

# The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

Written by Mark Purvis

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/27/the-impact-of-nationalism-on-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-japan/>

MARK PURVIS, JUL 27 2015

While the idea of commemorating and memorialising defeat may be dismissed as an orientalist quirk of tradition, the tropes of shame, humiliation and revenge can be found in almost all societies. One may look at Russia's obsession with recognition after the humiliations of the 1990s (Neumann, 2008; Rywkin, 2014; Tsygankov, 2013). Germany and Argentina have also utilised similar narratives (Harkavy, 2000).

In China, humiliation plays a significant part in the construction of collective memory. In response to the Tiananmen Incident, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started promoting, and continues to promote, the narrative of humiliation as part of a broader discourse of nationalism. In utilising a feeling of victimhood embedded in the humiliation narrative, the CCP is able to project opposition outwards, recasting the party as a harbinger of stability and prosperity (Wang, 2012). Many sites of Chinese nation-building and state legitimation have been identified, including museums (Vickers, 2007), public holidays (Callahan, 2006) and even the internet (Zhang, 2013). The cultivation of a Chinese patriotism appears to have satisfied its original intentions (Zhao, 1998).

Since a review of the CCPs success would differ little from the aforementioned studies, I will instead investigate the effects of this growing nationalism in another sphere. With this essay, I will show how the CCP has narrowed the scope for productive relations with Tokyo through its investment in this nationalist discourse. I will begin by showing how the humiliation narrative has given rise to a sense of Chinese victimhood by examining the way China remembers the 'Rape of Nanjing'. This is used to demonstrate how collective memory is used to foster humiliation and victimhood in contemporary Sino-Japanese relations. I will then show how the CCP discusses the disputes surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (herein referred to as the Senkaku Islands due to international recognition as such) in a way that connects current tensions to the tradition of humiliation and victimization by Japan. This will be done through an analysis of both official and unofficial government sources. I argue that this is done to delegitimise Japanese claims by conflating the images of the 'imperial' and the 'modern'. In doing so, the CCP has managed to forge a sense of national unity without calling upon socialism. I will finish by considering the implications of this for future Sino-Japanese relations.

Chinese nationalism is not merely dictated as an ideology from the top. There are significant challenges presented by grassroots organisations, and other 'nationalisms' differ greatly from the Party line. The constraining effects of popular nationalism have been identified prior (Liao, 2013, p. 557), hence I will only be addressing the discourses utilised by the Communist Party in this essay.

### Collective Memory and Sovereignty in Chinese Nationalist Discourse

Callahan's examination of cartography demonstrates that defining the borders of China is a political act (2009). China's hypersensitivity towards the issue of sovereignty is visible in the use of its Security Council veto regarding intrastate matters (Holland, 2012, p. 8). The origin of this sensitivity can be traced back to the Century of Humiliation (Zhao, 2000). Foreign occupation and extraterritoriality are deeply embedded in China's 'national myth'. Bell defines myth as "a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation's past and its place in the world, its historical eschatology: a story that elucidates its contemporary meaning through (re)constructing its past"

# The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

Written by Mark Purvis

(Cheskin, 2012, p. 563).

The 'story' of the Century of Humiliation is central to China's construction of the past and, therefore, its sense of self in the present. There is a teleological component to Century of Humiliation remembrance as well, in that the Century is framed as a period of time that China had to overcome in order for it to realise its greatness. The reification of this episode of Chinese history serves to justify the notion of Chinese victimhood. Wang argues that China has a "Chosenness-Myths-Trauma complex", which defines its national identity (2012, p. 41). This trauma creates both victim and victimizing identities for the self and other. In China, the role of the victimizing other is fulfilled by the imperial nations, of whom Japan is one. Relations with Japan are heavily coloured by the euphemistically named 'history issue', the occupation of Manchuria and numerous atrocities of the Japanese Imperial Army perpetrated by China during WWII. To understand why issues regarding territorial and national unity are particularly sensitive with regards to Japan, an examination of the Rape of Nanjing is useful.

