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Chinese Nationalism: Challenging the State?

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In July 2003, 66 years after the Marco Polo Bridge incident that led to Japan's invasion of central China, a group of Chinese nationalists organized an Internet petition. Their goal: to prevent Japan from winning a \$12 billion Chinese government contract for the construction of a high-speed Beijing-Shanghai rail link. Featuring an image of a clenched fist evocative of socialist propaganda, their campaign logo read: “Heaven and Earth will not tolerate traitors. We *don't* want the Japanese *bullet train*. We refuse the use of Japanese products for the Beijing-Shanghai line.” In just one week, the organizers gathered 90,000 e-signatures, which they publicly submitted to the Ministry of Railways in Beijing on July 29.

Visiting the Chinese capital the next week, Chikage Ogi, Japan's minister of transportation, discovered that her appointments had been cancelled: she was unable to meet with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao or even any Railway Ministry officials. The press in both China and Japan described the cancellations as a snub. The rail contract decision, furthermore, was suddenly deferred. Petition organizer and “nationalist hero” Feng Jinhua declared that the Internet petition had a “clear impact.”

That very week of Ogi's visit, construction workers in Qiqihar in China's northeast uncovered and ruptured five drums of mustard gas left from the wartime Japanese occupation. Dozens were injured and one man died. The popular Chinese reaction to the news was fast and furious. Internet chatrooms were filled with anti-Japanese invective. A million

e-signatures were gathered on a second petition demanding that the Japanese government thoroughly resolve the chemical weapons issue. It was delivered to the Japanese embassy in Beijing on September 4, 2003, as Chinese and Japanese diplomats were negotiating compensation for the victims of the Qiqihar accident. Petition organizer Lu Yunfei later said that he and his followers sought to “put pressure on the Japanese government.”

Domestic Chinese analysts were quick to note the significance of the online petitions, declaring 2003 to be the beginning of a “new chapter” or “second wave” of Chinese nationalism. In this view, books like *China Can Say No*, which appeared in 1996, and *Behind the Demonization of China*, published a year later, marked the “first wave” of recent popular nationalism. The first wave was largely anti-American and centered on events such as US involvement in the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the 2001 collision of an American surveillance plane with a Chinese fighter jet. This nationalist outpouring was concentrated in books and magazines and thus largely confined to intellectuals. The current second wave, by contrast, focuses on Japan and is more Internet-based. This new “Internet nationalism,” the analysts argued, is “more influential” than the earlier wave, better able to convert popular opinion into political action.

They turned out to be right. April 2005 witnessed three successive weekends of anti-Japanese protests involving tens of thousands of Chinese in cities as diverse as Beijing, Shanghai, Canton, Shenzhen, and Chengdu. The protests were organized almost exclusively by e-mail, text messaging, and online chatrooms, and were notable for their lack of a clear leadership. While the street demonstrations did die

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down in May, Internet activity did not. Indeed, on July 1, 2005, activists presented an e-signature petition with 46 million names to an aide to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The petition stated that “Japan thus far shows no remorse [for] its past misdeeds, refuses to repent, and appears to be untrustworthy. The international community cannot and must not designate such [a] state to [a permanent] seat on the Security Council.” The vast majority of the 46 million signatures came from China. (According to the China Internet Network Information Center’s latest report this January, China has 96 million “Internet users,” loosely defined as those who use the Internet at least an hour per week. It is thus highly likely that many Chinese “netizens” signed the petition more than once; the 46 million figure is nonetheless astounding.)

The Internet clearly is altering the nature of politics in the People’s Republic. Chinese Internet petitions are not just getting larger; their targets are also changing, first presented to the Chinese government, then to the Japanese embassy, then to the United Nations. And the Internet has transformed the ways that Chinese protest in the streets, facilitating larger and more decentralized demonstrations.

