Nationalism, Indignation and China’s Japan Policy

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The recent upsurge of anti-Japanese sentiment in China should not be reduced to elite instrumentality, the Chinese Communist Party merely fomenting nationalism to legitimize its rule. Anti-Japanese sentiment in China today has deeper popular roots in evolving narratives about China’s national past and in debates over the very meaning of being “Chinese” at the dawn of the 21st century. These popular sentiments, furthermore, are increasingly constraining China’s elite as they seek to make China’s Japan policy.

“T he Chinese people are very angry; there will be serious consequences!” read a long banner held aloft by a dozen marching demonstrators. It was Saturday, Apr. 16, 2005, and thousands of mostly college students were protesting through downtown Shanghai. Another banner revealed the object of their anger: “Oppose Japanese imperialism!” Other signs displayed a variety of specific grievances: “Oppose Japan entering the Security Council!” “Boycott Japanese goods, revitalize China!” “Oppose Japan’s history textbooks!” “Protect our Diaoyu Islands!”

Other students expressed their protests individually, holding high a wide variety of handmade placards and posters. The most persistent messages focused on a proposed May 2005 boycott: “Boycott Japanese goods for a month and Japan will suffer for a whole year.” “Boycotting Japanese goods will castrate Japan!” The two most striking visual images were of weapons and Japan’s Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Pictures of butcher knives, swords and arrows were painted to pierce the rising sun of Japan’s national flag.

Yet it was the image of Koizumi that received the most attention from the young demonstrators. One protestor gave him a mustache to make him look like Adolph Hitler, and others went further, dehumanizing Koizumi. One placard placed his head on a pig’s body and declared him to be a “little pig.” Another painted a pig’s snout and ears onto his face and declared in large characters, “Death to Koizumi the pig!” But

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the most ominous images evoked a dead Koizumi, with tombstones bearing his name, and a photo of a funeral with Koizumi’s picture at the center. In addition to peacefully waving the flag of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), singing the “Internationale,” and chanting anti-Japanese slogans, the demonstrators also engaged in a number of activities of a less benign nature. On their way to the Japanese consulate, they smashed the windows of Japanese stores and restaurants, overturned Japanese cars, and burned Japanese flags and photos as well as placards of Koizumi. When they arrived at the consulate, they hurled eggs and pelted it with paint bombs.¹ Shanghai is generally seen as China’s most cosmopolitan city, an apolitical place where people from all over the world can safely do business. Yet these Shanghai youth displayed a passionate indignation directed at Japan—a passion that even flared into displays of violence. In addition, this Shanghai protest was not an isolated incident. It was the third successive weekend of protests involving tens of thousands of Chinese in cities as diverse as Canton, Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing. And the current wave of anti-Japanese sentiment traces back to the summer of 2003, when a string of anti-Japanese incidents in Chinese cyberspace and on Chinese streets prompted a national debate on China’s Japan policy.

Where does this anti-Japanese anger come from, and what are its implications for the future of China’s Japan policy? This article explores the origins and consequences of anti-Japanese sentiment in China today. I will argue, first, that popular indignation against Japan in China has its origins in evolving stories about two pasts: the “5,000 years” of “Civilization” and the “Century of Humiliation.”¹ Second, I contend that popular Chinese indignation against Japan today is increasingly constraining China’s elite as it seeks to make China’s Japan policy.

Affect and International Relations

Following Jonathan Mercer and Neta Crawford, this article seeks to bring emotion back into the study of international relations.² Specifically, it interrogates the role of indignation, or righteous anger, in motivating Chinese nationalists.

To focus on affect is not to dismiss the role of the instrumental. Sense and sensibility do not exist in zero-sum relationship.³ Human motivation is generally both multiple and complex: our behaviors are frequently simultaneously passionate and purposeful. The expression of anger can seek both to secure certain instrumental ends, like preventing Japan from winning a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, as well as to serve the emotional role of restoring self-esteem and worth.

Furthermore, focusing on the emotional determinants of behavior does not downplay the behavior’s significance. Western analysts generally assert that the Chinese party-state today orchestrates Chinese nationalism for a variety of instrumental purposes, from consolidating its legitimacy to gaining a chip in its Japan policy. They thus tend to dismiss the anger displayed by Chinese nationalists as “mere emotion.” I wish they were right, for
if Chinese nationalism could be reduced to an issue of elite instrumentality, it would be amenable to rational compromise. The problem, in my view, is that Chinese nationalism implicates popular passions that are less readily negotiable. A focus on the so-called “softer” side of human motivation has actually led me to be more, rather than less, pessimistic about the future of Sino-Japanese relations.

