Chinese Nationalism through the Prism of the Sino–Japanese Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

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ABSTRACT
In the last two decades, against the backdrop of multiple anti-Japanese protests in China, the rise of Chinese nationalism has been much debated. By taking the 2010 and 2012 Sino–Japanese crises over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as a case study, the article applies discourse analysis to media articles and interviews to ascertain the Chinese government's propaganda toolbox in shaping the nationalist discourse, as well as to substantiate the defining features of anti-Japanese nationalism. The findings reveal a combination of strategies and techniques that the propaganda apparatus uses, such as the creation of an 'us-versus-them' dichotomy, galvanised inclusiveness, censorship, and 'card-stacking' to mould nationalism. The article substantiates empirically both top-down and bottom-up strains of nationalism, and their interaction through the four key themes of sovereignty, history, mistrust and reactivity. It finds that Japan bridges these strands of Chinese nationalism, but in its absence alternative views of nationalism are articulated.

KEYWORDS
China; nationalism; Sino–Japanese relations; Diaoyu/Senkaku islands; territorial disputes; propaganda

Introduction

> There is the 'patriotism' of the Japanese aggressors and of Hitler, and there is our own patriotism. Communists must resolutely oppose the so-called 'patriotism' of the Japanese aggressors and of Hitler [...] China's case is different because she is a victim of aggression. For us, defeatism is a crime, and to win the era of resistance is a duty we cannot shirk. For only by fighting in defence of the motherland can we defeat the aggressor and achieve national liberation (Mao, 1972, 176).

When Mao Tsetung made the above statement at the Sixth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in October 1938, China was at war with Japan. Despite the normalisation of Sino–Japanese relations in 1972, judging by the coverage of the Chinese media 70 years later, not much has changed. Mao's words still pertinently describe China's contemporary view of Japan, particularly in moments of crisis. This is best illustrated through the 2010 and 2012 crises over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea, which have been claimed by both China and Japan for more than half a century.

These uninhabited islands cover a mere six square kilometres but sit on rich natural resources and are of geostrategic and historical importance. The history of the islands remains contested and is an ongoing point of disagreement between the two sides. Briefly, in 1895 China was defeated by Japan, to which it ceded numerous islands, including, supposedly, the

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Diaoyu/Senkakus. The islands were mostly forgotten until 1951 when through the San Francisco Treaty the US gave executive powers over this territory to Japan. However, China never ratified this treaty. The first Chinese official claim over the sovereignty of the islands was only made in 1971. With the normalisation of Sino–Japanese relations in 1972, Premier Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei agreed to shelve the dispute (Asahi Shimbun, 2015). By the 1990s, non-state actors from both sides had become active participants in the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute and brought the dispute into the public eye. Thereafter, tensions reignited regularly and culminated in the events of 2010 and 2012.

In early September 2010, Sino–Japanese tensions grew after a Chinese trawler collided with a Japanese ship in the waters surrounding the islands, leading to the arrest of the Chinese crew. 18 September saw a surge in protests due to the annual anniversary of the 1933 Mukden incident, when a plot was engineered by the Japanese military commanders to allow their troops to occupy Manchuria. Slogans such as 'Never forget 9.18' and 'Get the Japanese out of the Diaoyu Islands' resounded across the country (Ito, 2010). Two years later, in August 2012, the conflict was reignited. On 15 August 2012, a group of Chinese activists landed on the islands, were arrested, and were sent back to China. By the evening of the day of their arrest, the news had captured public attention, becoming 'one of the top three of Sina Weibo's most popular discussions with more than 9.1 million posts discussing it' (Liu & Liang, 2012). Two days later, a group of Japanese activists and officials landed on the islands. By 11 September, Japan had controversially announced the purchase of the islands and anti-Japanese protests erupted across China. Japanese-branded cars and shops were smashed, flags were burnt, and products were boycotted. The 2012 protests are, according to some estimates, one of the largest protests China has seen in the last few decades (Moore, 2012).

This Sino–Japanese crisis, which was characterised by a high level of public engagement manifested through protests, boycotts, online commentary and historical references, offers ample scope for analysing the nature of nationalism. This article explores how anti-Japanese nationalism is understood, manifested and constructed in China. Addressing this topic improves our understanding of the nationalism the Chinese government can tap into when seeking to bolster its legitimacy, distract public attention from other issues, gain leverage in international negotiations, or pursue an aggressive foreign policy (Reilly, 2008; Weiss, 2014). It chiefly showcases the strategies used by the government to shape nationalism. Moreover, it illustrates the monolithic or pluralised, top-down or bottom-up, nature of nationalism. By analysing both state media and alternative discourses on nationalism offered by academics and activists, this article counters the assumption that Chinese nationalism is monolithic and operates at the whim of the Party and its top-down active propaganda. This study aims to highlight how the past, nurtured emotions and political calculations are intertwined. Nationalism is a construct that should remind us that the behaviour of the 'other' should not be oversimplified to emotions or rationalised political agendas, because the two often appear intertwined and give rise to multiple alternative discourses, even in a non-democratic state.

