

# “Patriotic Education” Is Not the Sole Reason—What Lies Behind the Complicated Chinese Mind-set?—

By *Iwase Akira*

THE massive anti-Japan protests that swept through major Chinese cities in April have highlighted the anti-Japan sentiments among the Chinese populace. Partly fanned by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s visits to Yasukuni shrine, the anti-Japan fervor in China had been increasing in recent years, and has now reached a “critical point.” The source of these anti-Japan movements is manifold, and not as some Japanese politicians believe, a simple manifestation of Chinese “patriotic education.” The phenomenal economic growth in China has once again fueled the burgeoning confidence that the country has greater power. Juxtaposed with this great-power mentality, there lies a certain jealousy toward Japan, which still has a more advanced economy; this psychological complex has been compounded by the pent-up anger toward the searing gulf between the rich and the poor as well as the prevailing culture of corruption in China.

The Japan-China relationship has been soured by Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni and the issue of Japanese history textbooks. But there are plenty of other straining points in bilateral ties: the issue of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands, or Diaoyu islands in Chinese, the development of gas fields in the East China Sea, and the inclusion of Taiwan issues in Japan-US security policy, among others. As the exchange of visits by the leaders of the two countries has been halted, negative images of Japan have become fair game in the Chinese media, and the effects have been further amplified on the Internet.

One major characteristic of the recent protests was the predominant presence of young participants. Many of them took to the streets in response to the call to arms trumpeted by anti-Japan websites, such as the Anti-Japan Vanguard (JapanPig.com), and the “Patriots Alliance Web” group (www.1931-9-18.org), whose site address was chosen in memory of the Manchurian Incident,

or the date of the Japanese railway incident of near Shenyang that triggered the Japanese occupation of Manchuria.

Today, China boasts nearly 100 million Internet users. As the online population soars, the influence of the traditional Communist Party-controlled media such as *The People’s Daily* and China Central Television is on the decline. It is a safe bet to say that the ubiquitous Internet has now become the principal source of news and information for most young Chinese people today. Cyberspace, however, is notorious for the abundance of inaccurate information, and there is one segment of the Chinese population who think of Japan as an extreme “right-wing” country, even though they have never met a Japanese.

## ■ Social Discontent Is One Factor

In the initial phase, the anti-Japan protests in Beijing and Shanghai were staged mainly by university students in a relatively orderly fashion. As the number of protesters grew along with onlookers, however, the protests turned violent as rowdy crowds started throwing stones at the Japanese embassy and consulate or smashing up Japanese cars while chanting “There is no guilt in patriotism.”

One prevailing view in China now is that the mob violence was the work of “hooligans who had little political awareness and simply wanted to vent their boredom.” Public security authorities in Shanghai have drawn a similar conclusion; and, to a large extent, that may have been the case. One Japanese diplomatic source concluded that, “It is the people who failed to make it in the Chinese economic boom that used the banner of patriotism to stir things up against the central government.” This speaks volumes about the pressure of the magma waiting to erupt among the unhappy Chinese masses who have been passed over in the Chinese economic boom.

While analysts in Japan tend to blame

the Chinese security apparatus for allowing the police to literally fold their hands in the face of rock-throwing mobs, a more on-the-mark observation is this: once the Chinese government and the Communist Party saw their initial intent of allowing the crowd to “let off steam” had misfired, they made a hurried retreat immediately after realizing that the mob violence could change course and turn their wrath toward the government itself.

## ■ A Weak Japan

It is, however, true that there is noticeable discontent about Japan among the highly educated rich people in China. Its high-flying economic growth has bred a new generation who have lots of self-confidence, believing Japan is dependent on the Chinese economy and its technology has little to offer. They are also critical of their own government, feeling that China has not taken a strong stand against Japan. For the Chinese leadership, showing any sign of compromise to Japan carries a huge risk.

