US SUM UP

After being humiliated and subjugated by foreign powers, modern nationalism rose in China in the early years of the twentieth century. Three factors, anti-imperialism, anti-Manchuism and a desire to have a strong nation prompted the emergence of nationalism but among all these the first factor, namely, anti-imperialism was the most crucial.

In the period between 1911 and 1919 a renewed nationalist spirit became noticeable as a response to the Japanese Twenty-one Demands. While China was struggling hard to find a way to deal with Western imperialism, the emergence of Japan as an Eastern imperialist power, hungry for China's resources, stirred

all thinking people. Patriotism reached new heights. Traditionally, on the East Asian scene, Japan was a 'disciple' of China having learnt and borrowed many things including philosophy, religion and script. It was an unprecedented shock for the Chinese to see that since 1894 Japan's aggressive designs kept increasing.

Nationalism in the early post-Qing period cut across class lines. Merchants, intellectuals, students and military were all united to fight the external enemy. What sparked off a militant and uncompromising nationalist spirit was the way the Shandong Question was handled by the victors of World War I at the Paris Peace Conference. The intellectual ferment that had already been taking place since 1915 had created a conscious nationalism among the youth. The May Fourth Incident culminated into the May Four Movement which became a broader movement with social, cultural and political features on its agenda with strong nationalist feelings. The Chinese delegation at Paris, finally, did not sign the treaty. Since then China never went back on its demand to be treated as an equal in the community of sovereign nations.

11.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include the concept of Zhongguo, that is China as the central empire, the belief that the emperor was 'Son of Heaven' etc. See Section 11.1.
- 2) Refer Section 11.2.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 11.3
- 2) Base your answer on Sub-section 11.3.4.