THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND A CHANGING CHINA

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Introduction: The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China
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Chapter 1: The Coevolution of the Internet, (Un)Civil Society, and Authoritarianism in China
Min Jiang

Chapter 2: Connectivity, Engagement, and Witnessing on China's Weibo
Marina Svensson

Chapter 3: New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China
Zengshi Shi and Guobin Yang

Chapter 4: The Privilege of Speech and New Media: Conceptualizing China's Communications Law in the Internet Age
Rogier Creemers

Chapter 5: Embedding Law into Politics in China's Networked Public Sphere
Ya-Wen Lei and Daniel Xiaodan Zhou

Chapter 6: Microbloggers' Battle for Legal Justice in China
Anne S. Y. Cheung

Chapter 7: Public Opinion and Chinese Foreign Policy: New Media and Old Puzzles
Dalei jie
New media—the Internet and especially social media—have become pervasive and transformative forces in contemporary China. Their reach is vast; nearly half of China’s 1.3 billion citizens use the Internet.¹ Tens of millions are active users of Sina Weibo, China’s principal Twitter-like service, and tens of millions more have weibo accounts.² Although much attention to these media has focused on their importance as a way for ordinary citizens to express and share opinions and information, new media also have changed the way that Chinese authorities communicate with the people they rule. China’s party-state now invests heavily in speaking to Chinese citizens through the Internet and social media, as well as controlling the speech that occurs in that space.

New media have altered the fabric of China’s civil society, legal affairs, politics, and foreign relations. Policy debates and public discourse regularly occur through—and sometimes focus on—the Internet and social media to an extent unimaginable a decade or two ago. Almost no area of public concern remains beyond the reach of discussion in cyberspace. This rise of new media reflects technological, economic, and political change in China. Use of the Internet initially grew with the advent of Internet cafés, as well as home and office-based computers. With the widespread adoption of smartphones, access expanded sharply. SMS (simple texting) and MMS (multimedia messages) were followed by weibo (microblogging similar to Twitter), and more recently the mobile text and voice messaging service weixin (known in English as WeChat).
China's stance on UNSC reform is readily explained by the shifting balance of power among coalitions at the UN, an oft-omitted consideration in the literature that instead narrowly focuses closely on the highly noisy and visible online petitions and anti-Japanese street protests within China.

Conclusion

The connection between public opinion and Chinese foreign policy remains elusive. Though it is plausible that public opinion plays a more significant role today than in the past, the difficulty in obtaining reliable data and identifying precise causal mechanisms is not a justifiable reason to lower standards for evaluating theoretical claims or to be satisfied with their mere plausibility. The analytical challenges discussed above suggest some of the hurdles that need to be cleared to develop a more cogent understanding of recent changes in China's foreign policy decision making and the role that public opinion may now play in it. My brief review of China's policy toward Japan's UNSC bid in 2005 reveals that even on an issue where public opinion was highly mobilized—with widely circulated online petitions and massive street protests in China—the evidence suggests that the effect of public opinion on Chinese foreign policy cannot be clearly established.

On the one hand, doubts about the causal significance of Chinese public opinion, especially its stridently nationalist manifestations, may be comforting inasmuch as many worry about the possibility that a rising China's foreign policy could be hijacked and driven to reckless extremes by such nationalist views. On the other hand, however, if the recently worrisome assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy is not the result of pandering to domestic pressure from nationalist public opinion but instead a result of the rational strategic calculations of the Chinese leadership, that might be even more disturbing. Making adjustments to a rationally calculated assertiveness requires not the relatively straightforward task of controlling public opinion but a much more daunting task—undertaking a fresh and fundamental recalculaion of China's strategic interests and the foreign policy that best advances them.

