Youth Nationalism in Japan and Sino-Japanese Relations

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Sino-Japanese relationship had developed positively at the governmental level. However, Sino-Japanese relationship remains fragile, mainly due to rising nationalist sentiments among Japanese youths. The increasingly interdependent economic ties of both countries will certainly act as a form of restraint on these expressions of nationalism, but the extent of its effect is doubtful. There are clear signs that both incumbent governments wish to maintain and improve Sino-Japanese relationship, and crucial to this is the youths’ positive interaction.

In August 2008, “The Daily Yomiuri Shimbun” and China’s Xinhua News Agency conducted a joint survey. The result showed great difference in the mutual perception of citizens of both countries. The survey in Japan showed that 36% of the Japanese believed that the Sino-Japanese relationship was good while 57% felt that it was bad; in contrast, the survey in China showed that 67% of the Chinese people thought that the Sino-Japanese relationship was good as opposed to 29% who thought otherwise.

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In terms of trustworthiness, 78% of the Japanese surveyed thought that China was untrustworthy as opposed to 42% of the Chinese who thought likewise of Japan. As for the future, 38% of the Japanese believed that Sino-Japanese relationship would improve while as high as 75% of their Chinese counterparts shared the same sentiments.

Japan’s Genron NPO and China Daily conducted a similar joint survey in June and July 2008 in five cities of China and across Japan. In issues concerning Sino-Japanese relations, the results were similar to the one conducted by Yomiuri and Xinhua. At the same time, NPO’s survey also showed that there is an equally stark difference in mutual perception over issues such as economic relations and economic development. For example, in terms of economic relationship, 41.6% of the Japanese surveyed felt that both countries are a threat to each other while 30.2% believed in a win-win situation. In contrast, 60.9% of the Chinese believed in a win-win situation while only 11.5% of them saw the relationship as a mutually threatening one.

Japan’s Genron NPO and China’s annual joint survey started in 2005 and is currently in its fourth year. Genron NPO was formed in 2005 in the wake of China’s anti-Japanese protests (see Figure 1 for an example). Back then, widespread anti-Japan demonstrations, radical burnings of Japan’s national flag and boycott of Japanese products shocked Japan. The Japanese government and other organisations were obviously shocked at China’s fury, but were even more shocked at their inability to grasp China’s perception of Japan in a timely fashion. Such is the motivation for the forming of Genron NPO. From the surveys conducted by Genron NPO, China’s impression of Japan had improved steadily over the years while Japan’s impression of China had plunged annually.

Why is there such a great difference in the mutual perception of average Chinese and Japanese? Why did the Japanese display greater pessimism than the Chinese?

According to the survey, the Japanese felt that the main obstacles to the Sino-Japanese relationship lay in its burden of history (53.3%) and China’s food safety problems (37.3%). Some analysts believe that this difference is caused by the high level of trust placed in their respective media as well as different levels of concern for politics. Post-war Japanese are generally unconcerned about politics and are generally sceptical about media reports.

Some Japanese scholars quoted by Genron NPO also pointed out that the different political systems of Japan and China are the main source of different perception. The source of Japanese anti-China sentiment is that “in China, any pro-Japanese opinions or even opinions that are simply against anti-Japanese will be suppressed and criticised.
This has led the Japanese to seriously doubt China’s freedom of speech, not just at the judicial level but also at the societal and political level. This is the source of Japan’s anti-China sentiments.”

While these reasons are worth looking into, they did not address the fundamental domestic nature of Japanese anti-China sentiments, fuelled by widespread nationalism among Japanese youths.

