

Chinese Nationalism: One Japanese Perspective

By Inoguchi Takashi

Reflecting on the Past, Looking into the Future

HAVING encountered Chinese nationalism last April, the Japanese have articulated their thoughts about China and its nationalism, arguably more earnestly than many other peoples in the world. Nationalism is defined here as a set of ideas which endeavor to design politics with the nation and the nation-state at center stage. The nation is defined as the social unit which is relatively homogeneous in ethnic, linguistic and religious terms, at a time of modern territorial sovereign states were conceived mostly in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. I summarize below five major angles from which Japanese authors look at Chinese nationalism as revealed in their writings on China.

Five Looking-Glasses of Chinese Nationalism

When examining Chinese nationalism, five looking-glasses are noteworthy in Japanese writings on the subject: (1) pre-modern empires, (2) modern nation-building, (3) communist politics, (4) democratic potential and (5) regional power rivalry.

It is not a coincidence to find that Japanese sinologists are very interested in the imperial legacy of Chinese nationalism from a non-Han perspective. This has something to do with the historically strong ties between Japan and China and its civilization. As early as 607, the Japanese crown prince sent a message to the Chinese emperor of the Sui dynasty, addressing Japan as the rising sun and China as the setting sun. As late as 1818, the Record of the Jiaqing Emperor registers two kinds of countries: tributary states like Korea, Vietnam and England, and mutually trading states like the Netherlands,

France and Japan. While Japanese tended to take some diffident distance from China, they came to recognize that the Japanese do not show sufficient respect toward China. It is not that Japanese are like Westerners or nomads in their civilizationally non-deferential attitudes towards things Chinese. It is rather that Japanese are familiar with the gap displayed by Chinese external politics between myth and truth, illusion and reality. Their perspective about the imperial legacy on Chinese nationalism is not like John King Fairbank who portrayed the Sinocentric hierarchical picture of the Chinese external politics, but more like Morris Rossabi, who gives the often contentious horizontal nature of politics between the Han and non-Hans in East Asia.

Those who focus on the modern period of nation building tend to underline the innate contradiction of constructing a nation state or multi-nation states out of the imperial map and memory. By the imperial map, I mean the largest territory of greatest dynasties whether they were Tang or Qing. By the imperial memory, I mean the supremacy of Chinese civilization. The predicament of Chinese nationalism is that it has to consider the historical grandeur and cultural supremacy and to pledge to restore and revive them. Once politically ignited, the demand for territorial integrity reigns supreme, and when related to patriotism, compromise is not easy for the government. China's recent issue of Russia and India has raised no such problem whereas that of Japan, or the "little Japanese pigs," has been exploited to the fullest length. Once agitated and awakened, you would be politically vulnerable unless you act as a patriot. Indeed, *aiguo wucui*, you would not be guilty as long as your action originates from your patriotism. The problem is

that the accusation could be directed at the Chinese government or its leaders who are regarded as not sufficiently patriotically handling "barbarians" instead of being directed at "barbarians" themselves. It was directed at Li Peng in June 1989, although the issue at hand was democracy and Zhao Ziyang. In April 2005 it was directed at "Japanese pigs." But once the Chinese government arrested a few dozen protesters in Shanghai, a huge number of patriots showed up en masse telling the Chinese government that it should not punish patriots and the government was about to be called traitors who sell out the country to "barbarians." The Chinese government suppressed them fully on May 4, 2005, the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the starting point of modern Chinese nationalist collective action against the Treaty of Paris that settled World War I in the Far East and the Pacific.

Those who focus on communist politics remind us of the origin of Chinese communist power. As Mao Zedong himself acknowledged to the Japanese Socialist delegation in 1964, the Communist party used the Japanese military aggression most effectively to its own advantage by mobilizing patriotism and humiliating the Chinese Nationalist government. The Japanese sinologists recognize that as long as Chinese nationalism was forged at times of foreign encroachment, aggression and exploitation, it is often inevitable for any Chinese political actors to harp on its xenophobic theme, which has universal appeal in China, and is effective in stirring things up. It has the elements of anger at injustice imposed by foreigners and of despair at the impotence revealed by the government which often ineptly faces public opinion with compromise and pragmatism, at least as seen from the viewpoint of Chinese patriots. The Japanese sinologists also recognize that once Chinese communists are in power, Chinese nationalism has two edges, positive and negative. By positive I mean you can get things done, manipu-