ChAPTEr 8

Social Media, Nationalist Protests, and China's Japan Policy: The Diaoyu Islands Controversy, 2012–13

Peter Gries, Derek Steiger, and Wang Tao

不杀日。难解心头之恨。
Without killing Japanese, I cannot relieve the hatred in my heart.
—Sina Forum post from Chengdu, August 16, 2012

这种人在日本叫做极右爱法西斯，在德国叫做纳粹，在中国叫做“爱国者”。
In Japan these people are called extreme right-wing fascists. In Germany they are called Nazis. In China they are called “patriots.”
—Wangyi post from Fuzhou, September 21, 2012

The year 2012 witnessed a renewed flare-up of anti-Japanese sentiment in Mainland China. In April 2012, right-wing Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara proposed that Tokyo Prefecture purchase three of the five Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Diaoyu Dao) from their private Japanese owner. Chinese nationalists were outraged. “I suggest everyone boycott Japanese goods,” one netizen wrote online at Sina.com. “Otherwise all the money we spend on Japanese goods will be used to buy bullets.” In mid-August, activists from Hong Kong landed on one of the islands and were promptly detained by the
Japanese coast guard. Chinese nationalists responded by protesting not just online but outside the Japanese Embassy in Beijing, in Shenzhen, and in other major Chinese cities.

In early September, the Japanese government purchased the three islands, apparently hoping to defuse the situation by taking it out of Ishihara and the right wing’s hands. Many Chinese interpreted the purchase, however, as an attempt to “nationalize” Japan’s claim to the islands. “Start fighting!” one netizen demanded online to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). “There are 1.3 billion people backing you.”2 On the weekend before September 18, the anniversary of the Mukden Incident that led to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, there were street protests in scores of cities across China. Demonstrators carried portraits of Mao Zedong and chanted slogans like, “Declare war!” Several Japanese factories were forced to close amid widespread vandalism. On September 18, protesters hurled bottles at U.S. ambassador to China Gary Locke’s car and grabbed its American flag, blocking him from entering the U.S. Embassy.

The Chinese government then took the unprecedented step of sending armed naval warships to the disputed Islands. In December, a PLA patrol plane flew over the area, and Japan scrambled jet fighters. In January 2013, Chinese and Japanese jets appear to have played chicken near the islands, and a Chinese frigate locked its weapons-targeting radar onto a Japanese helicopter and a destroyer.

Did nationalist opinion in Chinese cyberspace influence the PRC’s military escalation? Or are China’s foreign policy decision-makers wise mandarins with the smarts to fully manage popular nationalism, perhaps even strategically manipulating it to improve their bargaining position with the Japanese?

A lack of transparency in elite Chinese decision making puts definitive answers to these questions beyond our reach. This chapter argues, however, that the circumstantial evidence is compelling: nationalist opinion is a powerful bottom-up driver of China’s Japan policy. While political elites may sometimes seek to strategically manipulate domestic politics for foreign policy bargaining purposes, the weight of the evidence suggests that the opposite is more often true: Party elites, concerned above all about maintaining CCP legitimacy, are increasingly responsive to the demands of domestic nationalists.

CCP elites, furthermore, only appear “smart” when the situations that they confront are relatively manageable. They have been lucky that events beyond their control—such as the accidents of history that led to the Belgrade bombing and spy plane collision incidents of 1999 and 2001 with the United States—have not yet occurred in the context of Sino-Japanese relations. Should one or more Chinese die at the hands of the Japanese navy or air force—accidentally or not—the pressure for escalation and war will likely be more than China’s leaders can manage.

This chapter does not argue that the party-state plays no role in these anti-Japanese protests—only that the Chinese public increasingly plays an autonomous role. The Chinese party-state’s educational and propaganda systems are clearly a major proximal cause of popular anti-Japanese nationalism. The “Patriotic Education” (qiguo zhuyi jiaoyu) campaign that followed the Tiananmen Square Massacre inculcated a now widespread view of Japanese as “devils” (guizi).3 More recently, the CCP propaganda apparatus has even become involved in China’s online gaming industry, developing games about World War II that promote anti-Japanese sentiment among China’s youth.4

The CCP party-state was also a proximal cause of the popular anti-Japanese discourse and demonstrations of 2012–13. For instance, some analysts believe that the September 2010 ramming of Japanese Coast Guard vessels by Chinese fishing trawlers was actually contrived by the CCP to assert China’s right to patrol the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.5 This 2010 incident likely prompted Ishihara’s decision to try to purchase some of the Islands, which ultimately sparked the 2012 protests in China. But we agree with scholars like Iain Johnston that, in light of the sensitivity of the September 18th anniversary of the Manchurian Incident, the Chinese party-state did not directly initiate the September 2012 popular anti-Japanese protests.6 Instead, this chapter provides evidence that the PLA’s military escalation at the end of 2012 followed popular nationalist protests against both Japan and the CCP party-state, suggesting—but not proving—that an autonomous public was one proximal cause of the Chinese government’s escalation of the dispute.

