



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION  
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015  
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# DIVISIVE NATIONALISM: PUBLIC REACTIONS TO THE DIAOYU ISLAND DISPUTES IN 2010 AND 2012

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**Divisive Nationalism: Public Reactions to the Diaoyu Island Disputes in 2010 and 2012**

**Synopsis:**

This paper argues that events of the 2010 and 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Island crises demonstrate the divisive effects of nationalism in Chinese society.

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ICS 496R

December 12, 2014

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## **Introduction**

Notwithstanding the economic reforms that have radically altered the People's Republic of China over the past few decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has managed to consolidate its power and maintain control over an authoritarian one-party state. The main ideological tool used by the CCP in this endeavor is the promotion of official nationalism, called "patriotism" by the regime. Through history education, media control, and propaganda campaigns, the party is attempting to build a national identity that will be unified behind the state and its leaders. But the strategy also has adverse side effects, notably the encouraging and intensifying of anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiment. When political realities, both international and domestic, are at odds with the official discourse and popular nationalistic sentiment, conflict occurs. This is attested to by the multiple outbursts of aggressive popular Chinese nationalism in recent years, including the anti-American protests after the Belgrade bombing incident in 1999, regional anti-Japanese protests in 2005, and the counter protests organized in 2008 around the Olympics and Western support for Tibetan independence.

More recently, the anti-Japanese protests in 2010 and 2012 over the Diaoyu islands dispute grabbed international attention as the crises brought Sino-Japanese relations to their lowest point in decades. Various forces and political motives were involved, but the reactions to the crises and the popular demonstrations highlight the tension between moderate Chinese, nationalists, and the government. These events suggest that Chinese nationalism, whether official or popular, does not unify Chinese society, but rather contributes to its fragmentation.

The number of works on nationalism is only increasing, and the interested researcher has a large theoretical base to draw upon. Benedict Anderson (1991, 6) wrote one of the definitive works on nationalism, wherein he defined a nation as an "imagined political community—and

imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” This definition has largely laid the groundwork for our current conception of nations and nationalism. For this paper, Ernest Gellner’s (2006, 1) definition of nationalist *sentiment* is equally important: “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle [that the political and the national unit should be congruent].”

Indeed, as noted above, angry outbursts of nationalist sentiment have erupted in China since the 1990s, and social scientists have accordingly taken a greater interest in Chinese nationalism. Michael G. Murdock (2006) investigated the origins of Chinese nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Sun Yat-sen and the political elite used it as an ideology to mobilize the people in favor of their nationalist government. His work corroborates the idea that nationalist ideology can be promoted by a regime in a bid to gain power. However, as Peter Hays Gries (2004) convincingly pointed out, Chinese nationalism is now more than just an official doctrine, as the deep emotional issues at play result in strong nationalist sentiment that is outside of regime control.

Many other authors (e.g. Zheng 1999; Wang 2008; Wang 1995; Rosen 2009; Fewsmith 2001) have written about Chinese nationalism, but most of this work focuses on the 1990s or the early 2000s; relatively little has been written about recent developments such as the anti-Japanese protests in 2010 and 2012. However, these events entirely merit intense study as they offer critical windows into the current state of Chinese society and the complex interests that motivate different groups. One leading work in this regard is Jessica Chan Weiss’s (2014) *Powerful Patriots*, which presents a theory explaining the motivations behind the CCP’s decisions to allow or repress popular demonstrations. She examined the 2010 and 2012 disputes in detail, and I draw heavily on her book for the chronology of the crises. Still, even her work

focuses more on the international relations aspects of the disputes, instead of on the effects of nationalism on Chinese society. This paper analyzes Chinese nationalism and the 2010 and 2012 anti-Japanese protests to present evidence that nationalism in China is divisive, not unifying.

In the first half of this paper, I introduce Chinese nationalism. I will first outline the historical background of Chinese nationalism and its goals, then introduce the CCP's current promotion of patriotism via large-scale propaganda campaigns and compulsory history education emphasizing a victim narrative. I will then briefly discuss the "100 years of national humiliation" and various American conspiracy theories to further explain the roots of nationalist anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiment. In the second half of the paper, I will describe and analyze the 2010 and 2012 Diaoyu islands crises and subsequent public reactions in China to support my theory that the widespread encouragement of patriotism is a dividing force in Chinese society.