lating its symbols. By things I mean such things as extracting the apology by humiliated “barbarians,” inducing the dismissal of political rivals in China, and the elevation of political standing of themselves. By negative, I mean that because the communist party suppresses the freedom of expression by mass media in principle, media such as the Internet or semi-authorized demonstrations can sometimes get expanded beyond the governmental control. From this perspective Chinese nationalism tends to be analyzed as providing a political space where Chinese leaders compete with each other over which political strategy would be most effective to advance Chinese priorities at the time. During the anti-Japan protests last April, their high level attention went to the power plays between Hu Jintao, the supreme leader, and Jiang Zemin, the previous supreme leader, who is reported to be not entirely happy about Hu Jintao.

Japanese sinologists, or more appropriately China specialists, who examine democratic potentials in Chinese society examine the whole range and nature of Chinese social and political changes built on the reform and open policy for the last three decades in relation to the Chinese identity and nationalism. They focus on the mushrooming of socially stratified groups and their collective action, the steadily metamorphosing values and lifestyles of ordinary people, and sprouting democratic elections and governance at the grass-roots level. The extraordinary gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, and highly educated and virtually illiterate people have been accelerating with consequences that were not fully anticipated. The extraordinary penetration of foreign capital and technology in a communist society would have been simply unthinkable four decades ago when self-reliance was the canon to worship and practice. Is this to be called the revival of a semi-colony or to be called the permeation of globalization in China? Only the Chinese Communist Party placed at the helm or

an alternative forms of democracy be invented? How are Chinese leaders to handle the anti-Japan protests of such groups as Tiananmen democratizers from abroad, Falung Gong groups, Taiwanese independence fighters, American (meaning mostly Chinese-American) human rights fighters and democracy promoters as well as socially marginalized, alienated, frustrated and criminal elements?

Those China specialists focusing on the regional power rivalry between China and Japan tend to focus on diplomatic statecraft. In other words, their primary concern is which of the two “inscrutable Orientals” are more effective in bringing about desired outcomes. It has something to do with the fact that some of them are in a position to advise the Japanese government on its policy on China. They recognize the critical difference attached to the issue of visits to Yasukuni shrine. Many Japanese think the visits soothe the souls of the war dead whereas Chinese think this is the beautifying of war aggression. Besides this critical divergence, the China specialists note that the Japanese approach to China tends to be relational and interactional. For example, Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni seems to a surprise to the Chinese government, which was not able to take effective damage control measures. When summer was approaching in 2001, then Chinese Ambassador Wu Dawei asked Koizumi to refrain from visiting Yasukuni on August 15, the Japanese surrender day of World War II. Koizumi abruptly visited there on August 13 without breaking what he said to Wu. His “mischievous” quality often leads him to visit Yasukuni shortly after meeting Chinese leaders. What happens is that Chinese leaders lose face to the public shortly after they meet Koizumi in a friendly fashion. Recognizing this tendency of Koizumi, not many Chinese leaders want to meet him. For instance, when Vice Premier Wu Yi visited Tokyo to participate in a high level symposium sponsored by the *Nihon*

Keizai Shimbun in May, she steadfastly refused to listen to the suggestion of discussing matters with Koizumi. At one point, she agreed to pay a courtesy visit to Koizumi. Finally, however, she cancelled the appointment.

Japanese statecraft seemed to be well calculated and a finely crafted response package during the anti-Japan protests. First, the Japanese government merely demanded an apology and compensation for the damage caused by illegal protests. Second, it refused to make a specific promise that prime minister would not visit Yasukuni. Third, it flatly and clearly stated that Taiwan is included in those areas covered by the Japan-US Security Treaty. Fourth, it made a solidly considered proposal that Japan and China should jointly explore and exploit the petroleum resources in the East China Sea. The package of all this is like a Chinese dish of sweet and sour pork. Regionally and globally Japan and China are contesting each other on the critical issues of Yasukuni shrine, history textbooks, the exploitation of seabed energy resources, Japan’s aspiration in the UN, Taiwan, the Japan-US alliance, democracy and the human rights offensive into China.

Conclusion

Chinese nationalism is a powerful force in the 21st century. One fifth of the world’s population subscribe to it. At the same time, its vigorous voice presents both opportunities and dangers to the country’s people and government. Because it is dynamite, peoples near and afar are bound to be affected by how Chinese nationalism evolves and metamorphoses. **J.S**

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