We begin with a brief review of the recent literature on nationalism and Chinese foreign policy, followed by a concise historical overview of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands controversy. Following a brief discussion of Internet sources, we then turn to (1) qualitative and (2) quantitative examinations of the chronology of state-society interactions during the 2012–13 Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands controversy. We find that flare ups of anti-Japanese (and anti-government) sentiment, both online and on the streets of urban China, were followed by a clear toughening of the PRC’s Japan policy. This does not prove that the former caused the latter: correlation does not equal causation. But it
does satisfy the most basic and necessary condition for demonstrating causality: that a cause precedes an effect.

The chapter concludes with some thoughts on why nationalist opinion might influence Chinese policy makers when the CCP so easily disregards public opinion and crushes protests on so many other issues. We argue that because the CCP has staked its claim to legitimacy on its nationalist credentials for more than sixty-five years now, repressing popular nationalists is much more costly to the party-state’s legitimacy than crushing dissent on other issues. Regime legitimacy, in short, appears to be the key mediator accounting for the relationship between popular nationalism, on the one hand, and China’s Japan policy, on the other.

**Nationalist Public Opinion and Chinese Foreign Policy**

Does public opinion shape foreign policy making? In the study of American foreign policy, Aaron Wildavsky’s “two presidencies” thesis was dominant up until the Vietnam War. It held that J.S. Congress largely deferred to the president on foreign—but not domestic—policy. With Vietnam, however, partisanship over foreign policy became more apparent. In a longitudinal analysis of survey data, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro found that changes in public opinion on international events regularly preceded changes in American foreign policies. A new thesis emerged to explain this finding. It held that since the United States is a democracy, and the elected officials who make foreign policy generally desire reelection, they are attuned to what the public wants. In a comprehensive review of this “electoral connection” argument, John Aldrich and several colleagues at Duke concluded, “The potential impact of foreign policy views on electoral outcomes is the critical mechanism linking public attitudes to elite behavior.”

But does public opinion shape foreign policy making in non-democracies like China, where there is no “electoral connection”? James Reilly and Jessica Chen Weiss have recently taken up this question, reexamining anti-Japanese sentiment in 2005–5 and anti-American sentiment surrounding the Belgrade embassy bombing of 1999 and the spy plane collision of 2001.

Reilly’s 2012 *Strong Society, Smart State* examines the relationship between public opinion, mass mobilization, and the Chinese state in the context of China’s Japan policy. Reilly argues that the CCP has become an “adaptive authoritarian” regime, responding adeptly to public discontent, rationally managing popular nationalists and then quickly returning to pragmatic Japan policies. Over the longer term, the state uses propaganda campaigns to reshape public attitudes in a manner consistent with its goals. Earlier scholars like Susan Shirk, Peter Gries, and Ed Friedman, Reilly claims, have been too pessimistic about the state’s ability to manage popular nationalism; the Chinese state is “smart.”

Is the Chinese party-state really as skilful at blending responsiveness, repression, and persuasion as Reilly suggests? Is it “smart,” or was it just lucky that the events of a decade ago that Reilly chose to reexamine were relatively manageable? The viciousness and violence of the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Island protests, and the PLA military escalations that followed them, appear to undermine Reilly’s claim that Sino-Japanese relations are “relatively stable,” and that “The likelihood of China going to war with Japan is no greater in 2011 than [sic] it was in 2000.” The volatile events of 2012–13 strongly suggest otherwise.