Some Japanese scholars such as Kazuo Ogawa agree that “the Japanese are frustrated over the nation’s economic growth (or rather the lack of it), political stagnation

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**FIGURE 1 GENRO NPO’S SURVEY ON IMPRESSIONS OF JAPAN AND CHINA**

**QUESTION: WHAT IMPRESSIONS DO YOU HAVE OF CHINA OR JAPAN?**

**Japan**

- Very Good, 2.6%
- Relatively Good, 30.5%
- Relatively Bad, 57.6%
- Hard to Say, 0
- Very Bad, 8.7%
- No Answer, 0.6%

**China**

- Very Good, 0.7%
- Relatively Good, 23.7%
- Relatively Bad, 29.5%
- Average, 36.9%
- Very Bad, 7%
- No Answer/Hard to Say, 2.4%

*Source: Japan-China Joint Opinion Polls, 17 August 2007, Genro NPO*
and ageing population and hence see China as a venting channel for their dissatisfaction. China’s recent attainment of the status as an economic superpower and its rapid military modernisation might have contributed to this frustration. Japanese’s frustration is expressed in their denial or boycott of China”.

It is this frustration which ignited nationalism and corresponding Japanese perceptions of China. And such nationalism is probably much more dangerous than the anti-Japan sentiments of the Chinese, while fast in its proliferation, it also died down at an equally speedy pace.

**Discourses arising from Japanese youth nationalism**

The survey by Japan’s Central News Agency shows that the shift in Japanese’s perception of China occurred sometime in 2005. The catalyst for this change was the waves of anti-Japanese protests in many of the major Chinese cities. In China, these movements soon died off. Thereafter, on the Chinese side, many events changed Chinese perceptions of Japan. The friendliness displayed by the Japan Rescue Team during the recent Sichuan earthquake and the innocence of Japanese table tennis player Fukuhara Ai touched the hearts of many Chinese and improved the image of Japan among the Chinese people. This might have caused many Chinese to believe that the Sino-Japanese relationship is developing in the right direction. However, the improvement in Japan’s image amongst the Chinese did not cause a reciprocal improvement in the Japanese’s impression of the Chinese.

The nationalism of Japanese youths is generally displayed in two spectrums, Nation Superiority Theory and China Detestation Theory. The former has often been coded as “Japonism” by Japanese scholars. Japonism is a fad of the Japanese culture with particular emphasis on art and its beauty judgement. Modern Japonism is expressed in three ways. Firstly, a renaissance of Japanese culture, language and art among youths who are increasingly enjoying public recital of Japanese poems and literature works. A book by Saitou Takashi entitled “Koe o Dashi Te Yomi Tai Nihongo” (Reading Japanese language through vocalisation) has sold 1.4 million copies since its publication in 2001. This sort of Japanese language and recital movement reminds one of the “recital education” of pre-war Japan.

Secondly, the increased frequency of Japanese youths singing the National Anthem “Kimi ga yo” (May your reign last forever) with Japanese flags drawn on their faces and waved in their hands at sports events such as the Fifa World Cup is also seen as an expression of rising nationalism.

The third major expression of nationalism would be the youths’ participation in the Yosakoi festival. The Yosakoi festival was originally the traditional summer festival of Kochi City and is increasingly becoming popular among Japanese youths, who infused it with modern elements and transmitted it throughout the nation. The Yosakoi Festival of 2002 held in Sapporo City attracted two million participants, most of them were youths in their 20s.

The mass dance activity in these Yosakoi festivals is an important expression of Japanese nationalism. Japanese scholars believe that these Yosakoi festivals are useful
for allowing the Japanese youths to not only vent their frustrations and release abundance energy but also rediscover their Japanese identity and the uniqueness of Japan.

A survey done among 15 to 20 year-old youths by a celebrated Japanese columnist in 2007 showed that 53% of high school girls participated in the Yosakoi mass dance at least once while at least 48% of their male counterparts did so. The survey also showed that Japanese youths have strong likings for Japanese cultural icons such as the kimono and Japanese bathing robe.

The renaissance and rediscovery of Japanese culture and nationalism brought about a parallel rise and spread of detestation of China and Korea. While China detestation is not new in Japan, the China Detestation Theory has received a surge in its subscription due to Sino-Japanese frictions in recent years. In particular, the anti-Japanese movements in 2005, the East China Sea Oil Field issue, the Yasukuni Shrine issue and Pinnacle Islands disputes provoked resentment among Japanese youths towards China. Actions by radical Chinese youths (known as Fen Qing, literally Angry Youths) such as the burning of Japan’s national flag are perceived to have damaged Japanese’s national pride.