## **Patriotism**

In this section I trace a basic history of state-sponsored Chinese nationalism and identify its goals in post-Tiananmen China. Chinese leaders first employed nationalism as a political tool in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to rally support for a republican government. Statism, or the belief in the need for a strong state, has remained a driving ideology of the leadership ever since, though specific details, emphases, and ideals of the nationalist discourse changed over time according to the political exigencies of the moment. The current flavor of patriotism began to emerge under Deng Xiaoping in the 80s and was intensified following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen Square incident at the end of the decade (Gries 2004). The party now popularizes nationalism as an ideology that will foster public support for the CCP and shape society in

accordance with party goals. In particular, Chinese nationalism revolves around three broad objectives deemed necessary for the people and the regime: economic development, political stability, and national unity (Zheng 1999).

Chinese nationalism, or the willful promotion of the “Chinese nation,” has been part of Chinese politics since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Murdock 2006). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous military and diplomatic defeats crushed the traditional Chinese Confucian identity as *the* civilization at the center of the world. In the resulting turmoil, many rising Chinese leaders and intellectuals decided that the only way to compete (and even survive) in the international arena was through the creation of a powerful, modern nation-state (Zheng 1999, 89). As they struggled for power in the 1920s, Sun Yat-sen and others realized the importance of mass mobilization and initiated propaganda campaigns (Murdock 2006, 58). The party (at that time the Guomin Dang or KMT) needed a state and the state needed a people; nationalist propaganda set out to “create” the nation.

The appeal of Chinese nationalism lay in strong anti-foreign sentiment at the time. The author Wang Gungwu (1995, 47-8) described the situation, saying that

The idea of nationalism itself was an inspiration for all Chinese who felt humiliated by the successive military defeats that led to unequal status for Chinese everywhere, to extraterritorial privileges for foreign residents within China, and to the increasing dominance of foreign enterprises on Chinese soil. Nationalism was tied to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as the key to almost all of the political struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, from the beginning Chinese nationalism was essentially anti-foreign. Chinese identity was constructed and defined in opposition to the “other,” to Westerners. Political elites promoted and manipulated these deeply emotional issues in order to garner public support, even when their true actions vis-à-vis foreign governments were conciliatory and amiable.

The nationalist discourse changed when the CCP defeated the KMT in 1949, but it remained nationalist all the same. As Benedict Anderson (1991, 2) points out, the new state still defined itself in nationalist terms: the *People's* Republic of China. Wang Gungwu (1995, 48) concludes that “despite the romantic internationalist slogans after the communist victory in 1949, national pride and interest remained in the forefront of the goals of the People’s Republic.” This is easily evidenced by the conflict and tensions between China and Russia, or China and Vietnam, all communist states.

The discourse changed again when Deng Xiaoping came to power in the 80s, but again, remained nationalist. The perceived necessity of a strong, centralized state was still paramount, but Deng offered a new strategy to achieve it. He convinced both officials and the public that economic power was the most important determinant of state power (Zheng 1999, 91), and the reforms he initiated pursued economic growth above almost everything else. Under Deng Xiaoping, economic development became the foremost virtue of Chinese nationalism.

In the late 80s and early 90s, however, the ideological foundation of the CCP began to crumble. With communism discredited as an ideology, the state governed by the Chinese Communist Party is *not* communist and, depending on where you are, not really Chinese either (Xinjiang, Tibet, etc.). Following the catastrophic events of the Tiananmen Square massacre and the fall of the Soviet Union, the CCP realized the hollowness of its political legitimacy and added a new tenet to nationalist discourse: political stability. Economic growth also gained even greater importance, as such growth not only increases state power but also satisfies the masses and offers up proof of the benevolence of the party’s authoritarian rule. Preoccupied with political legitimacy, the party sharply increased official nationalist propaganda in an attempt to fill the ideological vacuum and link the party and the state inseparably in the minds of the people.



In addition to touting the virtues of economic development and political stability, the regime continually reaffirmed the necessity of national unification (Zheng 1999, 91). In the 1990s, the term “national unification” referred specifically to Hong Kong and Taiwan, two territories with deep historical symbolism and meaning for the party and the Chinese people. Today, the term has shifted slightly to “national *integrity*,” a phrase broad enough to encompass issues such as the Diaoyu islands, the so-called nine-dash line in the South China Sea, and Xinjiang province. With the return of Hong Kong to Chinese control and the impasse with Taiwan, the shift reflects a change in emphasis on what is considered both salient and feasible.

These three broad goals of official Chinese nationalism—economic growth, political stability, and national integrity—are the public, overarching goals of the CCP, conveyed to the people constantly through the state-run media. This is the new ideology the CCP wants Chinese society to subscribe to, and official nationalist discourse is a grand endeavor to convince each member of society that the goals of the regime are also his or her own personal goals and patriotic duty.