In her 2013 “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China,” Jessica Chen Weiss makes a very different argument for international organization. Weiss chides earlier China scholars as diverse as Ian Johnston, Danie Stockmann, Peter Gries, Mike Oksenberg, Dan Lynch, Wu Xinbo, Zhao Suisheng, Tom Christensen, Robert Ross, and Wu Xu for suggesting that popular nationalism is an “unhelpful constraint” on Chinese foreign policy makers. Specifically, she claims that these scholars err in treating popular nationalism as a “constraint exogenous to the government’s own actions.” Weiss flips the causal arrow, claiming that it is international strategy that drives elite decisions about domestic politics.

Weiss applies IR bargaining theory to China, claiming that Chinese leaders strategically manipulate popular nationalists to signal either resolve (for example, the Belgrade bombing, 1999) or a willingness to cooperate for example, the Hainan spy plane incident, 2001 in their diplomacy towards the United States. When a major event occurs that mobilizes Chinese nationalists and creates the necessary conditions for mass protest, the CCP chooses to either “nip protests in the bud” by giving a “red light” to domestic nationalists, thus reducing domestic audience costs, or allow protests to develop, giving a “green light” to domestic nationalists, tying their own hands and communicating resolve to their diplomatic foes.

Since the publication of James Peacock’s “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes” twenty years ago, a burgeoning rationalist IR literature on bargaining and “audience costs” has been lucrative.
for its practitioners. Jessica Weeks has extended the bargaining logic beyond democracies to posit “authoritarian audience costs.” Weiss builds on this line of bargaining scholarship, arguing that nationalist politics within China are driven by leadership decisions about what messages to signal to the external world.

The application of rationalist bargaining theory to Sino-American relations today, however, suffers from many of the same empirical problems that it does in explaining international crises elsewhere. Jack Snyder has convincingly argued that bargaining theory is little more than “conjecture,” failing to survive a real world reality check. For instance, historical analysis reveals that leaders rarely issue “bridge-burning ultimatums” to increase audience costs and signal resolve. Instead, they usually seek the opposite: flexibility through ambiguity so that they are not forced into a corner from which they cannot retreat.

In the case of Sino-American relations, Weiss claims that the CCP allows or forbids domestic protests prima facie on the basis of international calculations. For instance, she asserts that the Chinese government permitted anti-American protests in 1999 to gain the “international benefits of signaling resolve.” Another possibility, of course, is that with the death of three Chinese and the visible anger of Chinese all around the world, the CCP elite may have realized that it would be too costly to its nationalist legitimacy to block the protests. They gave a “green light” to domestic nationalists not because of its “international benefits,” but because CCP regime legitimacy was at stake.

“Second image reversed” approaches have the potential to add nuance to extant second image work, introducing greater dynamism to our thinking about elite decision making in the context of the two-level game that the CCP elite must play in the making of China’s Japan policy. To argue that elites are primarily driven by international bargaining considerations when making the “red light, green light” decision vis-à-vis domestic nationalists, however, assumes a degree of elite unity and skill that, like Reilly’s argument, may be overly optimistic about CCP control of popular nationalism.

**The Diaoyu Islands Controversy: Historical Background**

The 2012–13 Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute provides a new and consequential case study to inductively explore the relationship between popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy.

The Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands are eight desolate rocks lying in the East China Sea between Taiwan and Okinawa, and they are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Japan. The sovereignty dispute is long and complex. Chinese claims (Mainland and Taiwan) are based on historical records dating back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the 1943 Cairo Declaration stipulation that Japan return all Chinese territory it had annexed, and a “natural prolongation” of the continental shelf argument in international maritime law. Japan denies that the Islands were included in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki. Instead, for Japan they were terra nullius when they were annexed. Japan also advances a “median line” division of the continental shelf argument in international maritime law.

The first major protests over the islands occurred in 1971, after a September 1970 incident in which the Japanese navy evicted reporters raising Taipei’s flag on one of the islands. Large and vocal anti-Japanese protests were organized in Hong Kong and Taiwan and among Chinese in the United States. Normalization of relations between China and Japan in 1972, however, included an agreement between Beijing and Tokyo to shelve the dispute for future resolution.