The indignation that many Chinese today feel towards Japan has its roots in evolving Chinese narratives about their past. The stories that people tell about their pasts are constitutive of who they are in the present. Sociologists Anthony Giddens and Margaret Somers maintain that narratives infuse identities with meaning. Giddens argues that narratives provide the individual with “ontological security”: “The reflexive project of the self ... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continually revised, biographical narratives.”4 Somers contrasts “representational narratives” (selective descriptions of events) with more foundational “ontological narratives:” “the stories that social actors use to make sense of—indeed, to act in—their lives. [They] define who we are.”5 The storied nature of social life, in short, infuses our identities with meaning. For better or for worse, Japan has become central to evolving Chinese citizens’ understandings of their own past and who they are at the dawn of the 21st century.

Pride in One Past, Humiliation in Another

Pride in past accomplishments can translate into confidence about an uncertain future.6 One group of social psychologists found, for instance, that in subjects for whom being a fan of a particular team was an important aspect of their social identity, assessments of personal efficacy (like their ability to “get a date” with an attractive member of the opposite sex) were significantly higher after a team victory than after a team loss.7 A humiliating past, conversely, can be the source of anxiety and anger in the present. Chinese nationalists today find pride in stories about the superiority of China’s “5,000 years” of “glorious civilization.” Soon after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Xiao Gongqiong, an outspoken neoconservative intellectual, began advocating the use of a nationalism derived from Confucianism to fill the ideological void opened by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.8 The mid-1990s, indeed, witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in Confucianism. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which only 20 years earlier in 1974 had launched a campaign to “Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius,” ironically became an active sponsor of Confucian studies. President Jiang Zemin himself attended the 1994 celebration of Confucius’ 2545th birthday.9 The Confucian past, over the course of just a few years, was transformed from a source of anger, blamed for China’s backwardness and “feudal thinking,” into a source of pride.

The “5,000 years” are central to the dream of a “prosperous country and a strong army” (fuguo qiangbin), which inspires Chinese nationalists today, more than a century after it was first promoted by late-Qing Dynasty
reformers. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) writer Jin Hui writes that “for over one hundred years, generation after generation of Chinese have been dreaming that since we were once strong, although we are now backwards we will certainly become strong again.” The “unlimited cherishing of past greatness,” Jin laments, is tied to overconfidence that “in the future, we will certainly be ‘first under heaven.’” Such “illusions,” Jin Hui warns, are “even worse than spiritual opiates.”

Such “illusions” about China’s past glory are nonetheless linked to a confidence that a Sino-centric order will reemerge in 21st century East Asia. In such accounts, the “5,000 years” of imperial glory take on a timeless, ahistorical character. As Beijing Normal University’s Lu Benlong wrote in 2004, “In East Asia, a distinctive empire system emerged and centered on China. This single territory constituted the so-called Chinese-barbarian order and tribute system, which formed the concentric and hierarchic world system of East Asia. Even today, this great-power psychology characterized with ‘China at the center and barbarians in the four directions’ still remains in the subconscious of many Chinese.”

To understand the volatility of Chinese nationalism today, we must also address a second story about another past that is evolving in China: the “Century of Humiliation.” This period begins with China’s defeat in the First Opium War and the British acquisition of Hong Kong in 1842. The period was marked by major wars between China and both Western powers and Japan: the two Opium Wars of 1840–1842 and 1856–1860, the Sino-Japanese “Jiawu” War of 1894–1895, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, and the “War of Resistance against Japan” of 1931/1937–1945. Many educated Chinese today are painfully aware of the “unequal treaties” signed with the British at Nanjing in 1842 and the Japanese at Shimonoseki in 1895. Unilateral concessions forced on the Chinese in these treaties, such as indemnities, extraterritoriality, and foreign settlements in the treaty ports, are still perceived as humiliating losses of sovereignty.