Anderson (1991, 101) fittingly described the nature of “official nationalism” as “an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.” With the advent of the internet, Chinese citizens have far greater access to information and exponentially greater chances for interaction with each other and the outside world. This means that the Chinese “nationally-imagined community” has the potential to evolve quickly and independently of the party. Knowing this, the CCP vigorously uses nationalist media, propaganda campaigns, and history education to redefine nationalist ideals and the nationalist agenda in such a way that it always favors the regime.

## Promotion Strategy

States seeking to promote nationalism have a variety of tools at their disposal. Anderson (1991, 101) named “all the policy levers of official nationalism: compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism... and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation.” I will limit my discussion to three major tactics used by the CCP: nationalist language in media publications, propaganda campaigns such as the “Chinese dream,” and pro-party history education that emphasizes China as a victim of Western imperialism.

The careful manipulation of language is the first, most evident strategy used to popularize the regime’s nationalist ideals. In China, official nationalism is called “patriotism.” In Chinese, the exact term for “nationalism” is “minzu zhuyi” (民族主义). This term is inherently dangerous because “minzu” means people or *ethnicity*, and is the word used for the 55 ethnic minorities in China (“shaoshu minzu,” 少数民族). The last thing the CCP desires is to encourage separatism, and so the more friendly “aiguo zhuyi” (爱国主义, “patriotism;” literally “love country-ism”) is used. Everything is done to get the populace to buy into the “imagined community” of the Chinese state. Media publications (particularly those with articles from Xinhua, the official state-run news agency) consistently use the term “wo” (我, “I, me, my”) to modify words such as country, party, and military. Thus “guo” (国, “country”) becomes “woguo,” “jundui” (军队, “military”) becomes “wojundui,” etc. This naturally creates a sense of shared Chinese identity, common interest, and ownership, as Chinese readers unavoidably read the decisions and deeds of “my country,” “my party,” and “my military.”

Beyond simple language, the three main regime goals are repeated over and over in the state-run media to praise those who act as the regime wishes and denounce those who do not. As

a recent example, in response to the 2014 pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, the sally of mainland news articles accused the protestors of being “radicals” who were upsetting Hong Kong’s stable, harmonious political order and hurting the city’s economic interests. They also brashly accused outside elements (i.e. the UK and the US) of supporting the demonstrations in order to encourage separatism (e.g. Xinhua 2014a; Xinhua 2014b; BBC News 2014). This appeal to nationalism effectively inoculated against similar “destabilizing” activities on the mainland.

Biased news reporting is only one media tool. The CCP often launches large-scale propaganda campaigns, which include speeches in schools, banners on government buildings, billboards, television and radio commercials, and posters on every inch of the miles of fences surrounding China’s millions of construction projects. Since taking office, current president Xi Jinping has personally promoted the “Chinese Dream” as the slogan of his presidency. In his first speech as head of state, he used the phrase several times, saying that

We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation... To realise the Chinese road, we must spread the Chinese spirit, which combines the spirit of the nation with patriotism as the core and the spirit of the time with reform and innovation as the core. (BBC News, 2013)

In this speech, patriotism is defined as the “core” of the spirit of the nation. The concept of the “Chinese Dream” is inherently patriotic, and has been a major propaganda push since Xi became president in 2013. State-run media refer to it constantly in all of their publications, schools have “dream walls” where children are encouraged to write their own patriotic dreams, and it has even influenced pop music (BBC News 2013). The “Chinese Dream” is now a daily phrase.

An analysis of the Chinese characters used in “Chinese Dream” is insightful. Whereas in English the word “Chinese” can refer to people, language, culture, state, etc., the Chinese

themselves have different terms for each of these concepts. The official slogan, “zhongguo meng,” (中国梦) uses the word “guo,” *country*. The dream is not the dream of the Chinese culture (“zhonghua meng”中华梦), or even of the Chinese people (“huaren meng” 华人梦), but of the Chinese state. In a recent interview, the Chinese ambassador to the US said as much: “We can best describe it by borrowing President Xi Jinping's term, the 'Chinese Dream,' which is first and foremost for the Chinese nation. This is a tremendous effort by an ancient nation to modernize itself, to catch up with world development” (Richards 2014). This, according to the leadership, is China’s dream: modernization and development.