It is against such a backdrop that messages to boycott Japanese goods surged on the Internet, with some predicting that the Japanese economy will collapse if the Chinese pursue a don’t-buy-Japanese campaign for a year. Japanese electronics makers, who had commanded a dominant presence in the Chinese market up through the mid-1990s, have been badly bruised by low-cost Chinese and South Korean competitors as well as reinvigorated Western high-tech rivals. Whether in so-called “white-goods” home electric appliances or in the huge mobile-phone market, the Japanese presence has shrunk rapidly. Such “reality” in the Chinese marketplace, along with a prolonged stagnation in the Japanese economy, has given rise to a new Chinese confidence that there is nothing to fear from Japan.

However, not all Japanese products

Photo: REUTERS • SUN

have a low reputation in China. Take automobiles for instance: during the first quarter of this year, sales at Honda's joint venture in China, Guangzhou Honda, ranked second in the Chinese automobile market. From luxury cars to digital cameras and cosmetics, competitive Japanese products still sell well in China. Not a few anti-Japan protesters in Beijing shouting "Boycott Japanese products" were seen taking pictures with Japanese-made digital cameras. Ito-Yokado, a major Japanese retailer which has been setting up supermarkets and shopping centers in China, opened yet another outlet in Beijing five days after a massive anti-Japan protests in the city. More than 30,000 Chinese – larger than the number of anti-Japan protesters – flocked to this new outlet every day in the first days of operation. At the Shanghai Motor Show that opened on April 22, shortly after the massive anti-Japan protests in the city, interest was high in the new models by Toyota, Honda, Nissan and other Japanese automakers. The Toyota Corolla, for example, drew an enthusiastic crowd who seemed to believe that politics has nothing to do with business.

### Deepening Business Interdependence

As a matter of fact, the economies of Japan and China have become far more interlocked than anti-Japan activists would like to think. On April 22, the Chinese Commerce Minister, Bo Xilai, called for an immediate halt to the don't-buy-Japanese campaign, arguing that "Japanese capital and Japanese technology are essential for China's economic construction and a don't-buy-Japanese campaign would harm the interest of producers and consumers on both sides."

At the back of this unusual public appeal looms the long shadow of the Japanese presence in the Chinese economy. About 20,000 Japanese companies have invested in China. In 2004, the amount of direct investment in China implemented by Japanese companies totaled \$5.45 billion, accounting for 8-



Chinese protesters shout "Boycott Japanese products"

9% of the total foreign investment in the country. Most Japanese investments are carried out in the form of joint ventures, and a don't-buy-Japanese campaign would highly likely hurt the Chinese partners as well. While China displaced the United States as Japan's largest trading partner in 2004, Japan still remains China's third largest partner after the EU and the United States, accounting for 15% of its overall trade. Moreover, Japanese firms provide employment, directly or indirectly, for 9.2 million Chinese. This is roughly the same size as the number of new jobs the Chinese government plans to create this year. In a country with 150 million surplus labors in rural areas, employment is the No. 1 priority for the government. If sales at Japanese-owned businesses go down and a large number of Chinese workers are laid off, the result could be social unrest.

Zhang Jifeng of the Institute of Japanese Studies, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, points to the problems in the Chinese media, noting that they "will not sell if they do not take a critical stand on Japan." He argues that "the recent events have, for the first time, enabled the Chinese public to become aware of the deep economic ties between the two countries." He hopes this will help foster a more objective media outlook on Japanese-Chinese relations.

### A Complicated Mind-set

The biggest problem, however, is that the Chinese themselves have yet to sort out the complexities of Japan-China relations on their own. With a grimace, a Chinese professor who had studied in Japan said: "The daughter of my relative loves Japanese products and *manga* comics, but she says she hates Japanese people." Japanese *manga* clubs at Peking University and Tsinghua University – the two elite universities in Beijing – boast hundreds of members. While costume plays for characters in Japanese comics *Naruto* and *Inuyasha* are popular among Chinese aficionados, the love of Japanese manga does not necessarily mean these students would not take part in anti-Japan protests. Explains a 23-year-old female student at Peking University: "I love Japanese culture, but I do have anti-Japan feelings. Perhaps at the bottom of my heart, I feel jealous of Japan." Such a complicated mind-set toward Japan is evident among many Chinese people. While it is admittedly difficult to untangle complex national feelings, mutual denunciations based on images created by the media can only make things worse. **JS**

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