Like the “5,000 years of Civilization,” the “Century of Humiliation” is a continuously reworked story about a national past that is central to the contested and evolving meaning of being “Chinese” today. Furthermore, the “Century” is a traumatic and foundational moment because it fundamentally challenged Chinese views of the world. In Chinese eyes, earlier invaders became Chinese, while barbarians beyond the border paid humble tribute to “Civilization.” Both practices reinforced a view of Chinese civilization as universal and superior. Early encounters with “big noses,” from Marco Polo to pre-19th century European and American traders and missionaries, did not challenge this view. The violent 19th century encounter with the “West” was different. The “Central Kingdom” was not only defeated militarily but...
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was also confronted by a civilization with universalist pretensions of its own. “The Western impact,” writes Tu Weiming, “fundamentally dislodged Chinese intellectuals from their Confucian haven . . . [creating a] sense of impotence, frustration, and humiliation.” The “Western devils” had a civilization of their own that challenged the universality and superiority of Confucian civilization. The traumatic confrontation between East and West fundamentally destabilized Chinese views of the world and their place within it. “Trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past,” writes historian Dominick LaCapra in a discussion of the Holocaust; “it unsettles narcissistic investments and desired self-images.” Just as the trauma of the Holocaust led many in the postwar West to re-examine their tradition, the “Century” threatened a Chinese identity based upon the idea of a universal and superior civilization—the “5,000 years.”

Today, Chinese struggles to come to terms with this period of trauma are reflected in the emergence of new narratives about the “Century.” Under Mao, China’s pre-“Liberation” (pre-1949) sufferings were blamed on the feudalism of the Qing Dynasty and Western imperialism, and the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist masses were valorized for throwing off their chains and repelling foreign invaders. This “heroic” or “victor” national narrative first served the requirements of Communist revolutionaries seeking to mobilize popular support in the 1930s and 1940s and later served the nation-building goals of the People’s Republic in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

During the 1990s, however, the official Maoist “victor narrative” was joined by a new and popular “victimization narrative” that blamed “the West,” including Japan, for China’s suffering. This “new” storyline actually renewed the focus on victimization in pre-Mao Republican-era writings on the “Century.” Indeed, the image of China as a raped woman, common in Republican China but unpopular during the Maoist period, has re-emerged.

The contrast between “victor” and “victim” national narratives is nicely captured in two Chinese movies about the First Opium War of 1840–1842. Lin Zexu (1959) is a story of the Chinese people’s heroic anti-imperialist struggle. Named Lin Zexu to highlight resistance, it does not focus solely on Chinese Commissioner Lin Zexu but emphasizes his close relations with a peasant couple who seek vengeance against Eliot, the evil British trader who had killed the peasant woman’s father. Lin and the Chinese people are one in an upbeat tale of popular defiance. Opium War (1997), by contrast, is a dark and depressing tragedy of the past. Only at the very end of the movie, with the image of a stone lion and the message that “On July 1, 1997, the Chinese government recovered sovereignty over Hong Kong,” is China redeemed. Director Xie Jin’s vision of the past is one of opium addicts and humiliation; his vision of the present and future is one of mighty lions awakening to exact their revenge. A victim in the past, China will be a victim no longer.

Despite the new focus on “victimization,” heroic narratives about the “Century of Humiliation” have not disappeared. Narratives of “China as
victor” and “China as victim” coexist in Chinese nationalism today. The “Century” is arguably both what psychologist Vamik Volkan calls a “chosen glory” and what he calls a “chosen trauma.”18 The publisher’s preface to a series of books entitled “Do not forget the history of national humiliation” is typical, describing the “Century” as both a “history of the struggle of the indomitable Chinese people against imperialism” and a “tragic history of suffering, beatings, and extraordinary humiliations.” Many Chinese nationalists, it seems, are eager to capitalize on the moral authority of their past suffering. However, there is a downside to the new “victimization narrative.” It entails confronting vulnerability and weakness. The enduring need for heroism and a “victor narrative” serves, it seems, to allay the fears of those who are not yet ready to directly confront the trauma of the “100 years.”

In sum, during the quarter century since the death of Mao, the “5,000 years” has been transformed from a source of anger and humiliation at China’s backwardness to a source of pride in a superior Chinese “Civilization.” The “Century,” meanwhile, has been transformed in the opposite direction: from a proud story of heroism and victory over imperialism to a more multivalent story that includes victimization and humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan.