In 1996 David Chan from Hong Kong drowned while trying to land on one of the islands, prompting street demonstrations in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the expression of anti-Japanese sentiment in print in Mainland China. Books like the fall 1996 China Can Still Say No (Zhongguo hai shi neng shuo bu) lamented that “China has been too warm and accommodating towards Japan.” 2003, the “year of Internet nationalism,” was the first time that mainland Chinese nationalists undertook their own trip to the islands after organizing themselves online. They received a hero’s welcome upon their return to Xiamen.

**Internet Sources**

Our qualitative and quantitative analyses utilize material gleaned from the Chinese Internet. Data from Chinese social media are obviously not representative of Chinese public opinion more broadly; Internet users tend to be younger, more urban, and more educated than the full Chinese population. However, because our interest is not in Chinese public opinion as a whole, but precisely in the younger and more educated politically attentive public most likely to participate in nationalist protests in urban China, we believe
that social media offer a useful window into the dynamics of Chinese nationalist politics.

This analysis explores tweets made on Sina Weibo (xinlang weibo), a popular microblogging service in China that is comparable to Twitter, posts on Tianya Club (Tianya sheqiu), and comments on articles from three major online news outlets, Sina News (xinlang xinwen), Tencent News (tengxun xinwen), and Wangyi News (wangyi xinwen). We use multiple sources to increase variation and reduce sampling error. The comments on Sina News are relatively pro-CCP, while Sina Weibo is relatively liberal and enables us to examine comments on the topic outside the context of one specific news article. In terms of comments on news stories, Wangyi is traditionally very liberal and independent of the party-state. We assess public sentiments both quantitatively and qualitatively, coding Sina Weibo and comments made on Sina News articles, and utilizing translations from these sources to illustrate our arguments.

Censorship could systematically distort the content of materials gathered from Chinese social media. We argue, however, that (1) the state is often not as thorough in deleting comments as some argue; (2) commenters are often very clever in how they phrase their comments to avoid deletion; and (3) the state's will to censor comments varies from issue to issue. The CCP faces significant costs to its legitimacy if it chooses to stifle public discourse on nationalist issues like Sino-Japanese relations.

The 2012–13 Dispute: A Qualitative Analysis

Prior to the fall of 2012, Beijing largely restricted its words and deeds on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute to reassertions of its sovereignty and non-military actions. For instance, following a January 2012 Japanese government announcement that it would name a number of the uninhabited islands, the official Chinese People's Daily merely reasserted China's "firm and unwavering" determination in safeguarding its sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands. 21

CCP actions had long been restrained as well. The Chinese government had sent fishery and patrol boats around the islands, but never armed the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels. 22 Even after a collision between Japanese Coast Guard and Chinese fishing boats resulted in the Chinese boat captain being detained in 2010, the Chinese government did not send military vessels to the area. 23 Prior to the escalation of popular anti-Japanese nationalism in 2012, it appears that China's leaders had no desire to escalate the dispute with Japan.

On April 17, 2012, Governor Ishihara announced that Tokyo would buy three of the islands. "The purchase of these islands will be Japanese buying Japanese land in order to protect it," he claimed. "What would other countries have to complain about?" 24

Beijing's response was notably mild. "Any unilateral action taken by the Japanese side is illegal and invalid," a People's Daily article claimed. "Given the complex and sensitive nature of the issue . . . Japanese politicians at both the central and local levels . . . should exercise caution in their remarks and should not take any provocative moves." 25

Chinese netizens (wangmin), by contrast, were upset at both Japan and their government. As noted above, some urged a boycott of Japanese goods. Even at this early stage, however, netizens were already expressing frustration that their government had allowed this to happen in the first place. On April 19, a netizen from Kaifeng lamented on Tencent that "China is such a big country but sees itself in fear. China is really sad (pa de niao niao, zhen kabei a zhongguo)." Three days later, a Beijing netizen added, sarcastically, that he might as well "support Japan, as all China will do is [diplomatically] issue condemnation and protests (zi hui qian zhe can yi) . . . ." 26

