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# The Dragon's Scapegoat: China's Dual Approach to its Japan Policy

by Jordan Hamzawi

## Overview of China's Government

China has one of the most effective authoritarian regimes in history. The CCP's authoritarian control over the populace, particularly in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, has allowed it to guide public opinion and to remove whatever seems threatening to the stability of the regime (Riley 2012, 63). However, what sets China's authoritarian rule apart from others is what Reilly, author of the book *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy*, identifies as "responsive authoritarianism" (12). The CCP has retained power where other authoritarian regimes have failed largely because it has carefully managed public discourse among the it placescitizens. When it comes to China's Japan policy, three elements of responsive authoritarianism are of particular importance: control over the media, the public's role in foreign policy, and government manipulation of anti-Japanese rhetoric.

### *Control of the Media*

The lynchpin of any authoritarian regime's stability is control over public discourse. During the Mao era, the CCP had little trouble in keeping a tight grip on access to media outlets, restricting and regulating every minutia of information given to the public (Hassid 416). As a result, "the vast majority of the Chinese did not even have the ability to be suspicious of the CCP's political system, because they didn't know in the outside world a different . . . life even existed" (416). It was not until Deng Xiaoping initiated reforms for a more open China that control of the media slipped away from total government oversight. Furthermore, economic opportunity awaited a more liberalized country, and a commercialized news media would usher in unrealized revenue. Deng and the CCP recognized that technological advances

would inevitably break the information barrier in China with or without their blessing, so they chose to manage the transition on their terms. However, despite these reforms, the CCP has continued to maintain its heavy-handed control over media, only granting greater media privileges when alternatives have failed. Firing or jailing journalists, banning publications, and running large government-run conglomerates within the media remains far from irregular within the PRC (417). Slight reforms aside, given the CCP's absolute domination of the media in China, the Chinese people only hear what the government tells them, with some exceptions.

### *The Public's Role in Foreign Policy*

In spite of the CCP's media monopoly, China's responsive authoritarianism has given the public a larger voice in an increasing foreign policy decisions. Though the CCP continues to thwart protests against its legitimacy, it has encouraged or even staged protests in favor of policies that align with its interests. This allows the Chinese people to feel incorporated in the PRC's affairs as well as provide citizens a conduit to vent frustration without challenging the government's authority. However, public demonstrations have occurred largely within the framework established by the CCP and those few that have strayed from what the regime has deemed "protestable" (such as Tiananmen Square) were quashed (Riley, 55–80). As a result, many scholars in the past have considered public opinion in China as little more than one of many tangential influences on policymakers; protests and public opinion are tools for the government rather than an external force on the government. That being said, recent scholarship reveals quite the opposite. Over the past few decades, public opinion has exerted increasingly higher levels of influence on China's foreign policy, even restricting the CCP's ability to carry out its preferred objectives, especially with China's Japan policy (83). As Riley succinctly puts it, "in short, recent scholarship on China-Japan relations and domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy suggests that public opinion *does matter* for Chinese foreign policy" (17).

### *Manipulating Japanese Rhetoric*

The above factors of media control and public opinion converge on government-sponsored rhetoric. In the case of Japan, this has fluctuated between positive messages about Sino-Japanese relations and biting anti-Japanese rhetoric. The crux of this issue is whether or not the public follow and believe the rhetoric provided by the government. During the Mao and early Deng eras, it appears that public opinion stayed mostly in line with government rhetoric, particularly on foreign policy issues (Whiting and Xin 1990/1991, 108–12). Furthermore, the CCP focused on primarily positive media to encourage support for lucrative economic ties with Japan. However, as China entered the 1980s and '90s, the government changed its tune. Hoping to maximize domestic support for new liberalization programs, the CCP began approving anti-Japanese propaganda, which led to an explosion of anti-Japanese

demonstrations. As the government moved away from its ideological roots, these protests provided the CCP with a method for transitioning the party's focus from ideology to nationalism at the expense of loosening public oversight. Along with the greater freedom afforded by responsive authoritarianism adopted to maintain CCP legitimacy, there is also greater susceptibility to a dissenting public.

