

China at the Turn of the 21st Century: The Role of Public Opinion in Its Relations with Japan

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Abstract

During recent decades, public opinion has played an important role in the making of Chinese foreign policy. Chinese citizens, with the coming of commercialised media and information technology, have more latitude to express their own views on international affairs. As a result, it is difficult for the Chinese leadership to get the people to conform to official foreign policy orthodoxy, including the concept of “Peaceful Rise” propagated by the Chinese Communist Party and the government. Emotional outburst during the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and 2012 reminds us that the peaceful image of China presented by the authorities has been challenged by the public’s violence and anger. However, the Chinese government has been quite successful in responding to public emotion while maintaining official foreign policy orthodoxy and regime stability. Therefore, although the role of public opinion is non-negligible, it does not completely dictate the course of Chinese foreign policy.

Keywords: public opinion, Sino-Japanese relations, nationalist sentiment

1. Introduction¹

China is a country that has suffered much from aggression and humiliation in the past. The Chinese people have a strong sense of fairness and justice when it comes to international issues. You rarely hear them attacking other people or intervening in other countries’ internal affairs. However, when provoked, they also react quickly and express their indignation. This is quite normal in most developing countries. Likewise the Chinese government cannot but respond to its people and take measures to safeguard rights and interests of the country.

(Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying’s interview with the *Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*, 10th September 2012)

At Boao Forum for Asia in China's Hainan province in November 2003, Zheng Bijian, former vice president of the Central Party School and one of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leading thinkers and writers on ideological questions, proposed the concept of "Peaceful Rise" by describing that China at the beginning of the 21st century is facing two major problems. The first one concerns multiplication. Multiplied by 1.3 billion, any social or economic problem, no matter how small it is, will become a huge problem. The second one concerns division. Divided by 1.3 billion, China's resources, no matter how abundant they are, will be at extremely low per capita levels. As a result, in order to achieve its development goals, China has no choice but to take part in economic globalisation, pursue a road of independent development, and adhere to peace and never seek hegemony (Zheng Bijian, 2005: 14-19). Since then, the concept of "Peaceful Rise", used interchangeably with "Peaceful Development", has become key words in many speeches on foreign policy by China's leaders and diplomats.

In the interview with Chinese writer Ye Xiaoshen on 10th September 2004, Zheng Bijian revealed that the concept of "Peaceful Rise" is in fact an antidote to the so-called "China Threat Theory" which has been popular in the West since the early 1990s. The theory states that if China becomes stronger, it will look for resources and seek expansion abroad. Zheng's immediate reaction was that a reply was needed and he should respond "based on the facts and basic experience of China's development" (Zheng Bijian, 2005: 56). In this article, the author argues that, although the Chinese leadership have chosen to strive for a peaceful rise, their discourse has been challenged by the rise of public opinion in the globalised world. Facilitated by the Internet and a more commercialised publishing industry, public opinion in China has been more diverse and sometimes become a limit to official foreign policy orthodoxy including the concept of "Peaceful Rise". However, as seen in the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and 2012, the Chinese government has been quite successful in responding to public emotion while maintaining official foreign policy orthodoxy and regime stability. Therefore, one should not be too pessimistic on the role of public opinion in China's foreign relations.

2. The Role of Public Opinion in Chinese Foreign Policy

Public opinion has played an important role in the making of Chinese foreign policy since 1978. Entering the reform era, the state has diminished its control over society and citizens have enjoyed considerably more latitude to speak their minds in private and public, as long as they respect the "Four Cardinal Principles" laid down by supreme leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978; i.e. Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, the socialist road, the people's

democratic dictatorship, and the supremacy of the CCP (Shambaugh, 2000: 184). In other words, “public sphere” developed in post-Mao China.

