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Chinese Visions of Japan

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### Editorial

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# Editorial

EDWARD VICKERS

**A** resurgent China nowadays looms ever larger in the public consciousness of its East Asian neighbours, with implications not just for their external relationships, but also for their domestic political dynamics. However, Japan still supplies, as it has for over a century, the benchmark of successful “catch-up” modernisation for states, including China, that see themselves as still “catching up.” For authoritarian governments keen to minimise “spiritual pollution,” Japan has also long provided a model for the selective preservation of native “essence” alongside imported modern “technology,” even while attracting condemnation for the nationalistic excesses associated with this enterprise: colonialism, invasion, and associated brutality. And at the popular level, the impact of Japanese culture – high-brow, low-brow, literary, or visual – on the societies of the region has been manifold and profound.

With the exception of Korea, no country’s modern history has been more intimately intertwined with Japan than China’s. Even at the height of the Cold War, Japan re-emerged under American tutelage as the key regional trading partner for Hong Kong and for “Free China” on Taiwan. And when bilateral ties with the mainland were restored in the 1970s, exhortations to look eastwards for lessons in modernisation came from Deng Xiaoping, the child of an era when Chinese intellectual life was still dominated by Japan-educated scholars.<sup>(1)</sup> Not just in commerce and industry, but in almost every sphere of social and cultural life, the engagement of post-Reform China with Japan has been far-reaching – more so, sometimes, than it has officially been deemed politic to acknowledge. Yet the early twenty-first century presents us with the spectacle of a Chinese society apparently more animated by anti-Japanese fervour than at any time since the 1940s. Why is this so?

While official programmes of “patriotic education” have played a role, in a post-Mao China characterised by significant, if limited, media plurality, state propaganda is neither all-encompassing nor consistent enough to offer a more than partial explanation. We need to ask why certain messages strike a popular chord. A contrast is commonly drawn between an allegedly conciliatory approach under Deng Xiaoping and the turn to nationalism under his successors, with the latter blamed for provoking hostility amongst the population at large. However, one advocate of this line claims that “to tell passionate Chinese patriots [in the early Reform period] that they should learn from the Japanese took political courage and determination,”<sup>(2)</sup> acknowledging the already-existing reservoir of popular antipathy towards Japan (but ignoring Deng’s own manipulations of anti-Japanese sentiment).<sup>(3)</sup> Although the Party leadership may largely have toed a pragmatic line, the same was not true of university students, who from the mid-1980s mounted protests against visits by leading politicians to Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine (honouring war dead including convicted war criminals), official censorship of history textbook accounts of the war, and other perceived Japanese transgressions (see article by Yanan He).<sup>(4)</sup> In the 1990s, as Party leaders cast about for a new ideological anchor, anti-foreign, and especially anti-Japan, nationalism therefore presented itself as a ready alternative to moribund state socialism. Patriotic education has tapped, manipulated, and doubtless accentuated attitudes already salient among the population at

large – but it has not manufactured an anti-Japan consciousness out of thin air.

The role of grass-roots activism in sustaining anti-Japan sentiment is especially obvious in the case of Hong Kong.<sup>(5)</sup> It was the former British colony (along with Taiwan), not the propaganda-drenched but politically-repressed mainland, that in the early 1970s spawned a popular movement to “protect” the Diaoyu Islands, at around the time these disputed rocks were being transferred (along with Okinawa) from American back to Japanese control – and as the People’s Republic was engaged in “normalising” its diplomatic ties with Tokyo. Indeed, some of the most ardent exponents of anti-Japan patriotism have been among the fiercest critics of the local and Beijing authorities. There is a connection here between popular and official discourse: a regime that stakes its legitimacy on anti-foreign nationalism, as to some extent China’s Communists have always done (even if economic growth nowadays takes priority), is vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy when striking deals with the old enemy. But the outrage of anti-Japan agitators has often appeared visceral, not just tactical.