The 'Rape of Nanjing' is a site of particular trauma for Chinese nationalists. The Rape occurred between December 1937 and January 1938, in which the Japanese Imperial army killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and POWs and raped over 20,000 women (Callahan, 2009, p. 164). While one may examine the historiography of this dark chapter in the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in greater detail, I would like to draw attention to the way that China 'remembers' Nanjing.

Victimization by Japan is seen as particularly damaging to the Chinese national body, owing to a myth of shared culture and blood (Gries, 1999). China remembers Nanjing as part of the master narrative of humiliation and the foci of the Century of Humiliation. Territorial integrity was challenged by the installation of a puppet government in occupied Manchuria and the butchered Chinese scarred the national body. Some have even suggested that the Rape of Nanjing was an act of genocide (Campbell, 2009). In contrast, historical revisionism in Japan has led some to claim that incidents like Nanjing were either overplayed or entirely fabricated (Bartrop & Totten, 2007, p. 298-299). The response to this has been a deepened sense of injustice towards the Chinese (Simonsen, 2010, p. 71). Nevertheless, the accounts presented by the nationalists are far from objective; Chinese barbarity towards each other is ignored to construct the narrative of the Century of Humiliation (Callahan, 2009, p. 188).

By casting China as historically victimized, the nationalist discourse gives the CCP a moral authority to 'correct' such injustices. When this discursive hegemony is challenged, we see historical analogy used to portray opposition to the Party as a continuation of historic victimization. I will now examine how discourse surrounding the Senkaku Islands dispute provides evidence for these assertions.

## The Disputed Islands and Nationalist Discourses

The Senkaku islands are barren and uninhabited (BBC 2014). Japan declared them *terra nullius* in 1895 and has administered them since, save a brief period by the US post-WWII. China has only seriously challenged Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands since the early 1970s, coinciding with the discovery of significant natural resources (Smith, 2013, p. 28). It seems that the CCP had no interest in these islands beforehand; there is evidence of Chinese maps referring to these islands by their Japanese name (Gertz, 2010). The nationalisation of the islands by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda saw anti-Japanese protests throughout China in response (BBC, 2012). The rhetoric used mirrored the themes of national humiliation, territorial integrity and Japan's history of aggression.

The official government rhetoric surrounding the Senkaku Island dispute is uncompromising. In *Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China*, a white paper published by the State Council Information Office, the PRC outlines its claim and assesses Japan's counterclaim to the islands. Much of the paper outlines a history of the territories' repeated changing of hands; the word 'sovereignty' is mentioned 32 times. However, there are three threads that run through the report that mirror Chinese nationalist discourse.

The paper begins with affirmation of "China's will to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity" against "Japan's violation of China's sovereignty" (State Council Information Office, 2012, p. 1). It is clear from the language used that the PRC does not see this as a small infraction but an attack on China as a whole. The conclusion follows a

# The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

Written by Mark Purvis

similar theme, urging Japan to “respect history” and stop its attempts to “undermine China’s territorial sovereignty” (State Council Information Office, 2012, p. 8). National unity and territorial integrity are crucial elements of the narrative of humiliation (Zhao, 1998, p. 297) and so this fear of the erosion of territorial integrity is heavily justified in this context.

From this we can infer that the PRC regards Japan’s stance on the islands as an aggressive move, referring to the “occupation” as a “challenge to post-war order” (State Council Information Office, 2012, p. 6). This is in spite of the fact that Japan has had internationally recognised administrative rights over the territory since the Okinawa Reversion Agreement was drafted in 1971 (US Government, 1971). The rhetoric used emphasises that opposition to this ‘occupation’ is the “common position of the entire Chinese nation. The Chinese nation has the strong resolve to uphold state sovereignty and territorial integrity” (State Council Information Office, 2012, p. 7). This rhetoric is consistent with an attempt to portray the Japanese as aggressors and, in contrast, the Chinese as resistant, or defensive, victims of this aggression.