Although the media are still under the control of the government and the CCP, they have been encouraged to be more commercialised in order to reduce the state's financial burden. Advertisements are permitted and publishers tend to publish news, articles, and opinions on public issues whose contents are more interesting and different from official orthodoxy, in order to attract readers and make profits. The media like the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, attracts fewer readers. Liu Dabao, a senior researcher of *People's Daily's* research office told Thai researchers in October 2003 that its amount of sales decreased from seven to eight million issues per day in the Maoist era to two million issues per day after Deng's institution of reform (Utamachan and Utamachan, 2006: 94-95). In addition, the Internet has expanded in China, enabling public opinion to be formed quickly. According to the Chinese Internet Information Center in a 2011 report, more than 450 million people in China subscribe to Internet services and more than 300 million people are using mobile phones to access the Internet (Shin 2013: 76-77). As Qing Cao (2007) argues, “the growing partially deregulated market forces, though under tight control, could still combine with a potential societal push for quantity information and wider participation in public affairs”. Therefore, what the Chinese government and the CCP call “pacifist foreign policy” might not always be supported by their own citizens.

The indication of differences between official foreign policy orthodoxy and public opinion occurred in 1996 with the publication of *China Can Say No*, a book edited by Zhang Xiaobo. On the one hand, the book criticised the American aims to contain China's growth; e.g. the CIA secret mission in China, the support for Tibet's independence, the protracted negotiation over China's bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). On the other hand, it also charged that the Chinese government was naïve and soft in its dealing with the United States, and that it should dare to “say no” to Washington (Fewsmith and Rosen, 2001: 163). The book quickly became a bestseller, selling as many as two million copies, reflecting that many people read it and had the same sort of frustrations they shared with the authors.

In the early years of the 21st century, the people's frustrations became an outburst in the protests against foreign powers like Japan. In the “collective memory” of the Chinese, Japan has been perceived as an aggressor who invaded China several times during the so-called “Century of Humiliation” (1840-1949) and has not apologised to China for its atrocities. *March of the Volunteers*, the national anthem of China composed during Japan's occupation of northeastern China in the 1930s, is full of anti-Japanese sentiments. History still haunts Sino-Japanese relations.

3. Anti-Japanese Protests over History Textbooks in 2005

The year 2005 was a sensitive year for Sino-Japanese relations as it marked the 60th anniversary of the Chinese people's victory over Japan in the Second World War. Anti-Japanese protests in China in the second week of April of that year were a result of a coincidence. The first was the Japanese Ministry of Education's approval of eight history textbooks to be used in secondary schools. Many Chinese citizens claimed that the content in them made a glorification of Japan's war with China. The second was Japan's bid to become one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). More than 20 million Chinese "netizens" signed their names to protest against the bid, saying that an unrepentant nation like Japan is ineligible for the permanent seat on the council whose mission is to maintain world peace. In Beijing, tens of thousands of people marched to the Japanese Embassy and the residence of Japan's ambassador, and smashed windows of these buildings to show their frustrations. Meanwhile, ten of thousands of people in Shanghai destroyed Japanese stores, companies, and cars on their way to the Japanese Consulate. The crowd chanted anti-Japanese slogans like "Japan doomed", "Go away Japanese" (Khamchoo, 2005: 49-50).

The protests created a dilemma for the Chinese leadership. On the one hand, China's economic interests with Japan were non-negligible. By the end of 2004, trade volume between the two countries had reached 167 billion US dollars and Japan had replaced the US as China's biggest trading partner. Also, more than 70,000 Chinese students were studying in Japan (Theeravit, 2006: 113). On the other hand, failing to take the issue of history seriously could be detrimental to the CCP's legitimacy. Ma Licheng, an editorial writer of *People's Daily*, and some Chinese scholars in 2003 had proposed what is called "New Thinking" on Sino-Japanese relations. They held the views that China should abandon the issue of history in dealing with Japan. Moreover, it should recognise and value the economic aid that Japan had given to China since 1979 in the form of soft loans. However, their proposal aroused criticism, not only from scholars, but also from many citizens and netizens who denounced Ma as a "traitor" (Hughes, 2006: 149). Therefore, following "New Thinking" was not an option for the Chinese leadership, as it could easily arouse anti-CCP sentiments.