The PRC's responsive authoritarianism reveals the logic of the CCPs dual approach to its Japan policy. While pursuing pragmatic negotiations and treaties with the Japanese government, it attempted, at first successfully, to manipulate the public by enjoining greater Sino-Japanese cooperation and then promoting nationalistic anti-Japanese sentiment for political gain. These seemingly opposing policies are logical within the framework of an authoritarian regime attempting to increase its standing abroad while seeking to bolster legitimacy at home.

### **One Side of the Dual Approach: Government-to-Government Relations**

Though countless anti-Japanese protests and historical animosity would point to the contrary, China and Japan have had relatively good relations throughout the post-World War II period. Whenever Chinese burn cars or denounce Japan over some perceived offense, historians and political scholars have often cited a century of imperialism and war atrocities as evidence of an impossibly high hurdle for Chinese-Japanese reconciliation (Zhao 2005, 76–9). However, such claims only emerge during crises and fail to explain longer periods of harmonious, mutually beneficial cooperation. The real question here is why, after years of war, are decent Sino-Japanese relations even possible, and how does the Chinese government manage public opinion so as not to derail this important bilateral relationship? The government-to-government side of China's dual foreign policy approach allows China to engage in pragmatic diplomacy while moving beyond the past; the anger, frustration, and passion that comes from historical conflicts is neatly tucked away in the government-to-citizen side. Hence, the CCP can displace all the anti-Japanese sentiment of the people while securing the support of the regime through nationalism, and simultaneously engage in friendly, pragmatic official relations with Japan.

Beginning with the end of the U.S. occupation of Japan in 1952, Beijing and Tokyo immediately went about establishing unofficial channels through which the governments worked together (Johnson 1986, 403–5). Though the countries were enveloped in opposing sides of the Cold War during the 1950s, Japan and China focused more on improving economic ties than worrying over security issues. Delegates from both countries attended the 1955 Bandung conference and emphasized a mutual desire for peaceful coexistence. Recognizing the potential disaster a weak China would face with economic isolation from Japan, the CCP embraced its pragmatic Japan policy, pushing aside the still fresh memories of Japan's World War II atrocities.

Despite the desire on the part of both countries for improved relations, China viewed Japan's movement deeper into the U.S. security sphere as a mounting threat to Chinese interests; China feared more than anything else Japanese remilitarization. Furthermore, though Japan and China were following a "separation of politics and economics," China demanded for the first time that Japanese firms accept three political principles: no support of hostile policies toward Beijing, no two-China policy, and no prevention of diplomatic relations between China and Japan (Johnson, 405, Iriye 1990, 632). Although this cooled Sino-Japanese relations for a time, the economic incentives from increased trade kept the door open for diplomacy. By 1965, trade between China and Japan increased over 350 percent with a further 40 percent increase by 1969 (633). The most intriguing aspect of this data is that much of this growth overlapped with the peak of the Cultural Revolution, the most radical period in PRC history. Despite domestic radicalism and turmoil, China preserved economic relations with its nemesis of only a few decades ago.

Once the countries normalized relations in 1972 and signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, Sino-Japanese relations were at an all-time high. Top officials from both countries visited each other, trade exploded, and Tokyo worked with Beijing on the PRC's modernization efforts. Japanese officials visiting the Yasukuni shrine in the 1980s and history textbooks that euphemized many of Japan's war atrocities were met with resentment from Beijing officials, but the scale of official opposition remained relatively calm (Rilley, 58). The CCP would publicly make statements defending Chinese nationalism but officially pursue pragmatic policies with Japan behind the scenes. The dual approach was largely successful since public information and involvement in foreign affairs was really still almost nonexistent.