Protests erupted in mid-August following the Japanese arrest of activists from Hong Kong on one of the islands. Chinese netizens began calling for large scale demonstrations against Japan, some even going so far as to criticize the CCP's "weakness" over the situation. 27 On August 15, a netizen from Guangdong wrote on Sina that "we knew several days in advance that some Chinese would land on the Islands and declare sovereignty. So why didn't the state send surveillance ships to assist them? They are always so passive, it is too funny. Shameful! (tao gao xiao ao, Kechi!!)" 27 The next day, a sarcastic netizen from Jinan declared on Wangyi that, "China will launch the strongest counterattack: wrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
humiliation to their national dignity. . . . The government seems to always sit on the sidelines or repress the people’s patriotic sentiments.”

On September 11, renewed street demonstrations broke out across China. Japanese property and Japanese-made products were damaged in Chengdu, Shenzhen, Suzhou, Qingdao, Beijing, and other major cities. Much Japanese manufacturing in China was suspended. Purchases of Japanese cars declined. Travel between the two countries decreased. The People’s Daily claimed that the Japanese economy slowed for months after the protests ended. A September 18 Tiexia post explained the rationale (or rationalization?) of the violence of many Chinese netizens and protestors:

Smash hard! Don’t let the so-called rational Japanese dogs and Han traitors (Rigou Hanjian) dare to purchase Japanese goods. Drive those Japanese goods out of China. . . . To drive a Japanese car is to dig your own grave (zijue fenmu). . . . By smashing a Japanese car we can prevent 100 people from buying one. This is how we should calculate the costs and benefits. It is not simply Chinese smashing their own cars. In the short run we destroy our own wealth, but in the long run we cut off the enemy’s road to wealth (diren de cai ili) and begin our own path to development.

This is a clear proclamation of a willingness to suffer for the sake of revenge.

Many anti-Japanese protests were actually directed at the PRC party-state. For instance, a QQ message spread around Nanchang in Jiangxi Province called for a protest on September 16, 2012, against “the Japanese invaders.” The three thousand to four thousand protestors chose to gather, however, in front of the provincial government building (Jiangxi sheng zhenfu). Provincial Secretary Tan Xiaolin came out to speak to them, calling the demonstrators “patriots” and reassuring them that the Chinese government would protect Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands. He was clearly responding to the protestor’s dissatisfaction with their government’s Japan policy. The demonstrators had chanted, “Never learn from Li Hongzhang again” (bu ke zai xue Li Hongzhang), a reference to the Manchu Qing dynasty official who is reviled for selling out China to the Japanese in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.

Official Chinese statements on the Diaoyu Islands, notably, were targeted more at the Chinese people than toward Japan or international/Western opinion. The day after the Nanchang demonstration, the Jiangxi Daily (Jiangxi Ribao) featured a front-page editorial entitled “Rational patriotism is more powerful” (lixing aiquo geng you liiang). It listed ad nauseam the measures that the Chinese government had already taken to safeguard Chinese sovereignty:

With regard to the Japanese purchase of Diaoyu islands, the Chinese government has undertaken a series of steps to declare sovereignty and protect territorial integrity: from issuing solemn statements, to drawing baselines of the territorial sea around the Diaoyu and affiliated islands; from dispatching maritime surveillance ships for patrol and law-enforcement, to refuting Japan’s protest; from giving special declarations to foreign diplomats in China, to depositing the document of the base points and baselines of the territorial sea of the Diaoyu Islands with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. All of this manifests the clear position of the sacredness and inviolability of China’s sovereignty, and indicates our absolute determination to defend China’s territory.

The Jiangxi Daily was not speaking to Japan; it was speaking directly to the Nanchang protestors of the day before, reassuring them that the government was responsive to their concerns, and seeking to persuade them that the government was handling the situation effectively.