What should we make of the emergence of Internet nationalism in twenty-first century China? First, Western analysts must move beyond reductionist, top-down understandings of Chinese politics to embrace the complexity of state-society legitimacy dynamics in China. Nationalist opinion is an increasingly important constraint on China’s elite decision-makers. Western analysts and policy makers ignore this new development at their own peril.

CYBER-LIBERTARIAN DREAMS

When the Internet first emerged as a significant technology in the 1990s, many Westerners optimistically predicted that it would be a potent force for political change. Authoritarian regimes, in this view, could not survive the free flow of information that the Internet allows. Indeed, US Secretary of State George Shultz had suggested as early as 1985 that “totalitarian societies face a dilemma: either they try to stifle the [information and communication] technologies and thereby fall further behind in the new industrial revolution, or else they permit these technologies and see their totalitarian control inevitably

eroded.” In the extreme cyber-libertarian view, the Internet would topple tyrannies around the globe.

But authoritarian regimes endured. Indeed, some appeared to be using new Internet technologies to their advantage. In a 2002 *Weekly Standard* cover article, Ethan Gutmann argued that the Internet in China was “a tool of the Beijing government, not a force for democracy.” Tamara Shie, a researcher at National Defense University, has even declared that in the Chinese context, “arguments for the emancipatory power of the Internet are merely utopian political rhetoric.” The Internet, in this pessimistic view, cannot overcome China’s authoritarian political culture.

The idea that the Chinese people are largely impotent before the vast coercive apparatus of the Oriental state has a long history in the Western study of Chinese politics, and it continues to impede Western studies of state legitimation in China today. In the

eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, an “Oriental despotism” view of Chinese politics prevailed, depicting Asian absolutism as the opposite of Western liberal-

ism. American freedom, in particular, has long been constructed against the foil of Chinese tyranny.

During the cold war, “totalitarianism” replaced “Oriental despotism” as the predominant paradigm for studying China, but the state dominance thesis persisted. Since the cold war’s end, new approaches have focused on civil society and the public sphere in state-society relations, but the thesis of state dominance endures. The Western media and academics alike still largely depict the Chinese people as defenseless against the coercive power of an omnipotent Chinese state.

Western analysis of Chinese nationalism exhibits this same tendency. The dominant view today depicts Chinese nationalism as “party propaganda”: the Communist elite constructing nationalism to use it in its domestic and foreign policies. Thomas Christensen expressed this view succinctly in an influential 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article: “Since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese.” Chinese nationalism is largely reduced to “state” or “official” nationalism, a top-down party affair that leaves little room for popular participation.

This “state nationalism” view is not wrong. The Chinese Communist Party came to power based in

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large part on its nationalist credentials, leading the Chinese peasantry during the victorious “War of Resistance Against Japan.” And nationalism has been central to Chinese Communist claims to legitimacy since. School textbooks indoctrinate a nationalist vision of the Chinese nation. Following the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, the party initiated a “Patriotic Education Campaign” to shore up its shattered legitimacy.

But the top-down state nationalism view is incomplete. Nationalist politics is never a one-way street. As e-petition organizers like Feng Jinhua and Lu Yunfei show, popular nationalists play a central role in Chinese nationalist politics today. If the state nationalism thesis were the end of the story, then the state should have both the ability and the willingness to manipulate Chinese nationalism at will, turning it on and off as it sees fit. Recent petitions and protests clearly demonstrate that this is not the case. The state is not the only actor in Chinese nationalism and does not have complete control over it. A more dynamic analysis of Chinese nationalist politics, therefore, is needed.

POWER, PARTY, AND PUBLIC

How can we move beyond state dominance approaches to bring the Chinese people back into the study of Chinese politics? We can begin by reexamining the neglected core of the discipline of political science: power.

“Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” Mao Zedong said and wrote many, many things. And yet this quote is among the best known of his remarks in the West. Why? Because it fits with prevalent Western views of Chinese politics, and therefore resonates with Western audiences. As Richard Madsen argued in *China and the American Dream*, Americans continue to construct and treasure American liberty in opposition to the “Red menace” of communism: Americans can freely participate in politics, but Chinese are mere slaves to China’s authoritarian rulers.