As the public became more involved in foreign policy, the CCP adopted a more critical stance with Japan. What were originally offenses worked out through diplomatic channels became the subject of large anti-Japanese protests in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the emergence of a public highly attuned to the actions of Japan and extremely sensitive to nationalistic issues, the government has had to tread carefully to appease both its public and Japan. A kink had formed in the dual approach: how can should the government manage Sino-Japanese relations and deal with increasing public outcries over perceived Japanese offenses?

As relations began to sour between Japan and China, accompanied by increasing numbers of anti-Japanese protests in the 2000s, the government began a full-scale media effort to moderate its citizens and ease building tensions. While this initially showed promise, the reemergence of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute seems to have neutralized Beijing's efforts to reign in its public. As Rilley succinctly concludes:

These efforts at moderation were undermined by Beijing's legacy of using historical disputes for diplomatic leverage and domestic legitimacy . . . instead of trying to explain or justify this contradiction to the public, Chinese leaders simply ignored

it. It was as if they believed they could continue the approach of the Mao and Zhou era: telling the Chinese public one thing while foreign policy moved in the opposite direction. This was a mistake" (59).

China's dual approach had served the country's international interests well until the 1980s. Regardless of domestic conditions, China, as a responsive authoritarian regime, used the tools available to follow pragmatic policies that would have otherwise been extremely difficult with an informed public. For the first few decades, the Chinese people only knew what the government told them, and even as news became more accessible, the CCP continued to manipulate it to suit its needs. Today, the Chinese public is an informed public and a far more salient force than they were in the 1950s and '60s. The government's response to the increasing critical rhetoric of Japan has only complicated foreign policy as it tries to continue its increasingly untenable dual approach.

### **The Other Side: Government-to-Citizen Relations**

If one solely considers international relations, it would appear that not much animosity existed between China and Japan in the aftermath of World War II. However, even before the communists gained power in 1949, officials began sowing the seeds that would grow into the rampant anti-Japanese rhetoric and protests that plagued Sino-Japanese relations today. Along with the West, Japan was one of the CCP's scapegoats as the party worked to win popular support, culminating in its seizure of leading up to taking power in 1949. The Communist Party in China never actually consolidated power through Marxist-Lenin ideology; rather, the CCP secured its position by asserting that it could best defend China's national integrity and interests (Zhao, 77–82). Nationalism was the key, and nationalism continues to place a wedge in Sino-Japanese relations.

Thus, China developed the second aspect of its dual Japan policy: gain political legitimacy through manipulation of the abundant anti-Japanese sentiment that was developed over the course of World War II. This approach initially required little effort on the part of the CCP as Chinese citizens were already profoundly anti-Japanese. Since the government held incredible control over the media and censored almost all dissenting political opinions, one of the few topics on which the Chinese people could safely vent their anger was Japan. The Nagasaki flag incident in 1958, where two Japanese youths took down a Chinese flag in a department store is one example. Mao Zedong claimed this incident as a pretext for cutting off trade relations with Japan, an action that reinforced anti-Japanese sentiment with the Chinese public. Once the conflict was diplomatically smoothed over, the CCP returned to its pragmatic policy in building relations with Japan without informing the Chinese people the issue had been resolved.

As economic and diplomatic ties with Japan became all the more important after the Sino-Soviet split, Beijing attempted to systematically muffle the anti-Japanese

sentiment that had developed since the 1930s. In addition to strict caution regarding media publications on Japan, the rampant radicalism of the Cultural Revolution distracted the public's attention and ushered in a period of temporary amnesia over Japan's recent aggression.

This wistful forgetfulness continued well into the 1970s where "Beijing's attempt to create an illusion of Sino-Japanese friendship . . . without first settling the historical account was largely successful" (Rilley, 59). The CCP's rhetoric in both the international and domestic spheres came together as the pragmatism of Beijing's foreign policy aligned with the promises of liberalization under Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese people remained in the dark over potentially inflammatory Japanese actions such as textbook revisions and the Yasukuni Shrine controversy. As younger generations grew up ignorant of Japan's war atrocities, the CCP's dual approach seemed successful; the party enjoyed all the benefits of pragmatic relations with Japan without upsetting the Chinese public.