The Jiangxi Daily was not alone; the central government in Beijing was doing the same thing. “Civility and Reason Display China’s Strength” (wenming lixing zhanshan Zhongguo liiang), an opinion piece on the front page of the September 18, 2012, People’s Daily, similarly enumerates the government’s extensive countermeasures:

Responding to Japan’s arbitrary move, the Chinese government, according to international laws and conventions, has undertaken countermeasures of different sorts in a just and confident way to declare its sovereignty and protect its territorial integrity: it has issued official statements, drawn the baselines of the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands and their affiliated islets, sent surveillance vessels to carry out patrols around the disputed islands, rejected Japan’s unreasonable protests, circulated special bulletins to embassies in China, submitted the baselines and related sea maps to the United Nations, and submitted the 200 sea miles outer limits of the continental shelf in the East China Sea to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental
Shelf. All these moves not only indicate the mature rationality of a great power, but also illustrate the [government’s] absolute and ruthless determination to defend its territory and sovereignty. The countermeasures greatly impair the Japanese goal of consolidating de facto occupation of the Diaoyu Islands, and have won the respect and recognition of international society.38

The People’s Daily is not speaking to “international society”; they are speaking to the Chinese people. Claiming that the Chinese government has “won the respect and recognition of international society” (yingle guoji shelui de zunchong yu renrong) is part of an attempt to reassure the Chinese people that their government is doing a good nationalist job of defending Chinese sovereignty and face before international audiences.

Following this mid-September outpouring of anti-Japanese and antigovernment rage both online and off-line, the Chinese government sent PLAN warships to the Diaoyu/Senkaku area.39 The initial netizen response was largely positive. “Go fight! (daba)” declared a Nantong netizen on Tencent on September 19. “At least 90 percent of the people around me are prepared to donate and offer support once war is declared. This is the people’s heart (xinli) and will (xinyi).” Also on Tencent that same day, a Shenyang netizen chimed in, “Good job navy! Your presence gives us strength … We support you (zhihi ni).”40

There have been several military confrontations between fully armed Chinese and Japanese military personnel since then. As noted above, in December Chinese and Japanese fighters shadowed each other in the vicinity of the islands.41 In January 2013 a Chinese frigate locked its missile radar onto a Japanese ship near the islands.42 And in November 2013, the PRC announced an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, prompting firm protests from both Japan and South Korea and the United States to fly two B-52 bombers over the contested area, which it considers to be international airspace.43

The 2012–13 Dispute: A Quantitative Analysis

In addition to this qualitative analysis of popular and official discourse and behaviors, we also undertook a quantitative analysis, aggregating and coding the words and actions of both state and social actors over the eleven month period from April 2012 to February 2013.

Social Actors

We start with what social actors said and did, as manifest online in social media and offline in demonstrations on the streets of urban China. We began by creating a spreadsheet with 317 rows: one for each day from April 10, 2012, to February 20, 2013.

To quantify online discourse, we examined Sina.com.cn, a popular website, and Sina Weibo, a popular Chinese microblogging site akin to Twitter that is used by more than 30 percent of all Chinese Internet users. From Sina.com.cn, we entered the number of news stories each day about the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the second column (the first was the date), and the total number of comments to the stories in the third column. From Sina Weibo, we entered the total daily “tweets” that mentioned the Diaoyu Islands in the fourth column.

To quantify popular protests, in the fifth and final column we entered the total number of street demonstrations in cities across China every day. We did not quantify the size of protests; only whether a protest in a particular city could be confirmed from multiple sources or not. The resulting data for all 317 days are visually displayed in Figure 8.1. The dotted line represents Sina.com.cn news stories about the dispute, the dashed line public comments on the news stories per 10,000, the double line the number of tweets on Sina Weibo per 10,000, and finally, the solid line the number of cities with confirmed street protests. The figure reveals a small peak of social media activity in August 2012, followed by a much larger peak in September, mostly before the surge in street protests.