A critical aspect of the modernization dream is “rejuvenation,” or “restoration” (“fuxing” 复兴), a term articulated by previous presidents as a main goal of the Chinese nation (Wang 2014). This concept is rooted in the historical sources of Chinese identity. For thousands of years, Chinese dynasties headed some of the largest, most powerful states in the world and maintained a continuity of Chinese civilization. Yet in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, industrialized countries vastly outstripped China and internal and external forces led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty, resulting in chaos and poverty that climaxed in the Second World War. Ignoring the misery endured under early CCP leadership, the current regime promises that modernization and development will restore China to its rightful status as a great power.

Manipulating education has long been seen by the Chinese elite as a key element in shaping society (Murdock 2004, 20), and indeed, the CCP still manipulates Chinese national identity to great effect by carefully controlling history education. In 1991, the party began the “Patriotic Education Campaign,” which targeted Chinese youth by rewriting history textbooks and encouraging the creation of museums and cultural sites deemed important for historical memory and cultural identity (Wang 2008, 784). The main object of this campaign was to

change the previous national narrative, where China was a victor (i.e. the CCP defeated the Japanese and the KMT), to a victim narrative of national humiliation blaming the West (including Japan) for China's problems. These victim sentiments certainly were not invented by the CCP, but the campaign has strongly reinforced them, with dramatic consequences for popular nationalist sentiment. According to the narrative, only the CCP can reverse the trend, restore China's former greatness, and bring about "national rejuvenation" (Wang 2014, 2). This reveals the main motive behind the manipulation of historical perspective: to foster widespread loyalty to the party.

The effectiveness of this particular goal is dubious. Obviously, Chinese nationalism is more than just what is promoted by the CCP. As an ideology, the Chinese adhere to it in varying degrees, and some beliefs are dropped, changed, or added. Hereafter, I will use the term "popular nationalism" to refer to nationalist sentiment in the public at large, as opposed to the patriotic discourse advocated by the regime. Popular nationalism is heavily influenced by government initiatives, but occasionally differs with the party line. As will be discussed later on, this is why nationalism is a divisive force in Chinese society.

Still, taken together, all these actions form a formidable strategy intent on furthering nationalist ideology and creating party loyalty. The use of nationalist language and blatant media reporting biases limit the playing field for competing opinions while intense propaganda campaigns such as the "Chinese Dream" promote nationalist agendas. Underlying all nationalist sentiment is historical memory, which is manipulated by the promotion of a strong victim narrative. This is intended to build party loyalty, but also puts Chinese nationalism in an antagonistic relationship with many foreign countries, particularly Japan and the United States.

## **Anti-Japanese and Anti-American Sentiment**

The Patriotic Education Campaign fosters and exacerbates popular anti-Japanese sentiment in China by memorializing China's "100 years of humiliation." Several Western countries forced "unequal treaties" on China from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, but, following the atrocities of World War II, none is more aggressively denounced than Japan. Though nearly 70 years have passed, the suffering of Chinese at the hands of Japanese soldiers remains deeply imbedded in national memory, and anti-Japanese sentiment is widespread in China. Anti-American feelings, on the other hand, stem mostly from the Cold War and, after its end, the emergence of American hegemony. Conspiracy theories concerning American attitudes and actions toward China are also widespread due to media insinuations and popular nationalist publications such as *China Can Say No* (Wang 2011). However, political realities often require cooperation and interchange between all three countries, creating antagonism as ideologies conflict with practicality in Chinese society.

Encouraged by the Patriotic Education Campaign, "national humiliation" is central to popular nationalism. "Bai nian guo chi" (百年国耻) literally means "100 years of national humiliation," and refers to the century between the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the establishment of the P.R.C. in 1949, where China was "attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists" (Wang 2008, 784). As noted above, anti-imperialism was a dominant mobilization tactic in Chinese politics during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the Chinese even declared May 7 to be National Humiliation Day (Murdock 2004, 132). Anti-imperialism easily translated into anti-foreignism and, more specifically, into anti-Japanese sentiment.

In 1895, Japan defeated China in the Jiawu War (also known as the First Sino-Japanese War) and enacted the Treaty of Shimonoseki, effectively requiring that China grant Korean

independence and cede the Liaodong peninsula and Taiwan to Japan, among other things.

According to Peter Gries (2004, 70), this defeat

turned the world of China's elite upside down... Earlier losses in wars with "Western barbarians" (*yang guizi*) were one thing, but losing to an inferior *within* the realm of Sinocentric civilization fundamentally destabilized Chinese worldviews. Many Chinese today see the 1895 loss to Japan and the ensuing Treaty of Shimonoseki as the darkest hour in the "Century of Humiliation."