However, China's dual approach began to unravel in the early 1980s when the CCP allowed propaganda against a new revision of Japanese textbooks that presented Japan as a victim in World War II (Bukh 2007, 690). This tiny spark ignited underlying though dormant anti-Japanese nationalism as student protests unexpectedly erupted in the summer of 1985. More conservative forces overtook the liberalization movement within the CCP as massive propaganda campaigns undertaken by the party-led media embraced the public's fierce display of nationalism. The *People's Daily*, for instance, ran as its headline "The Distortion of the History of Japan's Aggression on China Shall Not Be Allowed" (Rilley, 64). However, once the protests began to harm official relations between China and Japan, the government quickly backed away from its initial support. Newspapers' tones mellowed and encouraged Chinese citizens to recognize the efforts of the government in forging relations with Japan. The change in tone was met with contempt as students challenged the CCP's claim that it was defending China's national honor. The government responded with redoubled efforts to suppress the growing number of protests but capitulated to the public sentiment somewhat by increasing its critical rhetoric toward Japan. For the first time, China's dual approach restricted the CCP's policy goals rather than enhanced them. What initially seemed a wonderful opportunity for increasing loyalty to the regime resulted in hurried backpedaling to contain protests that were undoing diplomatic ties the government had worked tirelessly to establish.

The situation only worsened in the 1990s as Beijing felt continual pressure from an assertive public to stay tough on Japan over national injustices. Simultaneously, Chinese officials were keenly aware of the need to patch relations with a country so close and so economically vital to China. The dual approach caught the government in the pincer of hypocrisy. The anti-Japanese sentiment that the government either willfully ignored or outwardly endorsed prevented Beijing from fully implementing

its desired policies. At the same time, the government could not just forgo the economic and diplomatic ties with Japan it had worked so hard to build. Riley describes the situation:

The contradictions between these two approaches—a willingness to deemphasize the wartime past for strategic and economic reasons and the temptation to use history for diplomatic leverage and domestic legitimacy—have repeatedly provided an opening for public pressure to emerge and influence China’s relations with Japan (63).

Regardless of this impediment, China and Japan continued to preserve good relations, albeit the tone of relations had changed significantly (Whiting, 120–23). However, as the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute develops, it will become difficult for China to continue its dual policy without severe backlash from the Chinese public, Japan, or both.

### **The Erosion of the Dual Approach: The Case of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands**

The Chinese protester quoted at the beginning of this paper was one of many participants in widespread anti-Japanese protests over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Although no more than a group of uninhabitable rocks, these islands have sparked a record number of protests, property damage, and radical anti-Japanese sentiment from the Chinese public. Despite vigorous efforts on the part of the Chinese government to reduce tensions and improve the public image toward Japan, anti-Japanese sentiment frequently erupts. Japan itself is beginning to break from its pacifism and tilt toward more aggressive nationalistic elements, and the Chinese government’s continued adherence to its dual policy may no longer be tenable.

The Diaoyu/Senkaku island dispute began during the first Sino-Japanese War when Japan claimed the islands in 1895 as Japanese territory. From that point forward, Japan administered the islands until its defeat in World War II when the U.S. took over administration of the Okinawa island chain and the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands until 1972. When the U.S. proposed to return the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands to Japan in 1971, Beijing (and Taiwan) objected, claiming that the islands were originally Chinese territory.

However, Japan and China were working toward normalization and China’s dual approach during the 1970s favored ignoring historical and territorial disputes with Japan in favor of pragmatic interests. Normalization and the Treaty of Peace and Friendship went forward while the Chinese winked both times at resolving the dispute. At the same time, the government prevented public awareness of the issue, preferring to paint Sino-Japanese relations as harmonious and without incident. Both China and Japan sidestepped the issue and let it fade into the background while focusing on more pressing diplomatic and economic matters.