In this common view, power in Chinese politics can be reduced to coercion: the Communist Party endures solely because of the coercive power of the state. Little wonder that the image of a People’s Liberation Army tank facing down a single Chinese man, Wang Weilin, remains the most enduring image of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre in the West. In the Western imagination, communism = tyranny = tanks = coercive power.

But Mao also said, “When you make revolution, you must first manage popular opinion.” Western analysts have tended to treat “Chinese popular opin-

ion” as an oxymoron. Mao knew better. All regimes require the consent of the governed—legitimate power—to endure for long. It is extremely costly to have to constantly coerce compliance; it is much cheaper and more practical to persuade. Resorts to coercion, furthermore, undermine regime legitimacy.

Mao understood the importance of persuasive forms of power. His “manage popular opinion” remark came from the period just before the Cultural Revolution when he was busy cultivating his charismatic and traditional authority. The *Little Red Book* of Mao quotations and the Mao cult helped to persuade an entire generation of China’s youth, many of whom were soon to become Red Guards, to voluntarily do Mao’s bidding. Indeed, the Cultural Revolution would never have been possible without Mao’s careful cultivation of popular opinion.

Power, at its simplest, is the ability to get others to do what they would not otherwise do. It is thus relational. Power does not exist in isolation, but only if others accept it. And it occurs along a continuum, from more coercive to more persuasive or legitimate forms.

“THE PEOPLE ARE VERY ANGRY”

These two aspects of power—its relational nature and the tension between its coercive and legitimate forms—are central to an understanding of the dynamics of nationalist politics in China today.

The April 16, 2005, anti-Japanese demonstrations in downtown Shanghai illustrate the argument. “The Chinese people are very angry; there will be serious consequences!” read a long banner held aloft by a dozen marching demonstrators. Another banner revealed the object of their anger: “Oppose Japanese imperialism!” Other banners 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 protesters held high a 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!” Images of butcher knives, swords, and arrows were painted piercing the rising sun of Japan’s national flag.

But it was the image of Japan’s Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that incurred the greatest wrath from the young demonstrators. One protester gave him a mustache to make him look like Adolf Hitler. Others went further, dehumanizing the prime min-

ister. One placard painted a pig's snout and ears onto his face and declared in large characters, "Death to Koizumi the pig!" The most ominous images evoked a deceased Koizumi, with tombstones bearing his name, and a photo of a funeral with Koizumi's picture at the center.

In addition to peacefully waving Chinese flags, singing the Internationale, and chanting anti-Japanese slogans, the demonstrators engaged in a number of less benign activities. 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.

Why do so many Chinese today hate the Japanese? After a quarter-century of unprecedented economic growth, most Chinese no longer fear Japan, and a long suppressed anger at Japan has resurfaced. The Maoist "victor narrative" about heroic Chinese triumphs over Western and Japanese imperialism, dominant from the 1950s through the 1980s, has been challenged since the mid-1990s by a new "victim narrative" about Chinese suffering during the "century of humiliation." To most Chinese, the Japanese are "devils"—not just because of the brutality of the Japanese invasion of China and the sheer numbers of Chinese killed by Japanese troops, but also because of an ethical anger with earlier origins. The perceived injustice of "little brother" Japan's impertinent behavior toward "big brother" China, starting in the late nineteenth century and running through World War II atrocities like the "Rape of Nanking," helps to sustain deep anti-Japanese sentiments, setting them apart from other, more fleeting anti-foreign feelings.

But what about the state's role in the protests? If the government did not initiate the demonstrations, why did it not stop them? "Why Didn't," as Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* put it in the title of an editorial, "the Chinese Authorities Do Something?"