This dramatic transformation of Chinese stories about their distant and proximate pasts has direct implications for Chinese nationalism today. New narratives of Chinese victimization at the hands of Western and especially Japanese imperialism during the “Century of Humiliation” stand squarely between a pride in the glories of the “5,000 years” and a confidence in China’s future. Given that many Chinese view Japan as an ungrateful “little brother” that borrowed from Chinese culture for millennia, the perceived injustice of Japan’s victory over China in the Sino-Japanese Jiawu War of 1894–95 and the brutal 20th century Japanese invasion of China have understandably generated an indignation that currently shows few signs of dissipating.

**Popular Passions and China’s Japan Policy**

On Wednesday, Apr. 13, 2005, during a state visit to India, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao publicly announced that China would oppose Japan’s bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). On Wednesday, Apr. 13, 2005, during a state visit to India, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao publicly announced that China would oppose Japan’s bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC): “Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for the past, and wins over the trust of the people of Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibilities in the international community.”19
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China and Japan are rivals for dominance in the newly emerging East Asian security complex. Wen's opposition to Japan's UNSC bid, therefore, should come as little surprise. The timing and context of Wen's announcement, however, does beg explanation: Why hadn't China come out against Japan's bid earlier? And why would China's leadership choose to make its announcement so publicly, during an official state visit abroad?

Popular nationalism played a significant role in elite decision making on this Japan policy issue. While China's elite did not wish to see Japan become a permanent member of the UNSC, they also did not wish to jeopardize China's lucrative trade and investment relations with Japan. Until Apr. 13, therefore, they had chosen to take a backseat on the issue, allowing other governments, like South Korea, to take the lead in publicly opposing Japan's UNSC bid. China's policy towards the issue had thus followed a common Chinese foreign policy tactic—allowing others to take the heat for positions that China shared. China had, for instance, deployed this strategy during the Iraq War debate of 2003. Although China opposed U.S. unilateralism on Iraq, it remained largely silent, allowing France and Germany to take the lead—and the heat—in opposing U.S. policy.

So why did China's leadership not maintain this "lay low while others take the lead" policy on Japan's UNSC bid? While it is impossible to know for sure, as we simply do not have sufficient access to the inner workings of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Zhongnanhai, China's leadership compound in Beijing, I find the circumstantial evidence compelling: China's elite was responding to the pressures of domestic nationalist opinion. By early April, an Internet petition opposing Japan's UNSC bid had gathered a staggering 30 million signatures from irate Chinese "netizens," and two successive weekends of popular anti-Japanese demonstrations in China had focused on protesting Japan's UNSC bid. This popular pressure forced the leadership—against its own will—to come out very publicly against Japan's bid.

This argument runs counter to a long tradition in foreign policy studies. Democracies, according to a well-established argument, are constrained by elections and public opinion and thus at a disadvantage in foreign policy making. Authoritarian governments, conversely, are seen as free of domestic constraints and thus at a diplomatic advantage. As Kant put it, autocrats may "resolve on war as on a pleasure party for the most trivial reasons." In the mid-19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville was forceful: "I have no hesitation in saying that in the control of society's foreign affairs democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others." During the Cold War, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson concurred: "In the conduct of their foreign relations, democracies appear to me decidedly inferior to other governments."

Popular opinion, in this view, can compel both aggression and non-aggression—against the will of foreign policy makers in democratic states. The Maine and Munich serve as useful shorthand for these twin arguments. The sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor (mistakenly attributed to Spanish subterfuge) and popular outrage over Spanish atrocities against the
Cubans forced President William McKinley to launch the Spanish-American War of 1898, “a war which he did not want,” according to Ernest May, “for a cause in which he did not believe.” Munich is short for the 1938 acquiescence of the United Kingdom and France to the German annexation of Czechoslovakia. Pacifist British and French publics are frequently blamed for Prime Ministers Chamberlain and Daladier’s decisions to appease Hitler. In democracies, in sum, popular opinion can compel governments towards both war and peace.

The logic of democratic disadvantage/authoritarian advantage continues to drive U.S. visions of Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War world. Viewing China as a “communist tyranny,” many Americans today hold that the CCP, unlike the U.S. government, can calmly construct China’s foreign policies unfettered by domestic constraints.