In response, the pre-existing China Detestation Theory spread rapidly on the Internet. The website “Channel Two” became the hottest gathering spot for subscribers of China Detestation Theory and Korea Detestation Theory amongst the young Japanese.

The choice of the internet as the medium, in which the theory is broadcasted, along with the help of other media such as books and newspapers, caused the China Detestation Theory to spread like wildfire. On 6 August 2005, the release of the comic book, “A manga introduction of China – deciphering an antagonising neighbour” (Manga Chûgoku Nyûmon -Yakkaina Rinjin no Kenkyû, drawn by George Akiyama and produced by Huang Wenxiong) quickly became the hot topic of “Channel Two” and sold 180,000 copies within one and a half months’ time.

Comic artist Yamano who is active in Channel Two also released his new work, “Manga Korea detestation” in the same period. By mid-August, both comics were top sellers in Japan’s Amazon.com website with the latter occupying the bestselling position and the former occupying second position. Between July 2005 and August 2007, “Manga Ken-Kan-ryû” (Manga Korea detestation) went into its third volume and sold over a million copies. Its author, Yamano, released another comic titled “Manga Ken-Chûgoku-ryû” (Manga China detestation ) in July 2008.

Indeed, since 2005, endless volumes of such “China detestation” literature have been published, of which, “China detestation theory - the China detested by the world”
Causes of Nationalism among Japanese youths

Many factors contributed to the rise of Japanese youths’ nationalism. Japan’s nationalism has a long history with its roots traceable to some unique characteristics of the Japanese nation. Japan has a strong sense of national crisis and a siege mentality. Prior to the 17th century, the Japanese emulated Chinese Han culture, and the deeper the emulation, the deeper the sense of inferiority they have for their own Japanese culture. Getting over this entanglement of cultural worshipping and sense of inferiority was a major issue challenging the Japanese scholars then. Some chose to abandon the Japanese identity completely and become “sinicised”, while others chose to revert to Japan’s original culture and utilise any rediscovered uniqueness of Japanese culture to overcome the cultural inferiority.

In the post-Meiji Restoration period, the same complex persisted with European culture replacing Chinese Han culture. From a historical viewpoint, the Japanese had never successfully overcome their psychological entanglement. The return of “Japonism” among Japanese youths can be seen as an expression of such social and psychological complexities.

Japan’s prewar nationalism reached its height in the late 19th century and ceased at the end of the Second World War. Following its defeat, Japan concentrated on economic development and enjoyed decades of economic boom with lifetime employment guarantee. Since the 1990s however, Japan’s domestic situation has gone through an overhaul. The traditional promotion via seniority system has been on the decline, thus changing the traditional “protector and protected” relationship between companies and employees, and essentially changing Japan from a static society to a fluid one. A stable employment relationship not only brought about societal stability, but also allowed the companies as employers to replace the state as a target of loyalty. If pre-war nationalism had been absorbed by such private sector enterprises during the
post-War period, then the dissolution of the company loyalty system could be understood as a re-release of nationalism.

The stagnation of Japan’s economy since the 1990s, often known as the lost decade, has greatly increased the economic uncertainty and insecurity of the new generation of Japanese. A young Japanese scholar, Takahara Hajimeakira, pointed out that China and Korea detestation behaviour displayed by the Japanese youths on the internet is linked to their insecurity with daily life as there is no indication that they can be sure of a better tomorrow. This insecurity and disappointment encourages youths to use the virtual world of the internet as a space to vent their frustrations and both expressions of China and Korea detestations are outlets for such frustrations.