A common view is that the Chinese government encouraged the anti-Japanese protests for both domestic and international purposes. Domestically, the Communist Party is seen as using Japan as a scapegoat to preempt popular criticisms of the Chinese government itself. Tokyo Mayor Ishihara Shintaro quickly declared that the Chinese "government

is initiating a dangerous kind of nationalism in order to divert public frustration." Internationally, the party is seen as using popular anti-Japanese protests to achieve specific foreign policy goals, such as denying Japan a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

State nationalism arguments do of course tell an important part of the story. There is no question that the party has deployed its educational and propaganda systems to inculcate anti-Japanese views. But it would be a mistake to attribute to the Communist Party complete control over Chinese nationalism today. With the emergence of the Internet, cell phones, and text messaging, popular nationalists in China are increasingly able to act independently of the state. Popular nationalists—not the Communist Party—initiated and organized the April 2005 anti-Japanese protests.

And the critical question is not so much who initiated the demonstrations as why did the party not stop them sooner? The answer is that the party's hands were tied. It did not want to see Sino-Japanese relations deteriorate, but was forced to allow the anti-Japanese protests for fear of losing

the consent of the Chinese people. "The basic policy of our government has been to be conciliatory to the Japanese and the rest of the world, but that policy has become less viable today, when people are demanding a tougher line," Beijing University's Pan Wei told *The New York Times* during the April protests.

Many in the Chinese elite may have found the anti-Japanese protests gratifying, for they largely share the popular nationalists' hatred of Japan. But these sentiments are outweighed by the elite's number one goal: regime survival. And members of China's elite know that their continued rule depends in large part on continued economic development—which requires stable relations with Japan. Sino-Japanese trade benefits both countries enormously, and conflict with Japan is certain to disrupt China's economic growth. That the government sent text messages urging restraint by the April demonstrators reveals both the elite's desire to keep the protests within acceptable bounds and its weak position: forced to plead with the protesters for calm.

The Chinese state had the capability to clamp down on popular nationalists. The People's Armed Police could have stepped in to prevent protesters from hurling eggs and rocks at the Japanese consulate

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in Shanghai. But any blatant use of force to suppress the demonstrators could have backfired. Because anti-Japanese sentiment is widespread in China today, had the Chinese state deployed force, its legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people would have been seriously undermined. And few regimes last for long by force alone; stable governments require some degree of consent of the governed.

THE COMMUNISTS CONSTRAINED

Because the Communist Party's legitimacy is based in large part on nationalist claims—to make China rich and strong and, more fundamentally, to restore China's respect in the international community—it is increasingly stuck between the rock of domestic nationalists and the hard place of international politics. The tough foreign policies that domestic opinion often demands can arouse fears among its neighbors about China's rise, undermining the leadership's stated foreign policy goal of creating a peaceful environment for China's development. Nationalist opinion is increasingly constraining the ability of China's elite to coolly pursue China's national interest.

This argument runs counter to a long-standing Western view that democracies are constrained by elections and public opinion and thus at a disadvantage in foreign policy making. Authoritarian regimes, conversely, are seen as free of domestic constraints and thus at a diplomatic advantage. "In the conduct of their foreign relations," US Secretary of State Dean Acheson asserted during the cold war, "democracies appear to me decidedly inferior to other governments."

Popular opinion, in this view, can compel both aggression and nonaggression against the will of foreign policy makers in democratic states. The *Maine* and "Munich" incidents 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 historian Ernest May, "for a cause in which he did not believe." "Munich" is short for the 1938 acquiescence of Great Britain 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.

The "democratic disadvantage"/"authoritarian advantage" logic continues to drive American

visions of Chinese foreign policy today. Viewing China as a dictatorship, many Americans hold that the Chinese Communist Party, unlike the US government, can calmly construct China's foreign policies unfettered by domestic constraints. One example was the US-China Security Review Commission's report submitted to Congress in 2002. It expressed concern that, in contrast with America's China policy, which lacks consistency and is beset by rivalries between Congress and the Bush administration and among various interest groups, China's America policy is driven by a coherent set of expansionist goals. Free of domestic constraints, Chinese foreign policy makers are seen as better able to pursue their objectives.