I disagree. After a quarter century of “reform and opening,” China today is no longer Mao’s China. The Chinese people enjoy a wide range of economic, social and cultural freedoms and are increasingly demanding political liberties. The emerging role that popular nationalism is playing in Chinese foreign policymaking challenges the “democratic disadvantage” view. Lacking the procedural legitimacy accorded to democratically elected governments and facing the collapse of communist ideology, the CCP is increasingly dependent upon its nationalist credentials to rule.

Lacking the procedural legitimacy accorded to democratically elected governments and facing the collapse of communist ideology, the CCP is increasingly dependent upon its nationalist credentials to rule. Thomas Christensen expressed this point succinctly in an influential Foreign Affairs article: “Since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese.” Popular nationalists may even, therefore, come to play a greater role in foreign policy decision making in China than in the United States.

“Chinese popular opinion” is not an oxymoron: domestic nationalist opinion is increasingly shaping Chinese foreign policy making. Just as the USS Maine and domestic American opinion forced McKinley to make a decision to go to war that he did not wish to make, “Japanese history textbooks” and domestic Chinese opinion forced Wen to make a public announcement of opposition to Japan’s UNSC bid that he would have preferred not to make. Foreign policy making in both the United States and China are “two-level games,” with diplomats having to look over their shoulders at domestic audiences even as they negotiate with their foreign counterparts.

Indignation and Conflict in Sino-Japanese Relations

I have defined indignation not simply as anger but as “righteous anger.” In an intriguing discussion more than a century ago, sociologist Charles
Cooley distinguished between an animal, visceral or blind anger that does not think, and a rational or ethical anger which refers to standards of justice and the sanction of conscience. The former may be emotionally pleasing: “An enduring hatred may also be a source of satisfaction to some minds.” The latter, however, may have a positive social function: “the higher function of hostility is to put down wrong.”27 Such righteous anger or indignation seeks to restore status after it has been taken away unfairly. It “seems designed to rectify injustice,” one group of psychologists has more recently written, “to reassert power or status, to frighten the offending person into compliance, to restore a desired state of affairs.”28 In Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt, Barrington Moore similarly argues “vengeance means retaliation. It also means a reassertion of human dignity or worth, after injury or damage. Both are basic sentiments behind moral anger and the sense of injustice.”29 Where Moore highlights the emotional, J. M. Barbalet stresses the instrumental: “Vengefulness is an emotion of power relations. It functions to correct imbalanced or disjointed power relationships. Vengefulness is concerned with restoring social actors to their rightful place in relationships.”30 Indignation can thus simultaneously have both symbolic and instrumental dimensions. It is such ethical anger, I suggest, that can impel sustained conflict and violence.

What sets anti-Japanese sentiment apart from other anti-foreign sentiments in China today is that while it includes a lower, visceral anger stemming from Japanese atrocities (like the Nanjing Massacre) in China during World War II, it also contains a higher, ethical anger stemming from the perceived injustice of “little brother” Japan’s humiliating defeat of “big brother” China during the Sino-Japanese Jiawu War of 1894–95. It is such indignation, in my view, that sustains anti-Japanese anger in China today, creating a very real possibility of Sino-Japanese conflict at the dawn of the 21st century.

Notes

3 On recent developments in neuroscience, see the very accessible writings of Antonio R. Damasio, for example Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994).
8 See Xiao Gongqing, “Cong minzuzhuyi zhong jiequ guojia ningjuli de xinziyuan” (Deriving from Nationalism a New Resource that Congeals the State), Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management) 1994, 4.
10 Jin Hui, Tongwen cangzang: Rijun qinHua baoxing beiwanglu (Wailing at the Heavens: the Violence of the Japanese Invasion of China) (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1995).

The Japanese invaded and colonized Manchuria following the Mukden Incident of 1931. However, the invasion of the rest of China did not begin until after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937. Chinese from the northeast invariably cite 1931 as the onset of the war; others frequently cite 1937.


16 In Republican China, playwrights like Xiao Jun used rape in nationalist plays such as Village in August, in which Japanese soldiers rape a patriotic peasant woman. The return of the “rape of China” theme in late 1990s China may be seen in such bestsellers as Chinese-American Iris Chang’s 1997 The Rape of Nanking.
19 Ravi Velloor, “Chinese PM to Japan: ‘Face up to history’,” The Straits Times (Singapore), April 13, 2005.
21 See, for example, “Seoul Opposes Japanese UN Security Council Bid,” Korea Times, Apr. 9, 2005.