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Nations and Nationalism roundtable discussion on Chinese nationalism and national identity

Race, knowledge production and Chinese nationalism

In 2006, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) homepage briefly featured woodblock prints from Meiji Japan that were part of John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa's *Visualizing Cultures* open course. One print depicted Japanese soldiers decapitating Chinese prisoners during the 1894–1895 First Sino-Japanese War. Dower is the preeminent scholar and critic of both American and Japanese racism and dehumanization during and prior to the Pacific War, and the course explicitly critiqued the 'race feeling' that animated wartime Japanese propaganda prints (Dower 2008: 1–2).

MIT's Chinese students were outraged, however, at MIT's reproduction of the image. Word spread quickly in Chinese cyberspace. Miyagawa's phone was soon ringing off the hook, and his e-mail account was deluged with hate mail and even death threats (Gleitzman 2006). MIT was forced to temporarily remove the course from their website. Several dozen MIT professors signed a brief letter defending their colleagues and academic freedom, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote a piece about the tempest focusing on the hate mail and its threat to open intellectual inquiry.

In 2015, a special issue of *Positions: Asia Critique* included over a dozen essays revisiting the controversy nine years later. Remarkably, only one, by William Callahan, addresses the anti-Japanese nationalism in China that provided the critical context for the students' rage. Instead, editors Wang Jing and Winnie Wong and most other contributors direct their ire at MIT, its professors and *The Chronicle*. Wang Jing (2015: 168, 168, 172) repeatedly

accuses them of ‘racializing’ the incident. Winnie Wong (2015: 99, 100, 103) claims that MIT was engaging in ‘civilizing violence’ to ‘discipline’ its Chinese students. Tani Barlow (2015: 124) racially profiles the names of the 52 MIT professors who signed the 2006 letter, concludes that they were mostly white and insinuates racism. Zhou Kui (2015: 56) is more direct, accusing the MIT professors of being ‘haunted by a modern-day scenario of “yellow peril”’.

The silences in the 2015 *Positions* issue are equally deafening. The students’ racialized assumptions about Dower and Miyagawa’s identities and sinister motives are ignored. The hate mail and death threats are excused – to criticize student extremism in 2006, Shao Qin (2015: 46) claims, would trivialize Chinese wartime suffering in 1894–1895. The vital context of anti-Japanese nationalism, protest and violence in 2003–2005 China (see Gries 2005) is disregarded. And MIT and its professors’ reasonable, measured response to fundamentally unreasonable demands from MIT’s Chinese students is recast as racist American aggression against China, another insult to Chinese national pride.

While acknowledging the significance of broader processes of national identity construction, events like the MIT controversy highlight the continued relevance of nationalism as an ideology, with unexpected repercussions not only for contemporary Chinese politics and society, but indeed for politics and societies the world over. Given that words matter, how do we position ourselves? And how do we assess the positionings of others without falling into the same simplistic caricatures upon which nationalism thrives?

Based in these questions, this brief essay draws upon the 2006 controversy and its 2015 re-litigating to examine the racialized politics of the production of knowledge about Chinese nationalism today. We argue that scholars and scholarship would benefit from deeper reflection upon and open discussion of the issues of identification, control and, most importantly, racial taboos in the study of nationalism in China. Just as Orientalizing or infantilizing China inhibits understanding, so reflexive identification with Chinese nationalists impedes the study of Chinese national identifications. Scholars need to be both empathetic and critical in their positioning.

Identification and control

Identities are invariably implicated in studies of Chinese nationalism. The 2015 *Positions* issue reexamining the MIT controversy is short on context but bursting with political identifications. For example, James Farrer (2015: 72) transforms the widespread ‘anti-Japanese racism’ and ‘militant Chinese nationalism’ that he observed firsthand on the streets of Shanghai in the spring of 2005 into righteous ‘anti-Right Japanese demonstrations’ in his title. He thus identifies himself with a minority of ‘moderate internationalists’ in the crowd and sweeps the predominant anti-Japanese racism he describes in his article under the rug. In ‘How Chinese are you? Or, it could have been me’, *Positions* academic editor Tani Barlow similarly documents her search for an

‘internationalist’ position in the 2006 nationalist outburst at MIT. In such analyses, we learn less about the topic at hand than we do about the aspirational identifications of the authors.

Other *Positions* contributors identify even more instinctively with their nationalist subjects. Zhou Kui (2015: 51) associates so reflexively with the Chinese students that she uses the phrase ‘anti-Japanese patriotism’ uncritically, failing to question how loving China has come to require hating Japan. Wang Jing (2015: 168, 173) first accuses the *Chronicle* and her MIT colleagues of aggressive Orientalism. She then, however, engages in culturalist clichés, describing herself as engaged in a ‘culturally embedded’ strategy to ‘diffuse hostility behind closed doors’. She thus taps into an Occidental discourse of Chinese ‘harmony’ (*he*) set against American ‘hegemony’ (*ba*), reproducing the very epistemologies of difference she claims to abhor.

When context is provided in the *Positions* articles, the MIT controversy of 2006 is generally attributed to a ‘Cold War’ mentality and racism on the part of the American academy and media. Such critiques provide a feel-good narrative of identification with the Chinese student ‘activists’ and the Chinese victims of Japanese aggression with whom the authors can identify in comfort and self-congratulation, making their voices heard against American and Japanese imperialism. Such positioning may be emotionally gratifying for some, but they do not further our understanding of either the 2006 MIT controversy or Chinese nationalism more broadly.