The emerging role that popular nationalism is playing in Chinese foreign policy making challenges the "authoritarian advantage" view. It is clear that the April 2005 anti-Japanese protests influenced China's Japan policy. China's evolving policy toward Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council can serve as a case study. On April 13, during a state visit to India, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao publicly announced that China would oppose Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the Security Council: "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."

China and Japan are rivals for dominance in the newly emerging East Asian security order. Wen's opposition to Japan's Security Council bid should thus come as little surprise. The timing and context of Wen's announcement, however, do call for explanation: Why had China not 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?

Circumstantial evidence suggests that popular nationalism played a significant role in elite decision making on this Japan policy issue. While members of China's elite did not wish to see Japan become a permanent member of the Security Council, they also did not want to jeopardize China's lucrative trade and investment relations with Japan. Until April 13, therefore, they had chosen to take a backseat on the issue, allowing other governments, like South Korea's, to take the lead in publicly opposing Japan's UN bid. China's policy toward Japan's quest for a Security Council seat 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 2003 Iraq War debate. Although China opposed US unilateralism on Iraq, it remained largely silent, allowing France and Germany to take the lead—and the heat—in opposing US policy.)

So why did China's leadership not maintain this "lay low while others take the lead" policy when it came to Japan and the UN? While it is impossible to know for sure—we simply do not have sufficient access to the inner workings of Zhongnanhai, China's leadership compound in Beijing—the circumstantial evidence is compelling: China's elite was responding to the pressures of domestic nationalist opinion. By early April, the Internet petition opposing Japan's Security Council bid had gathered a staggering 30 million signatures from irate Chinese netizens. And Prime Minister Wen's announcement came after two successive weekends of popular anti-Japanese demonstrations in China that had focused on opposing Japan's seat on the Security Council. "China must vote no and not just abstain," said popular nationalist Tong Zeng. "The government may not want to take the lead, but the Chinese people have taken the lead." This popular pressure forced the leadership—against its own will—to come out very publicly against Japan's bid.

Lacking the procedural legitimacy accorded to democratically elected governments and facing the collapse of communist ideology, the Chinese Communist Party is increasingly dependent on its nationalist credentials to rule. But bottom-up popular pressures are increasingly threatening the party's nationalist legitimacy. And those pressures tend to be of the aggressive *Maine* variety—not the pacifist Munich type. Chinese nationalism, therefore, can no longer be described as a purely "state" or "official" top-down affair. Aware that popular nationalists now command a large following, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is actively seek-

ing to appease them. China's foreign policy makers, it appears, do not enjoy a "nondemocratic advantage" over their counterparts in democracies; as they make policy, they too must be responsive to domestic opinion.

THE DANCE OF POLITICS

At its core, politics in China today is like politics everywhere: it involves contestation over power. Seeking power on the cheap, the Communist Party makes a variety of claims, including nationalist claims, to legitimate rule and the voluntary consent of the Chinese people.

The party's nationalist claims, however, are increasingly falling on deaf ears. Few now accept the decades-old Chinese communist mantra that only the party can save China. Moreover, many popular nationalists are beginning to articulate their own nationalist counterclaims—often employing the regime's own nationalist grammar—to argue that they have the nationalist right to participate in Chinese politics. The party is thus losing its hegemony over Chinese nationalist discourse, weakening the hyphen that holds the Chinese Party-nation together.

China's cyber-nationalists, armed with PCs and cell phones, are increasingly contesting party claims to nationalist legitimacy. So far, the party has done a masterful job of containing popular nationalism. But it is forced to walk a fine line. Let the next nationalist protests spin out of control, and the party could become a target of popular criticism, whether for failure to uphold China's national dignity, or corruption, or social injustice. But should the party resort to force to suppress nationalist protesters, its legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people could receive a mortal blow. Either scenario could lead to regime change. The party and nationalist protesters are engaged in a very subtle dance, both seeking to use each other to achieve their goals, but also fearful of the threat each represents to their own survival. ■