The ensuing years, and then World War II, known in China as the "War of Resistance Against Japan" obviously only made things worse. This deep-seated anti-Japanese sentiment is genuine among the Chinese, but state initiatives to promote nationalism have augmented it considerably. Before losing to the CCP, the KMT put the official number of Chinese killed in the "War of Resistance" at 1.75 million. The CCP raised the number to 9.32 million in 1949, but in 1995 Jiang Zemin nearly *quadrupled* the estimate, putting the official figure at 35 million deaths (Gries 2004, 80). Higher numbers reinforce the victim narrative and make popular nationalism even more emotionally salient to Chinese.

Anti-Japanese sentiment is highly prevalent in Chinese society. Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen (2001, 162) compiled survey data from the *China Youth Daily* which, despite some obvious methodological problems, presents some interesting findings:

For example, the word *Japan* "most easily" made 83.9 percent of the youth surveyed think of the Nanjing Massacre and made 81.3 percent think of "Japanese denial" and the "war of resistance against Japanese aggression."... When asked to place a label on the Japanese, 56.1 percent chose "cruel."

As noted in the survey results, anti-Japanese sentiment focuses on World War II, with the Nanjing Massacre being remembered as the defining moment of Japanese identity in the conflict. Furthermore, the controversial history books used in Japanese high schools are seen as, at best, not treating the war in sufficient depth, and at worse, as neglecting or glossing over it completely (Oi 2013). This "unwillingness of the Japanese to apologize" is the main justification for Chinese

to hold on to these issues, 70 years after the war ended and 40 years after “normalizing” relations with Japan.

However, anti-Japanese sentiment is not the only anti-foreign feeling present in Chinese society—another key element of popular nationalism is an “American conspiracy,” or the belief that the US seeks to “divide China territorially, subvert it politically, contain it strategically, [and] frustrate it economically” (Wang 2011, 27). According to nationalists, this conspiracy theory explains the continued US military presence in Asia, friendly US-Japan and US-Taiwan relations, American advocacy for human rights in China, American offers of mediation in territorial disputes, and the popularity of the Dalai Lama in the US, all as part of a grand strategy to hurt China (Zheng 1999, 97-100). Anti-American sentiment was particularly present in the 1990s (Li 2005). Another *China Youth Daily* poll in 1995 “found that 87.1 percent of respondents believed that the United States was the country ‘least friendly’ to China, whereas 57.2 percent responded that the United States was the country toward which they felt most negative” (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, 161). This is a remarkable turnaround from the late 80s, when many Chinese saw the US as a country to be emulated. One of the contributing causes of this about-face is the success of the Patriotic Education Campaign, blaming the West (with the US as leader) as the cause of China’s problems.

However, if taken too far, this has serious economic implications for China, which relies heavily on exports to the US to sustain its current growth. The regime knows this, and is far more attached to pragmatism than to ideological ideals. Stable, positive relationships with the US and Japan are certainly in their best economic interests, and the CCP actively works to maintain them. The CCP is thus engaged in a two front game, similar to the political maneuverings of Sun Yat-



sen in the 1920s, promoting anti-foreignism at home while making friends abroad (Murdock 2004, 109-110).

Of course, this fact does not escape the Chinese people, and so popular nationalism tends to be highly critical of Chinese foreign policy, since “strong statements often compensate for the weakness of its actual policies” (Wang 2011, 29). Ironically, then, popular nationalism can thus pose a direct threat to political stability if not carefully controlled.

In most cases, the government expends great effort to curb protests and demonstrations, as any sort of large-scale demonstration is politically destabilizing and risks turning against the regime, whatever its initial impetus. However, in certain situations the government is constrained to more actively support popular sentiment, as in the demonstrations following the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the US Air Force. The government supplied buses to transport student demonstrators to the American embassy in Beijing, knowing that if they were not allowed to throw rocks there, they would throw them at the government compound (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, 173). Likewise, during the escalation of the Diaoyu islands dispute between China and Japan in 2010 and 2012, China experienced numerous large-scale, high profile anti-Japanese protests. During the crises, the CCP performed a careful balancing act between domestic nationalists and international interests which eventually resulted in the repression of the protests and a public backlash against the regime.