The protests became a difficult task for the Chinese government to keep a balance between peaceful foreign policy orthodoxy and violent popular sentiments. In his meeting with Kyodo News Agency's president Toyohiko Yamauchi on 12th April, the then Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan said that the Chinese people really could not understand how a nation which cannot honestly look at its aggressive history and which cannot correctly understand the feeling of the people of the countries it victimised could be

quantified to bid for a permanent seat on the UNSC. At the same time, Tang assured Yamauchi that China and Japan should look forward into the future and uphold bilateral relations (Handling China-Japan Ties Carefully, 2005: 16). He also said that the Chinese government called on the public to express their emotions by calm, reasonable, and legal means, rather than with violent behaviour. In order to communicate to the public, Tang's remarks to Yumauchi were published in full two days later by the *People's Daily* (Tang, 2011: 30).

After allowing the people to vent their anger for a few days, the Public Security Bureau of Beijing Municipality on 15th April made a declaration that any protest without official permission would be considered illegal and assured the people that the government and the CCP would handle Sino-Japanese ties in a proper manner (Theeravit, 2006: 114). Thereafter, the Chinese leadership had concentrated all efforts to express their concerns on historical issues and improve relations with Japan by means of governmental and non-governmental contacts and exchanges which led to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ice-breaking visit to China on 8th-9th October 2006. During his talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Abe admitted that Japan had brought disasters and sufferings to Asian people and would look humbly at history (Tang, 2011: 57). A month later, in the exclusive interview with Xinhua News Agency, Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wang Yi said with confidence that "the Sino-Japanese relations are witnessing obvious improvement and a momentum of development in all fields" (Wang, 2006).

4. Anti-Japanese Protests over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2012

Anti-Japanese protests in China erupted again in August and September 2012 as a result of disputes between the two countries over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. The official position of China is that these islands have appeared on China's maps since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), more than 400 years before Japan claimed discovery of the islands in 1884. China's sovereignty over the islands had never been disputed until the government of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was forced by the Japanese to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, under which it ceded the whole island of Taiwan and its surrounding islands, including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, to Japan. After its defeat in the Second World War, Japan signed the Treaty of San Francisco with the United States in 1951, in which the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were assigned to Japan's Ryukyu zone. As a result, the Chinese government lodged a strong protest and has never recognised the treaty (History of the Diaoyu Islands, 2012: 12)

The problem occurred on 7th July 2012 when Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda had expressed his consideration for the Japanese government to buy the disputed islands from the Kurihara family, claimed by the Japanese

side as the private owner of the islands. Therefore, activists from Hong Kong sailed to and landed on one of the disputed islands on 15th August where they were stopped and detained by Japanese authorities. This led to calls from netizens in China for a nationwide protest against Japan on 19th August. In Beijing, a crowd gathered in front of the Japanese embassy. Up to 2,000 people with Chinese flags and banners protested in Shenzhen, overturning Japanese cars, attacking Japanese restaurants and burning images of Japanese flags (Branigan, 2012). In Chengdu, the protesters walked with a banner saying, “Defend the Diaoyu Islands to the Death”. Another one said, “Even if China is covered with graves, we must kill all Japanese” (Bradsher *et al.*, 2012). Qingdao, Taiyuan, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Shenyang also saw protests.

Another wave of anti-Japanese protests took place a few weeks later, when the Japanese government on 11th September signed a contract with the Kurihara family to purchase the islands which cost some 2.05 billion yen (equivalent to 26.15 million US dollars). As a result, on 18th September, on the occasion of the 81st anniversary of Japan’s occupation of Manchuria (or the so-called “Mukden Incident” of 1931), people across the country joined the protests. Japanese businesses shut stores and factories across China, some sent workers back to Japan in fear the protests would get out of hand. The Japanese Embassy in Beijing was under siege by protesters throwing water bottles, waving Chinese flags and chanting slogans evoking Japan’s occupation (Wee, 2012).