The inability to continue with the economic miracle of earlier years hit Japanese’s pride hard. In contrast, China has gone into a phase of accelerated economic growth since the 1990s. Its successes in other aspects of development such as the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games and the launch of Shenzhou Seven into space have brought tremendous pride to the Chinese; these events became icons of China’s rise, but they have also exerted more pressure on Japanese pride. The contrast of China’s success and Japan’s relative “failure” hurt Japan’s pride and instilled nationalism just as the Meiji Restoration and Western invasion had brought about the rise of nationalism in China over a century ago.

As Sino-Japanese trade grows, cooperation with China has become a major element of Japan’s economical recovery. Unfortunately, the Japanese economy is not recovering as fast as Japan wanted and there is a gap between its society’s expectations of China’s rise and what it experiences in reality in its own country. Hence, China is perceived as more of a competitor than a partner for Japan.

Moreover, endless incidents of food safety issues such as poisoned dumplings and melamine-contaminated milk formulas, widespread official corruption and widening income gaps have aggravated the negative images of China among the Japanese. These negative issues also became legitimate causes for China detestation. As a matter of fact, one of the main reasons for the popularity of “Manga Chûgoku Nyûmon - Yakkaina Rinjin no Kenkyû” is the manga’s satirical portrayal of issues in China such as eco-pollution, intellectual property rights, money-worshipping and transnational crimes.

Nationalism is also deliberately instilled into Japanese youths as a by-product of patriotism. A Japanese scholar, Yongwook Ryu, did a survey with the Japanese Diet and found that there is a rising voice of conservative nationalism (known as Neo-Nationalism) over the years and these conservative politicians perceive that the public, especially Japanese youths, lack patriotism. The demonstrations in China of 2005 enhanced this view and caused the Japanese to feel that Chinese youths were much more patriotic than their Japanese counterparts, causing a “they have it, so I want to have it too” syndrome. Japanese politicians’ emphasis on the contribution of Japan’s Self-Defence Force, the discussions on issues such as Constitution amendment to “normalise” Japan’s international status, the populist policy of Koizumi and Shinzo Abe’s pledge to build a “beautiful country” all contributed to this neo-nationalism. It is a fusion of populism and nationalism.
Japanese Youth Nationalism and the Future of Sino-Japanese Relations

The increasing popularity of “Japonism” and “China Detestation Theory” is likely to impact on the development of the Sino-Japanese relationship. As a democracy, strong popular sentiments in Japan, which include Japonism and the likes, have various socio-political mechanisms of expression in the Diet that could influence Japanese policymakers.

It is still unclear how this will affect Japan’s foreign policy but Japan does have successful precedents in mobilising and uniting its population behind a certain ideology. Japanese elites in powerful political offices such as the Prime Minister may, at times, wish to exploit such opportunities to achieve domestic or foreign policy goals. Koizumi for example, turned to populism to achieve the required support to implement domestic reforms at the expense of the Sino-Japanese relationship.

The development of nationalism among Japanese youths is not decided merely by the domestic situation but also influenced by their interaction with the nationalistic sentiments of China’s angry youths. These Chinese nationalistic youths stoke the growth of Japanese youth nationalism with their actions such as the burning of flags or flaming on the internet. While China’s authoritarian government is better able to constrain the development of such sentiments for the sake of domestic stability, there will be times when things do get out of control.

The new media and products of advanced technology such as the internet and other advance communication devices will make it more challenging for the Chinese government to cap domestic nationalistic sentiment. As new generations of Chinese grow increasingly confident of their nation, their sense of nationalism also grows in tandem.

The increasingly interdependent economic ties of both countries will certainly act as some form of restraint on such nationalism, but it has its limitations. During Koizumi’s era, both nations experienced a prolonged period of “hot economics and cold politics” where economic cooperation appears to have little effect on cooling political ties. There are clear signs that both incumbent governments wish to maintain and improve the Sino-Japanese relationship, but, as Prime Minister Aso pointed out to reporters in his recent visit to China, “it is the youths who will open a new chapter in the Sino-Japanese relationship”.

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