### **Anti-Japanese Protests over the Diaoyu islands: 2010 and 2012**

The Diaoyu Islands consist of a few small islands located between Taiwan and Japan. Japan formally annexed the islands during the “100 years of humiliation,” and the legal basis for the dispute surrounds a treaty wherein Japan returned various territories to China. China claims

that the agreement includes the Diaoyu; Japan disagrees. In the 1970s both parties agreed to “shelve” the issue and leave the status quo, but occasionally tensions flare and the dispute is brought back into the limelight as both sides escalate the conflict. This was the case in both 2010 and 2012. The strong promotion of patriotism (and specifically of anti-Japanese sentiment) for more than a decade culminated in widespread demonstrations when the territorial dispute took a turn for the worse. In turn, these demonstrations had a polarizing effect on Chinese society when the regime finally took steps to reign them in. Below, I briefly introduce the conflict escalations in 2010 and 2012 and describe the ensuing demonstrations. In the next section I analyze public reactions to present evidence that nationalism is fragmenting Chinese society.

On Tuesday September 7, 2010, two Japanese naval vessels intercepted a Chinese fishing boat in the waters near Diaoyu Island. According to the Japanese, the Chinese boat rammed them in defiance. They arrested the Chinese sailors and the captain was taken to Okinawa for questioning. The Chinese government immediately summoned the Japanese ambassador to lodge a complaint, and the Foreign Ministry issued a statement: “We demand Japanese patrol boats refrain from so-called law-enforcement activities” (Johnson 2010). The next day, small protests were permitted in Beijing and Chongqing, and on September 10 China suspended planned talks with Japan on gas development in the East China Sea. Japan released the 14 crew members on September 13 but continued to detain the captain. September 18 saw anti-Japanese protests in multiple cities, commemorating the 79<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, though tight government supervision ensured that all these protests were kept small and short, and many others were prevented (Weiss 2014, 171, 174-5).

The dispute continued to escalate as China suspended “government contacts and other exchanges” with Japan (Fackler and Johnson 2010), then arrested four Japanese tourists on

charges of photographing military institutions on September 23 and halted the trade of rare earth minerals to Japan. The next day Japan caved in to the pressure and released the captain. The Chinese soon reciprocated by releasing the Japanese tourists and resuming the mineral shipments, but tensions remained high. Japanese protests condemning their government for releasing the captain were given prominent media coverage in China, and it did not take long for calls for anti-Japanese protests to spread. On October 16 numerous cities had protests that quickly grew from several hundred to several thousand and indulged in minor vandalism (Weiss 2014, 179). Similar protests occurred over the next few days, but the government immediately began to curb them. On October 20 the government forbade local media from reporting independently on protests either in China or Japan and managed to use heavy security to prevent a protest in Shenzhen (Weiss 2014, 181). The following weekend the government preempted protests in many large cities by putting universities on lockdown or by requiring students to attend extra classes. As a result, protests were organized in smaller cities to minimize attention from the central government. On October 26, the last anti-Japanese protest of 2010 occurred in Chongqing, where, though it also drew several thousand participants, it was dispersed in two hours (Weiss 2014, 182).

A very similar pattern occurred in 2012. Relations were still strained when the Japanese government confirmed a plan to purchase the Diaoyu Islands from the private owner and nationalize them. The announcement came on July 7, the anniversary of Japan's full-scale invasion of China, sparking widespread condemnation. Small protests were allowed by the regime, but large-scale demonstrations did not come until a month later. Activists from Hong Kong were permitted to land on the islands, with a resulting backlash from right-wing Japanese groups, who landed their activists on August 19. That same day, three dozen cities across China

had large anti-Japanese demonstrations, some of which turned violent (Weiss 2014, 201). The following weekend also had protests, though the government worked to increasingly tone them down in order to prevent them from getting out of hand and turning against the regime.

On September 11, however, the Japanese government announced the purchase of the islands and protests erupted across China. Jessica Chan Weiss (2014, 207) describes the situation:

By the weekend of September 15–16, nearly 100 Chinese cities witnessed anti-Japanese protests. The wave of protests culminated on September 18, the anniversary of Japan’s occupation of Manchuria, with anti-Japanese demonstrations taking place as many as 180 cities across mainland China. As it had the month before, the Chinese government allowed anti-Japanese street demonstrations to take place but sought to mitigate the risk that they would get out of control.

Once again, some protests became violent and destructive, and on a greater scale than before.

The scope of the demonstrations was unprecedented in recent years, and tensions remained high for months afterward as both governments continued to posture on the East China Sea.

As the largest popular demonstrations since the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, the anti-Japanese protests in 2010 and 2012 are highly significant. Though the government eventually managed to appease and subdue nationalist sentiment, both sets of protests offer insight into how nationalism divides China.