Again, like the anti-Japanese protests in 2005, the Chinese leadership faced a dilemma. China and Japan were mutually dependent economically with bilateral trade volume reaching around 345 billion US dollars that year (Wee, 2012), and the protests might disrupt economic relations between the two countries. However, banning the protests was not an option because the protesters might see it as a weakness of the leadership and thus may redirect their outburst of anger to their own government, or even question the legitimacy of the CCP’s authoritarian rule. Therefore, the Chinese government used balanced measures. On the one hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated on September 19th that the widespread anti-Japanese protests reflected Chinese public’s firm resolution to safeguard sovereignty and urged the Japanese government to listen to the Chinese people’s strong appeals (Anti-Japan protests reflect Chinese people’s resolution: FM, 2012). Other Chinese government bodies also lodged stern protests, including the National People’s Congress, the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the Ministry of Defense. Furthermore, Chinese marine surveillance ships were dispatched to waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Besides, the Chinese government announced the basic points and baselines of the territorial waters of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Ding, 2012: 12).

On the other hand, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei also said that the Chinese government would protect the safety of foreign diplomatic missions, personnel and institutions in accordance with the law, adding that relevant cases would be properly handled (Anti-Japan protests reflect Chinese people's resolution: FM, 2012). Therefore, a large number of riot police were deployed around the Japanese embassy in Beijing and the subway operator closed the station nearest to the Japanese mission (Wee, 2012). Meanwhile, the editorial of state-run *Beijing Review* magazine on 27th September stated that, although Japan must act responsibly, "some demonstrations have regrettably turned violent and these irrational expressions of anger must end" (Play Fair, 2012: 2).

5. Conclusion: Will Chinese Foreign Policy be More Aggressive?

The outburst of anger and the government's reactions to these anti-Japanese protests revealed the growing importance of public opinion in the making of Chinese foreign policy. Despite the fact that the government and the CCP have maintained their media control mechanism, Chinese citizens in the age of commercialised press and information technology have their own windows to the outside world, leading to the state's reducing capabilities to influence public opinion. Moreover, the Chinese leadership have to give more latitude to the people to express their frustrations. Otherwise, they could redirect their frustrations towards their own government and the CCP's authoritarian rule would face a crisis of legitimacy. Hughes (2006) calls this phenomenon as "the powerlessness of the powerful" because elite discourse is challenged by popular nationalism. In addition, the Chinese people have ambivalent attitudes towards their country's fate, described by Callahan (2010) as "pessoptimist" structure of feeling, which is a result of their country's grievous experience during "the Century of Humiliation". They are confident about China's prosperous future, but they also feel that China has always been victimised by foreign powers. Their victim mentality thus easily becomes an outburst of anger and violence. In other words, the Chinese people do not always conform to the concept of China's "Peaceful Rise" propagated by their leadership.

Recently, there are some China scholars who hold the views that the public's frustration is not only detrimental to the concept of China's "Peaceful Rise", but also leads to aggressive foreign policy. Susan Shirk (2007) argued that, in order to preserve the CCP authoritarian rule, Chinese leaders will make domestic considerations a priority, including the promotion of nationalist myths to show how strong they are, which in turn risks trapping them into an aggressive stance abroad. Shirk's views resonate with Avery Goldstein (2012) who argued that many Chinese are suspicious of the toughness of their post-revolutionary leaders in conducting foreign relations.

As a result, it generates demands for the Chinese government to stand up for China's interests on the world stage that the Chinese leadership find difficult to ignore.

However, one should not take such pessimistic views on public opinion. As seen in the measures toward anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and 2012, the Chinese government has been quite successful in responding to public emotion while maintaining official foreign policy orthodoxy and regime stability. In sum, although the role of public opinion is non-negligible, it does not completely dictate the course of Chinese foreign policy.

Notes

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1. This article is a major revision of the article titled "Public Opinion and the Limit of China's Peaceful Rise" published in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of Thailand*, Vol. 2 (2010), pp. 37-43. In this revised article, the author puts more emphasis on Sino-Japanese relations, analyses recent anti-Japanese protests in 2012 and makes a new argument about the non-negligible but somewhat limited role of public opinion in the making of Chinese foreign policy.

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