This pattern of a small peak of new media activity in August followed by a large peak in September is very closely replicated if one enters the Chinese characters “钓鱼岛” (Diaoyu Islands) in either Baidu Index (百度指数) or Google Trends.44 Both websites graphically display the number of keyword searches over a selected period. This replication with keyword searches gives us confidence that our coding of Sina.com.cn and Sina Weibo successfully captured the quantity of social media activity on the Diaoyu Islands dispute over this eleven-month period.
We also quantified the words and deeds of CCP party-state actors toward Japan over the Diaoyu dispute. Using Ministry of Foreign Affairs (waijiao bu) and Ministry of National Defense (guofang bu) press releases, the PRC's diplomatic and military words and deeds were coded separately. Coding was done on a 0–5 scale for each day, with 0 signifying no action and 5 meaning war. To deal with missing information, any misquotes in the press releases, or any other factors that might skew the data, we coded each day as an average of the information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with that provided by the Ministry of National Defense. Detailed coding criteria are listed in the appendix.

Figure 8.3 displays the data averaged by month. It clearly reveals that PRC diplomatic and military rhetoric and behaviors toward Japan toughened over the eleven-month period, with the most rapid escalation occurring in August and September of 2012. It also reveals that military escalation (September) slightly lagged behind diplomatic escalation (August), suggesting that CCP elites first sought to placate domestic nationalists with diplomatic measures before turning to military escalation.

Figure 8.2 zooms in more narrowly on our September 2012 data, displaying social media activity and street demonstrations over the peak month of the dispute. There were more than 2 million tweets per day for an eight-day period from September 11 to 18. This period of intense tweeting led up to two days of widespread protests, on September 16 and 18, when there were street protests in 85 and 180 Chinese cities, respectively.
Finally, Figure 8.4 combines data from our social and state data sets within a single chart covering a two-and-a-half-month period in the summer and fall of 2012. It clearly reveals that China's military toughening (the solid line) followed the rise in public indignation expressed in both social media (dotted line) and demonstrations on the streets of urban China (dashed line).

Conclusion: The Nationalist Politics of State Legitimation

Both qualitative and quantitative evidence thus strongly suggest that nationalist opinion expressed online in social media and off-line in street demonstrations played a critical role in escalating the Chinese party-state's response to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute. The step up from unarmed surveil-
Mao posters also served a second and more instrumental function: they reminded the party-state of the righteousness of the popular nationalist cause. Mao thus served as a "patron saint" of sorts for the demonstrators, increasing the odds that they would not be brutally repressed the way that Falun Gong and many other Chinese protestors are.

The CCP is thus increasingly stuck between the rock of domestic nationalists and the hard place of international politics. The tools, foreign policies that nationalist opinion increasingly demands can arouse fears among its neighbors about China's rise, undermining the leadership's stated foreign policy goal of "peaceful development" (heping fazhan). Nationalist opinion thus appears to constrain the ability of China's elite to coolly pursue China's national interest.

Chinese nationalism today cannot longer be described as a purely "state" or "official" top-down affair. Bottom-up popular pressures are increasingly threatening the Party's nationalist legitimacy. As the Party loses its hegemony over Chinese nationalist discourse, the hyphen that holds the Chinese Party-nation together weakens, and Chinese foreign policy becomes increasingly hostage to the accidents of history that can arouse the ire of domestic nationalists. Let us hope that our luck holds, and that no Chinese dies soon at the hands of the Japanese—whether surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands or elsewhere. The peace and prosperity of twenty-first century East Asia depend on it.

Appendix

Criteria for coding diplomatic discourse and military actions

Diplomatic Discourse
0 = Missing data or no comment made
1 = Statement of China's unquestionable sovereignty over the islands
2 = Reference to Japan as the guilty party in the dispute
3 = Warning of economic or military consequences including how Japan's actions threaten bilateral or regional stability
4 = Threats of dire consequences if Japan does not acquiesce to China's sovereignty and/or comments regarding China's responsibility to use military force to protect its territory
5 = Declaration of war or use of military force in a hot conflict

Military Action
0 = no known military presence around the islands or missing data
1 = Normal presence of merchant marine surveillance ships
2 = Increase in the number of surveillance ships in the area
3 = Introduction of armed, PLAN ships, People's Liberation Army Air Force jets, or PLA troops to the islands
4 = Incidents of direct confrontation with Japanese forces around the islands
5 = Intentional military confrontation with Japanese forces in the disputed area