Finally, the references to the victories of the “World Anti-Fascist War” (State Council Information Office, 2012, p. 2,8) being challenged by Japan’s ‘occupation’ demonstrates the way the CCP applies memories of WWII to contemporary political issues in order to delegitimise the Japanese position and ‘remind’ Tokyo that they have ‘been on the wrong side of history’ before. The rhetoric surrounding this war clearly emphasises the role of China’s War of Resistance as part of a global war against fascism (China.org.cn, 2005). While there is no direct reference to humiliation, the rhetoric used in the paper reflects significant elements of the nationalist discourse. The narrative of humiliation is far more explicit in ‘non-official’ sources.

*The People’s Daily* is the official newspaper of the CCP, and so opinion pieces from this publication are, of course, overwhelmingly sympathetic to the position of Beijing. English language websites have been created to assert the sovereignty of the Islands, including *No Concession on Diaoyu Islands* (The People’s Daily, 2015) and *Diayou Dao: The Inherent Territory of China* (The People’s Daily, 2014). The first provides articles regarding the political situation, while the second presents the case for China. One article linked from the former chastises Tokyo for not “facing up to past, present wrongdoing” (2012). Another stresses that Japan needs to have a “responsible attitude” regarding development (n.d., 2013). The rhetoric used by this publication contributes to the image of Japan as a reckless or irrational actor, not willing to negotiate or deliberate.

An ignorance for history, a rejection of sovereignty, an ambivalence to fascism and irresponsible leadership, this is the image of Japan that has been created through the CCP’s use of nationalist discourse. Tokyo not only represents a state intruding on sovereign territory but also it challenges the discursive hegemony of the nationalist discourse and the identity of victimhood that is constructed through remembrance of the past. By not accepting that it has humiliated and victimized China, Japan does not allow China to feel humiliated and victimized.

## Conclusions and Considerations

While the success of nationalism has greatly aided the CCP’s ability to maintain legitimacy and stability, it is not able to control all of the consequences. As a significant fixture of China’s collective memory, Japan is always likely to pose challenges to the Party. If we consider the increasing salience of the China Threat theory in Japanese policymaking circles (Ebert, Flandes, & Strüver, 2014; Grønning, 2014), the appearance of anti-Japanese sentiment may create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Other possible fault lines include the rare earths dispute, which may be an economic loss for the PRC (Dadwal, 2011) and, particularly, Japanese relations with Taiwan (Sun, 2007).

However, there is another view. Reilly argues that the constraints of nationalism are not as stringent. He argues that the liberalisation of the Chinese media market and access to other histories will weaken the CCP’s ability to promote a coherent national identity (Reilly, 2011). While this is worrying for a whole other set of reasons, relations with Japan may not be as cold if public opinion starts to soften.

The construction of a nationalist ideology and the mobilisation of the humiliation narrative has been instrumental in creating a sense of Chinese national identity without socialism. However, there are consequences that have had a

# The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

Written by Mark Purvis

significant impact on Chinese foreign affairs. In this essay, I have considered the impact of this nationalism on relations with Japan due to the visibility of anti-Japanese protests and disputes. Studying the effects of nationalism on relations with other states, the United States, South Korea and Russia being the immediate examples, would provide an opportunity for a comparative study of 'other' Chinese others. If the Party is to survive, it must find a way to maintain a cohesive sense of collective identity without projecting its failings on to a foreign other. This is no easy task.