In the 1990s, China altered the domestic side of its dual approach to gain nationalistic support and the Chinese public took to the streets. Protests over textbooks, Yasukuni Shrine visits, and war atrocities emerged first, but the Diaoyu/Senkaku island dispute followed shortly thereafter. Beijing vacillated between supporting and suppressing protesters, stuck between its pragmatist Japan policy and its claim to be the defender of Chinese nationalism. The time of total control over public opinion and foreign affairs had vanished, and China's responsive authoritarianism required it to heed its people or suffer domestic turmoil.

The dispute escalated in 2006 when activists from Hong Kong attempted to land on the islands only to be chased off by the Japanese Coast Guard. Various "skirmishes" with fishing boats since then have created a game of chicken on the high seas where China and Japan assert their claims by these and other indirect confrontations. Recent data suggest anti-Japanese sentiment is now even greater than it was in the 1940s (Rilley, 122). Historically, Beijing has preferred pragmatic solutions to territorial disputes, often compromising with its neighbors to finalize boundaries (Maxwell 2006, 3873–875). Although the Chinese government may prefer a pragmatic resolution to this dispute as well, the volatility of the protests over the islands has pushed China to assume a more unyielding, defiant attitude.

The intensity of popular protests over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands is becoming exponentially problematic for the Chinese government. With each policy it follows, the Chinese government is walking the line between an irascible public and a stiffening Japan. The dual approach of manipulating the public in one way while pushing foreign policy another has all but broken down.

### **Implications for China's Japan Policy**

Today, China's government is more responsive to public opinion than ever (Rilley, 129). The depth of anti-Japanese sentiment, which has been manipulated for so many years, has proven too powerful for the government to fully control. Still, Beijing continues to act as though it can simultaneously appease public opinion while implementing foreign policy that contradicts statements to the public, continually adhering to the dual approach. The venerated Japanese Sinologist Ishikawa Tadao explains this phenomenon:

The Chinese insist on basing their foreign policy on some abstract governing principle; when this principle no longer coheres with reality, or fails to advance then-current Chinese interests, the Chinese try to maintain the principle anyway, while looking for face-saving formulas within which actually to do business. (Johnson, 407)

The CCP fueled current mass anti-Japanese sentiment through its past practices of nationalistic propaganda and pursuit of pragmatic foreign policy while burying historical and territorial issues. Formative leaders like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping

looked for leverage over the people within historical Japanese abuses while working out diplomatic and economic deals devoid of nationalistic elements. As the Chinese public gained greater access to the media and started asserting nationalism within foreign policy, this dual approach became a time bomb. Should the Chinese government continue to follow its principles, sooner or later it will face a scenario where it must choose which side to support at the expense of the other. As tensions continue unabated, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands may become the trigger that sets off the bomb.

If China wishes to continue a positive, working relationship with Japan, it must reassess its approach to foreign policy. Officials in Beijing cannot appease public sentiment and secretly work out pragmatic deals with Japan as it has done in the past. The Chinese government currently faces two problems as a result of its dual approach: widespread anti-Japanese sentiment and a diplomatically hardening, more nationalistic Japan. In order to reduce Chinese nationalistic resentment toward Japan, Beijing must pursue negotiations to resolve previous historical issues when working with Japan instead of tabling them in favor of moving forward on economic issues. But this inevitably causes strains in Sino-Japanese relations. Although the Diaoyu/Senkaku island dispute may be too volatile an issue for the time being, smaller issues like textbooks could receive greater attention. Once China and Japan have reached an agreement, China should use its near-monopoly of the media to publicize that agreement as a final resolution to whatever historical dispute has been resolved. At the same time, Beijing must increase its efforts to promote peaceful demonstrations and reduce the level of violence in anti-Japanese protests, then make these efforts known to Japan. This will send a message to Japanese officials that the Chinese government is determined to preserve positive relations. Regardless of what actions the CCP decides to take, the dual approach to its Japan policy is no longer a viable option. The government must remodel its foreign policy principles to reflect the new state of affairs within its borders.

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