As Yanan He notes in the current special feature, the strength of this anti-Japanese sentiment cannot be explained without some consideration of Japanese agency. Japanese complaints about the Chinese state’s deliberate fanning of hostile sentiment are nothing new. In the 1920s, against a backdrop of escalating Japanese incursions into China, diplomats (including post-war Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru) lamented the impact of xenophobic

The current special feature was devised within a three-year project on *Japan and East Asian National Identities*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, bringing together scholars interested in the construction of identities across post-war East Asia and related portrayals of Japan as an “other.” It follows the volume *Imagining Japan in Post-war East Asia* (Paul Morris, Naoko Shimazu, and Edward Vickers (eds), New York and London, Routledge, 2013), in which scholars associated with the Leverhulme network examine both official and non-official “imaginings.” The volume includes studies of Singapore’s official campaign to “Learn from Japan”; a movement to erase a hulking colonial edifice from the Seoul skyline; Japan “mania” in post-Martial Law Taiwan; the portrayal of “good Japanese” in contemporary Chinese cinema; the transformation of images of the wartime enemy in Filipino comics; and shifting portrayals of Japan in East Asian history textbooks. This work is referenced at various points throughout this special feature.

I am grateful to the editorial team at *China Perspectives* and the external reviewers for their very detailed and constructive feedback on this special feature. My thanks also go to Christine Han for her assistance in reviewing prospective contributions.

1. Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Harvard University Press, 2011, Chapter 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
3. Yanan He suggests that a turning point in the official Chinese portrayal of Japan occurred as early as 1982, when Deng exploited patriotic outrage over Japanese history textbooks to bolster his position within the Party (see her article in the current special feature, and her book *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 212-214, 230-232). And criticism of Hu Yaobang prior to his 1987 fall from power involved efforts by his rivals to portray him as unacceptably “soft” on Japan. This underlines the latent potency of anti-Japan sentiment as a tool of intra-elite rivalry. As Christopher R. Hughes emphasises, both top-down and bottom-up perspectives are crucial to an adequate understanding of Japan’s role in Chinese politics. See “Japan in the politics of Chinese leadership legitimacy: Recent developments in historical perspective,” *Japan forum*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2008, pp. 245-266.
4. See Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the “Rape of Nanking”: History and Memory in Japan, China and the United States*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 110.
5. Gordon Matthews, “A collision of discourses: Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese during the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands crisis,” in Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis (eds), *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese presence in Asia, Europe and America*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 153-175.

propaganda on impressionable Chinese youth.<sup>(6)</sup> Just as such protestations were breathtakingly disingenuous then, so they are today, when the political heirs of early-Showa imperialists honour their forebears in pseudo-religious ceremonies (at Yasukuni), while denying past atrocities and preaching their nation's quintessential victimhood. Japan now is very different from the militarist power of 80 years ago, not least in its profound commitment to peace; but collective failure frankly to confront the wartime past supplies plentiful grist to the Chinese nationalist mill.

Nonetheless, Chinese are by no means universally or uniformly in the grip of anti-Japan resentment. Chinese demand for Japanese goods and services appears relatively resilient, despite the negative wider repercussions of recent bilateral tensions (see Stephen Robert Nagy's article in the current issue). Meanwhile, beyond the sphere of commerce, the allure of Japanese modernity remains strong, as witnessed by the recent success of a glossy new magazine, *It is Japan* (*Zhi Ri* 知日), catering specifically to youthful aficionados of "Japanese culture, art, creativity, and tourism."<sup>(7)</sup> This suggests class as well as generational dimensions: opportunities to enjoy these things are available primarily to wealthy, highly educated elites. For well-heeled cosmopolitan urbanites in Shanghai or Beijing, the dreary catechism of anti-foreign nationalism must seem banal and embarrassing (history and politics are notably absent from the *It is Japan* prospectus).<sup>(8)</sup> At the same time, the virulence of anti-Japan protest may derive from resentment not just of Japan or its governing elites, but of privileged Chinese for whom Japanese luxury is within reach.<sup>(9)</sup>

In examining contemporary Chinese perspectives on Japan, it is thus hard to know where to start. We begin by defining "Chinese" in geographically broad terms, encompassing societies beyond the mainland People's Republic (PRC), namely Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as (for comparative purposes) the ethnically and culturally "Chinese" city-state of Singapore. In addition to sharing distinctively "Chinese" cultural attributes, all these societies experienced Japanese occupation during the first half of the twentieth century, albeit to differing extents and in significantly different ways: 50 years of developmentalist colonialism in Taiwan, short-lived but brutal occupation in Hong Kong and Singapore, and steady encroachment followed by the prolonged agony of war on the Chinese mainland. In addition, during the post-war period all have developed intimate commercial and cultural ties with Japan. As we shall see, however, the past casts pronounced if varied shadows over each, and the old enemy has come to occupy quite different positions in their national narratives.<sup>(10)</sup>