## **Fragmentation**

The demonstrations and subsequent events highlight a division of Chinese society into three basic groups: the government (the party), moderate “mainstream” Chinese, and hard nationalists. Throughout the disputes, the CCP pragmatically sought to maintain political stability by curbing demonstrations while appearing nationalistic, and strove to gain internationally by demanding or conceding as the situation required. Most Chinese seem unaffected—some important counter-nationalist trends continued, including increased pro-

Americanism and political dissatisfaction. For them, nationalism appears ineffective in achieving increased support for the regime. The hard nationalists, those who went into the streets to protest, found themselves at odds with both other groups. The government forcibly limited their right to protest, and the incidences of violence and vandalism in the demonstrations brought condemnation from mainstream Chinese. The hard nationalists, in turn, condemned the government for failing to live up to nationalist values. Clearly, nationalism is *not* a unifying force in Chinese society, and actually contributes to its fragmentation.

The attitudes among moderate Chinese and hard nationalists following the protests deserve a closer analysis. Interestingly, despite the distinct anti-American component of Chinese nationalism and American complicity conspiracies in the Diaoyu Island crises (Wang 2001, 28), certain pro-American trends among mainstream Chinese run directly contrary to what one would expect if nationalist sentiment was more widespread following the protests. The trawler incident that sparked the 2010 crisis came after many citizens in South Korea and Japan participated in prolonged protests against US military bases, and so the conspiracy theory accused the US of stirring up trouble in order to maintain a viable reason for its bases in the area. However, as shown below, anti-American sentiment did not seem to grow following the disputes, thus showing the limited appeal of this part of Chinese nationalism.

First, applications in China for tourist visas to the US increased by 36% each year from 2010 to 2012, and by another 15% in 2013 to an annual total of 1,254,335 (US Department of State 2013). While still small in proportion to China's population of 1.3 billion, this is nearly a four-fold increase since 2009. Of course, Chinese can live abroad and still be intensely nationalist, as demonstrated by the worldwide nationalist Chinese protests following the bombing of the Belgrade embassy in 1999 (Gries 2004, 20). But this nationalism is not the same

as the patriotism put forth by Beijing—it does not inherently support the regime. In fact, many wealthy Chinese are choosing to leave precisely because they realize that critical political institutions such as property rights and rule of law are not secure in China (Browne 2014).

More significant than the number of tourists is the number of Chinese students studying abroad, which has also grown in the US each year by more than 20% since 2007/2008, to a total of 235,597 in 2012/2013 (Institute of International Education 2013). Even though students were a major driving force behind the demonstrations in China, more and more continue to study abroad in the US despite anti-American nationalist ideology.

Second, even students who stay in China accept a great deal of American influence. Stanley Rosen (2009, 365) summarized the findings of a student survey published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2007 as follows:

More than 94 percent acknowledged that they had been influenced by Western culture, and even though more than 82 percent agreed that Western video products propagate Western political ideas and a Western lifestyle, fewer than 12 percent expressed a willingness to negate such products. Most directly, more than 51 percent identified themselves with American cultural concepts... The surveyors were surprised to discover that more than 61 percent identified with liberalism (*ziyou zhuyi*) and found it to be a concept of universal moral significance, despite the fact, as the surveyors put it, that everyone knows liberalism is part of Western political thought and the basis of the "democratic system" associated with Western capitalism. In like manner, the surveyors were dismayed to find that close to 36 percent of respondents endorsed the concept of "separation of powers" (*sanquan fenli*) associated with Western political and legal systems.

The results of this survey present some interesting contradictions to the anti-American sentiment purportedly found by the *China Youth Daily* in the 1990s. The most plausible explanation is that China's technological development, and especially increased internet access, has opened the doors of American cultural influence for most Chinese youth. As noted above, American entertainment media is widely enjoyed, and through this, certain Western ideas are transmitted. Among the current younger generation, blanket anti-American sentiment does not seem to be an accepted part of nationalist ideology.

Pro-government support is another reaction one would expect to find following the island disputes if nationalism is successful at unifying the population behind the regime. However, general satisfaction with the CCP did not change following the disputes. While reliable poll data concerning support for top leadership in China is lacking, polls on policy priorities and public satisfaction are permitted as a way for the leadership to assess the public mind. Thus, though limited, it can give insight to domestic support. The Canton Public Opinion Research Center (CPORC) regularly conducts polls on public opinions. Though many of these polls are drawn only from the city of Guangzhou, they have some generalizability as Guangzhou had several large anti-Japanese protests during the crisis of 2012, some of which turned violent (Weiss 2014, 208).