## Bibliography

- Bartrop, P., Totten, S. (2007) *Dictionary of Genocide*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- BBC. (2012). Anti-Japan protests across China over islands dispute. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19312226>
- BBC. (2014). How uninhabited islands soured China-Japan ties. Retrieved May 5, 2015, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11341139>
- Callahan, W. A. (2006). History, identity, and security: producing and consuming nationalism in China. *Critical Asian Studies*, 38, 179–208.
- Callahan, W. A. (2009). *China: The Pessimist Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, B. (2009). Genocide as Social Control. *Sociological Theory*, 27 (2), 150–172.
- Cheskin, a. (2012). History, conflicting collective memories, and national identities: how Latvia's Russian-speakers are learning to remember, (February 2015), 37–41.
- China.org.cn. (2005). Anti-Fascist War in the 1930s and 1940s. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-05/08/content\\_440065.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-05/08/content_440065.htm)
- Dadwal, S. (2011). The Sino-Japanese rare earths row: will China's loss be India's gain? *Strategic Analysis*, 35(2), 181–185.
- Ebert, H., Flandes, D., & Strüver, G. (2014). The Politics of Contestation in Asia: How Japan and Pakistan Deal with Their Rising Neighbors. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7 (2), 221–260.
- Gertz, B. (2010). China-Japan tensions. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/sep/15/inside-the-ring-145889960/>
- Gries, P. H. (1999). *Face nationalism: Power and passion in Chinese anti-foreignism*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Grønning, B. E. M. (2014). Japan's Shifting Military Priorities: Counterbalancing China's Rise. *Asian Security*, 10(1), 1–21.
- Harkavy, R. E. (2000). Defeat, national humiliation, and the revenge motif in international politics. *International Politics*, 37(September)
- Holland, C. (2012). Chinese Attitudes to International Law : China , the Security Council , Sovereignty , and Intervention. *Journal of International Law and Politics Online Forum*, 1–44.
- Liao, N. (2013). Presentist or Cultural Memory : Chinese Nationalism as Constraint on Beijing ' s Foreign Policy Making, 5(4), 543–565.

# The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan

Written by Mark Purvis

- n.d. (2013). Japan should have responsible attitude: FM spokesman. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://en.people.cn/90883/8099123.html>
- Neumann, I. B. (2008). Russia as a great power, 1815–2007. *Journal of International Relations and Development*.
- Reilly, J. (2011). Remember History, Not Hatred: Collective Remembrance of China's War of Resistance to Japan. *Modern Asian Studies*, 45, 463–490.
- Rywkin, M. (2014). Russia: Mythology in the Service of Realpolitik. *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 36(3), 195–200.
- Simonsen, S. G. (2010). Europe-Asia Studies Compatriot Games : Explaining the ' Diaspora Linkage ' in Russia ' s Military Withdrawal from the Baltic States. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(March 2014), 37–41.
- Smith, P. (2013). The Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Controversy: A Crisis Postponed. *Naval War College Review*, 66(2).
- State Council Information Office. (2012). *Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China* (pp. 1–8).
- Sun, J. (2007). Japan-Taiwan Relations: Unofficial in Name Only. *Asian Survey*, 47(5), 790–810.
- The People's Daily. (2014). Diaoyu Dao, Inherent Territory of China. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://www.diaoyudao.org.cn/en/index.htm>
- The People's Daily. (2015). No Concession on Diaoyu Islands. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://en.people.cn/102775/206053/>
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2013). *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*. Rowman & littlefield publishers.
- US Government. (1971). Okinawa Reversion Agreement 1972. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://www.cfr.org/japan/okinawa-reversion-agreement-1972/p30266>
- Vickers, E. (2007). Museums and nationalism in contemporary China, (February 2015), 37–41.
- Voice, C. (2012). Japan should face up to past, present wrongdoing. Retrieved March 4, 2015, from <http://en.people.cn/90883/7996217.html>
- Wang, Z. (2012). *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. Columbia University Press.
- Zhang, L. (2013). The Google-China Dispute: The Chinese National Narrative and Rhetorical Legitimation of the Chinese Communist Party. *Rhetoric Review*, 32(February 2015), pp.455–472.
- Zhao, S. (1998). A state-led nationalism: The patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 31(3), 287–302.
- Zhao, S. (2000). Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations. *Political Science Quarterly*, 115(1), 1–33.

*Written by: Mark Purvis  
Written at: Newcastle University  
Written for: Michael Barr  
Date written: March 2015*

# **The Impact of Nationalism on Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Japan**

Written by Mark Purvis