With respect to subject matter as well as location, other starting points might have been possible, but our focus in this special feature falls primarily on official discourse. The "visions" of Japan with which we concern ourselves are primarily those generated by the educational or cultural bureaucracy, manifested in school textbooks and museums, though we also look at the wider context of bilateral relations (mainly from the "official" vantage point of high politics or diplomacy), and at the way in which tensions (inter-governmental and popular) have affected Sino-Japanese commerce. Yan He provides an overview of the history of relations between the PRC and Japan since diplomatic normalisation, highlighting major shifts and analysing some of the factors behind these. Edward Vickers compares the treatment of Japan in two major new or refurbished historical museums on either side of the Taiwan Strait, showing how depictions of Japan illustrate divergent narratives of nationhood. Edward Vickers and Yang Biao analyse the history textbooks of Shanghai, which since the early 1990s has enjoyed the right to devise its own

school curriculum; the shifting portrayal of Japan, they argue, highlights tensions inherent in allowing the city to carve a distinctive role as China's most "advanced" and cosmopolitan metropolis, while still requiring fidelity to an orthodox national narrative conceived in Beijing. Christine Han examines how school history textbooks in two former British colonies, Singapore and Hong Kong, have dealt with largely similar experiences of invasion and occupation by Japan, and discusses how their different narratives reflect radically distinct nation-building projects. Finally, Stephen Robert Nagy considers the implications for trade and commerce of the recent spike in Sino-Japanese tensions.

Since our focus here falls especially on officially sanctioned historical narratives, the question arises: Why do these matter? Especially in an age when young people garner more and more information from the Internet, what significance do school textbooks and state-run museums retain?

School texts and museums matter not just in themselves – as instruments for directly shaping the consciousness of the young – but also as definitive statements of an orthodox historical narrative. In a society such as the PRC, they play a significant role in signalling to educators and others where the parameters of ideological correctness lie. Even if not consciously internalised, orthodoxy must be publicly performed by those anxious to avoid antagonising the authorities. Artists, intellectuals, and academics can be relied upon to challenge and test the boundaries of orthodoxy, even on the Chinese mainland (where this still involves personal and professional risk), but will struggle (especially on the mainland) significantly to influence mass consciousness unless they can effect a revision of the authorised narrative as conveyed through official media. Even where conventional and online media are relatively untrammelled, the pronouncements of individual bloggers, journalists, or academics lack the authoritative stamp and broad readership of an officially approved textbook. No other media can claim a similarly captive audience, or rely on an elaborate assessment apparatus to ensure that content is studied, memorised, and reproduced on demand. It is thus natural that across East Asia, where the production of school textbooks is everywhere strictly supervised by the state, the contents of history teaching materials attract unrelenting critical scrutiny, not least from the tireless denizens of cyberspace.<sup>(11)</sup>

6. John Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878-1954*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1988.

7. Published by China CITIC Press, Beijing. The quotation is from the short prospectus printed inside the front cover.

8. Although one entire special issue (No. 7) is actually devoted to the Meiji Restoration – reflecting the enduring Chinese fascination with this Japanese template for self-strengthening modernisation (see articles by Christine Han, and by Edward Vickers and Yang Biao).

9. Chang Ping alludes to this dimension of popular resentment in a reference to "the privileged, rich, and powerful who have an opportunity to expand their horizons" and who are "steadily streaming overseas," in "Resistance as National Education," accessed on 7 November 2013 via the *China Media Project* (University of Hong Kong), <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/09/04/26585/> (original posted at *Deutsche Welle*, 6 August 2012). The complex and varied Chinese reactions to the Tohoku earthquake of 2011 – a mixture of *schadenfreude* and admiration – are also interestingly discussed by Yang Yi in "Weibo, China and Japan," *The Diplomat* (online resource of the School of International Service, American University, Washington DC), <http://thediplomat.com/new-leaders-forum/2011/10/19/weibo-china-and-japan/> (accessed 17 October 2013).