Public satisfaction ratings for the Guangzhou police saw no statistically significant change from 2008 to 2012, staying at 39% of respondents who chose “satisfied” (CPORC 2012a). Nor was there any change from 2009 to 2010 in satisfaction with government efforts to improve health, correct income inequality, or overall government efficiency (CPORC 2011). However, satisfaction with other public priorities, housing and product quality, actually *decreased* between 2009 and December 2010 (CPORC 2011). Clearly nationalism, at least that expressed by the demonstrations, was ineffective at improving public opinion on domestic issues and increasing party support. Mainstream Chinese are also pragmatic—quality of living standards matter more than ideological ideals.

In this light, it is not surprising that many Chinese criticized the demonstrators for disturbing the peace when some protests turned violent. Famous bloggers such as Han Han, representing the moderate majority of Chinese society, criticized the protestors as vandals, arguing that their actions had “nothing to do with patriotism” and saying that “they have wasted

their time in a wrong battle” (Weiss 2014, 208). This tension between moderates and hard nationalists is interesting, especially because many high-profile figures (including Han Han) initially suggested that the demonstrations should be turned against the government to protest domestic issues such as forced demolitions (Weiss 2014, 171-2).

The regime is also aware of this, and in 2010 and 2012, was constantly on alert to prevent the protests from becoming a platform for venting domestic grievances. During an anti-Japanese demonstration in 2010 in Baoji, a small city in the province of Shaanxi, Japanese media reported hundreds of other banners opposing corruption, housing prices, and even calling for a multiparty system (Weiss 2014, 181). The fact that the spate of protests in 2010 and 2012 ended through coercion, not the abatement of public sentiment, also highlights the government’s resolve to strictly control the situation.

However, the repression of protests pits both mainstream Chinese and hard nationalists against the government. Once all protests were quelled and overtures were made to Japan out of economic interests, there was strong public backlash against the regime for not living up to its supposedly nationalist credentials. Similar flares of anti-Japanese sentiment occurred in 1990 and 1996 due to tensions over the Diaoyu Islands, and there again the Chinese public discerned a large difference between the strong nationalist rhetoric of the government and its actual policy vis-à-vis Japan (Downs and Saunders 1999). Accordingly, a poll by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1998 “revealed that 82 percent of mainland citizens are opposed to the government’s policy toward Japan, noting that the government has departed from principle on such issues as the Diaoyu Islands’ sovereignty,” among others (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, 163). In 2010 and 2012 various nationalists also criticized the government as being “weak” for repressing protests and not taking a stronger stance against Japan (Weiss 2014, 201-202).



Even though anti-Japanese sentiment was widespread in during the dispute, the nationalist anti-Japan demonstrations in 2010 and 2012 did not unify Chinese society. Public support for the CCP did not increase; rather, government approval decreased among more extreme nationalists and potentially among the public at large. Mainstream public opinions concerning domestic problems and general local government approval ratings did not change following the disputes; many desired to use the protests for domestic purposes. And despite the prevalence of American conspiracy theories regarding the dispute, the strong anti-American sentiment espoused by popular nationalism has not prevented socially mobile Chinese from visiting the United States for travel, study, or immigration purposes, nor has it prevented the widespread consumption of American media among Chinese youth or the resultant adoption of some American ideals.

## **Conclusion**

The 2010 and 2012 anti-Japanese protests surrounding the Diaoyu Islands dispute shed light on the divisive nature of Chinese nationalism. The government promotes nationalism in an attempt to unify the people behind the party and the state and achieve party goals such as economic growth, political stability, and territorial integrity. This is primarily accomplished through a strategy that relies on anti-foreignism with deep historical roots. In turn, this anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiment often leads to emotional outbursts such as the 2010 and 2012 protests. However, contrary to the desires of the regime, the protests and the public reactions to them suggest that nationalism is dividing society by increasing tension between the government, the moderate majority, and hard nationalists. The majority of Chinese are less

affected by nationalism, as indicated by increasingly pro-American trends. Domestically, they are more concerned with quality of life than with ideology, and sometimes see the protests as opportunities to criticize government practices. On the other hand, they disagree with the violent behavior of some of the more extreme nationalists, and are divided against them. But when the protests are curbed by the government, the hard nationalists and the moderates together express dissatisfaction with the regime for limiting the right to protest.

Clearly, current Chinese nationalism is a divisive, and not a unifying, force in Chinese society. It exacerbates tensions between different groups and the government and influences Chinese foreign policy. None of the tension between these groups has turned violent, but with the massive changes occurring in China as the country rapidly modernizes, any destabilizing force poses a potential threat. Despite the intentions of the CCP, Chinese nationalism risks to weaken regime control instead of strengthening it.

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