Only Callahan (2015) emphasizes the Chinese context of post-Tiananmen ‘patriotic education’ and the PRC state media’s role in the production of anti-Japanese discourse. The other *Positions* articles largely ignore the increasingly strident demonization of the Japanese race as ‘devils’ (*guizi*) in the PRC’s educational system (Zhao 1998) and violent racialized representations of Japanese in the television, movie and video game industries (Lam 2013; Nie 2013). Many Chinese MIT students were enraged because they assumed that Professor Miyagawa, by right of his Japanese sounding name, identified with, enjoyed, and endorsed the woodblock prints of executed Chinese prisoners. This remarkable belief cannot be understood apart from their socialization in the PRC into a view of Japan as a fascist state perpetually frozen in time in 1945: a topic safely removed from the analyses of most *Positions* authors.

Behind the spectre of ‘Japanese militarism’ (Miyagawa), furthermore, stands the presumed American puppet-master (Dower). The two MIT professors thus formed the perfect imperialist villains for this Chinese nationalist saga. Such narratives not only deny the very real democratization and reflection upon its past that have occurred in postwar Japan but also delegitimize any understanding beyond the emotionally charged Chinese nationalist narrative. Furthermore, such narratives dehumanize their Japanese targets, laying the psychological foundations for conflict – decidedly *not* the lesson we should be learning from World War II.

At issue is not so much the violent images themselves, as Callahan (2015: 132) perceptively notes, but the question of ‘who controls knowledge production and distribution’. The protesting students, outraged at Miyagawa’s

participation in the project and questioning his motives, assumed that by right of their national identities only they as Chinese should control the representation of this history. This is a fundamentally anti-intellectual and essentializing position, yet it combines easily with the political correctness and identity politics currently predominant among many in the intellectual left worldwide.

Just as the Chinese state's criticism of Japan's hateful nationalism of the past ironically produces a hateful anti-Japanese nationalism in the present, Dower and Miyagawa's critique of the racialized nationalism of imperial Japan ironically activates a racialized Chinese nationalism against Japan and America. To move beyond this destructive nationalist echo chamber, studies of Chinese nationalism should acknowledge and challenge the essentializing and controlling assumptions of Chinese self-knowledge and self-description, which render critical perspectives as 'misunderstandings' at best and 'Orientalism' and 'Cold War ideology' at worst – and label internal Chinese dissenters from hegemonic nationalist narratives as 'race traitors' (*Hanjian*).

Race and taboo

There are many taboos in China studies: the 'three Ts' of Tiananmen, Tibet and Taiwan are the best known. Yet no taboo is more diligently policed than the subject of racism in Chinese nationalism. Despite revealing studies on racism in China (e.g. Dikötter 1992, Barmé 1995, Cheng 2011, Cheng 2014), scholarship on Chinese nationalism remains largely silent on the issue.

By contrast, race is central to many charges of Orientalism in China studies. In her re-presentation of the 2006 MIT controversy, we have already seen how Wang Jing points her finger at MIT and its faculty for 'racializing' the Chinese student protestors. At the same time, she downplays the students' own blatant racial stereotyping of Miyagawa and Dower, as well as the hateful rhetoric and threats that this racial thought produced.

Hateful rhetoric and behaviours can also be seen over the Tibet issue, seeking to silence all who deviate from hegemonic Chinese narratives. In spring 2008, Cornell anthropologist Kathryn March received hate mail from Chinese students for screening a documentary about Tibet. Such racial thinking is equally clear in the case of Duke's Grace Wang, attacked as a 'race traitor' for urging dialogue between sparring Chinese and Tibetan protestors that same spring. For her embrace of reasoned dialogue, Wang was anonymously lambasted in Chinese cyberspace as 'the ugliest overseas student' and told she should be burned alive.

Chinese racialized nationalism thus targets perceived enemies both near (e.g. Uyghurs, Tibetans and Mongolians), afar (e.g. Taiwanese, Japanese and Americans) and within (*Hanjian*). It involves both a complex and troubling process of national identity construction – and nationalism in the ideological sense of a vision that fundamentally shapes yet also distorts one's understanding of the world. Studies of Chinese nationalism should acknowledge and challenge its racialization and racism, which is far too often swept under the rug.

Perspective taking and the study of Chinese nationalism

We conclude by suggesting that scholars of Chinese nationalism would do well to embracing perspective taking as a vital tool in the study of Chinese nationalism. To understand any nationalism, scholars should stand in the shoes of the nationalist and try to get inside their hearts and minds. Only then can we begin to understand the sources and consequences of national identifications.

Seeking understanding through perspective taking, however, implies neither identification nor the slippery slope of moral relativism. We can seek understanding without agreeing with racist beliefs or condoning racist behaviours. Scholars seeking to understand the behaviour of MIT's Chinese students in 2006 can seek to understand the incident from their perspective, immersing themselves within the narrative of 'anti-Japanese patriotism' that they were socialized into back in China. Indeed, one cannot understand Chinese nationalism today without engaging evolving Chinese narratives of the 'Century of Humiliation' and its impact on Chinese collective self-esteem in the present (Gries 2004). Understanding these narratives and their depiction of Japanese as 'devils' (*guizi*) does not, however, require agreeing with that view or condoning all too familiar and widespread anti-Japanese invective.

The 2015 *Positions* re-litigation of the 2006 MIT controversy is emblematic of the predominance of identification and the failure of perspective taking in many studies of Chinese nationalism today. Rather than balancing their analysis on the Chinese students' perspective by also viewing the incident from the Liberal perspective of MIT, its faculty or *The Chronicle*, editors Wang and Wong and many other *Positions* contributors reduce the issue to racism, Othering those who they felt had Othered them. Tragically, although they clearly sought to right a perceived wrong, a failure of empathy led to the reproduction in their volume of the very epistemologies of difference they sought to overcome. [Correction added on 29 June 2016, after Online and Print publication in June 2016: The affiliation of Dr. Kevin Carrico was previously omitted and has been corrected in this current Online version.]

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