10. Indeed, in looking at the role of Japan as an "other" in the construction of Chinese identities, we might have cast our net wider still, to look at how folk memories of Japanese persecution have become a significant component of overseas Chinese identities, especially in North America. See the introductory chapter to *Imagining Japan in Post-war East Asia*, Paul Morris et al. (ed), p. 6.

11. The role of the Internet in channelling criticism of official historical narratives, both within China and across East Asia, is not dealt with explicitly in the current issue, though it is definitely a phenomenon worth investigating. In their article on Shanghai's textbooks, Edward Vickers and Yang Biao briefly refer to micro-blog commentary on these in the wake of the *New York Times* article, "Where is Mao?"

Nevertheless, the fact that textbooks are as (or perhaps more) likely to attract criticism for being insufficiently nationalistic as for being overly so brings us back to the issue of the extent to which today's widespread anti-Japanese sentiment can be seen the outcome of an orchestrated programme of political socialisation. The term "brainwashing" has recently enjoyed popularity with Japanese right-wingers keen to dismiss anti-Japan protests as products of Communist thought control and Chinese political "immaturity."<sup>(12)</sup> It has also been deployed, with apparently unconscious irony, by mainland officials lambasting Hong Kongers protesting against the introduction of "Moral and National Education";<sup>(13)</sup> the latter, they claim, are the stooges of "Western imperialism," "brainwashed" by decades of British colonial education. But even in so far as popular attitudes can be attributed to official programmes of political socialisation, the question remains: what makes people receptive to certain types of political socialisation, but not to others?<sup>(14)</sup>

Here it is salutary to recall that Taiwan was subjected for 40 years to a concerted Kuomintang (KMT) campaign of political re-socialisation, aimed at transforming the island's inhabitants into ardent Chinese patriots infused, amongst other things, with a proper resentment of Japanese depredations. However, Taiwanese entered the post-Cold War era arguably more ambivalent about their Chinese identity than in 1945, and in the grip of a popular "fever" for all things Japanese. Its remoteness from geopolitical reality and lived experience, as well as the KMT's own record of oppression, rendered the official vision of nationhood, and Japan's place within it, implausible or unpalatable to many. Viewed through the prism of four decades of Martial Law, the colonial period assumed a sepia-tinted aura, as an era of rational

modernisation under largely benevolent Japanese trusteeship. This vision finds distinct echoes in the National Museum of Taiwan History (see Edward Vickers' article on museums). Images of Japan have been implicated in an ongoing – and doubtless never-ending – struggle to redefine an orthodox vision of the national past, in the context of an increasingly diverse and complex popular discourse on matters of history and identity.

The portrayal of Japan in official discourse thus cannot be understood simply as the work of Svengalian apparatchiks. Even in an authoritarian context such as the mainland PRC, textbook and museum narratives reflect as well as help to direct popular perceptions and prejudices, as political elites manoeuvre to reinforce their legitimacy. Agency in shaping these perceptions is distributed amongst those elites, the media, activist groups, and the wider public of Chinese societies, as well as to actors within Japan itself. And as Yinan He observes, even when official bilateral ties are as fraught as at present, scope remains for people-to-people contacts to foster relationships drawing on sources besides the poisoned well of wartime memory. To be sure, social and political divisions within both Japan and China, as well as geopolitical factors, render this difficult; but these divisions also underline the diversity of these societies. Officially sanctioned linear national narratives notwithstanding, there is not one "China" or one "Japan," or even one "Taiwan" or "Hong Kong," but many, just as there are important dimensions of identity that transcend the nation-state. Even if school texts continue largely to ignore this, perhaps we can hope that greater civil society contacts across national boundaries will make it increasingly apparent to those in a position to influence public opinion, in Japan as well as in China.

12. See, for example, the article "Prepare for a Hundred Years War with China and Korea," in the Japanese monthly magazine, *Bungei Shunju*, September 2013, pp. 94-112 (*in Japanese*). See also comments from Japanese informants interviewed by Stephen Robert Nagy.
13. Karita Kan, "Lessons in Patriotism," *China Perspectives*, No. 2012/4, pp. 63-69.
14. Greg Fairbrother tackles such issues in *Toward Critical Patriotism: Student Resistance to Political Education in Hong Kong and China*, Hong Kong University Press, 2003.