To explore the nuances of contemporary Chinese nationalism, this article uses media discourse analysis and interviews with scholars and activists to present two key findings. First, thematically, media analysis reveals that anti-Japanese nationalism is defined by narratives of history, territorial sovereignty, mistrust and reactiveness. Moreover, it also identifies 'us-and-them' dualities, censorship and less discussed techniques such as galvanised inclusiveness and 'card-stacking', which are crucial to the 'activation' of Chinese nationalism. Some of these features of nationalism are often presumed in the literature, but rarely are they underpinned by empirical evidence. Second, the article identifies a convergence of thematic narratives of anti-

Japanese nationalism between state and non-state actors. Nonetheless, in Japan's absence, popular Chinese nationalism may diverge from the state discourse and become critical of the party-state as loyalty to the nation supersedes loyalty to the government. These findings must be interpreted within the constraints of this study. Because of the limited number of interviews carried out with intellectuals, protesters and activists (who were selected through purposive sampling), the sample is not representative of the wider population and findings cannot be generalised. This study nevertheless provides insights into the various strains of nationalism in China, how they manifest, and why.

The first part of this article provides an overview of the literature of nationalism, while also placing Chinese nationalism in historical perspective, and then outlines the methodology used in the study. Next, the empirical section analyses and compares the findings that emerged from state media discourse with those from interviews conducted with academics, activists and protesters. The ensuing discussion explains the significance of this convergence and divergence of themes of nationalism before concluding.

Perspectives on the Nature and Uses of Nationalism

Definitions of nationalism vary from feelings and memories to identities and ideology, from a primordial to an instrumentalised concept of an old or new nature. If for Connor (1994) and van den Berghe (1981) nationalism is about an ethnic bond through blood, race and territory, for Hobsbawm (1994) it is an elitist 'invention of tradition' by means of education, ceremonies and public symbols. For Smith (1996, 447) nationalism involves a nation's 'ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity', where the 'nation' is defined as a 'human population sharing a historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties'. Smith recognises the potential manipulation of nationalism by elites, but he warns against hyperbolising it. Nationalism can be an instrumental tool for those in positions of power to 'protect their well-being or existence or (…) gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves' (Brass, 1991, 8), particularly in non-democratic states where fewer checks are in place. Instrumentalists prioritise power relations and focus on the agency of elites and their methods of manipulating language, religion, ethnic memories and culture.

The tendency to reduce memories, history and emotions to an on/off switch controlled by elites is particularly accentuated in the context of non-democratic states, and China is no exception (see Carlson, 2009; Gries, 2004). The close alignment between what the editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily*, Yang Zhenwu, refers to as the 'news propaganda work [which] is related to the Party's destiny, to long-term state security, and to national cohesion' (cited in Edney, 2014, 126) further fuels such perceptions. However, this view that nationalism can be simplified to an instrumental use is problematic. Instrumentalism should not be seen in isolation but placed within 'nationhood [which] operates as an unselfconscious disposition: it underwrites people's choices without becoming a self-conscious determinant of those choices' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2012, 544). As Hutchinson explains, the nation is 'not merely [as] a construction of rational self-interest', but 'a source of unique charisma and creative energy expressed in its origin, myths, history, culture, and landscape' (1999, 399). Gries posits that 'Chinese national identity [also] evolves in dynamic relationship with other nations and the past [...] Chinese nationalism involves both the Chinese people and their passions' (2004, 19). It is in this vein that Chinese nationalism is described as a malleable concept, driven by interests, power, history and passions. This article therefore argues that the discourse on nationalism promoted by the party-state is just one of the many strands of Chinese nationalism.

While some China scholars tend to define patriotism as one's feelings of attachment to a country, and nationalism as a view in which one's country is superior to other countries (Gries, 2004), for the purpose of this article, the word nationalism is used, unless otherwise stated. Instead, this article investigates Suisheng Zhao's concept of 'statism', defined as an expression of nationalism promoted by the state which endeavours to identify the nation with the Communist state (2000, 20).

Nationalism is a concept largely unique to social and political dynamics. This explains why over time Chinese nationalism has been placed at different ends of a wide spectrum of adjectives, including 'assertive' (Whiting, 1983), 'confident' (Oksenberg, 1986), 'defensive' (Shambaugh, 1996) and 'pragmatic' (Zhao, 2000). To understand Chinese nationalism towards Japan, therefore, it must be placed into context.

Following the market reforms of 1978 and the Tiananmen protests in 1989, and devoid of Communist ideology, the Chinese government has had to bolster its legitimacy through nationalism and economic growth (Carlson, 2009, 23; Zhao, 2000; Zheng, 1999). The CCP has long been accused of reconstructing the past by placing itself at the centre of the nation, which has to be defended against external aggressors, and of using this strategy to consolidate its legitimacy (Christensen, 2002; Shirk, 2007). Stirring up anti-foreign sentiments can foster nationalism and has been 'regarded as a useful antidote to its opposite – extreme adulation for Western society', which became a more potent threat to the CCP's legitimacy after 1989 (Brady, 2002, 567). This explains the post-1989 books, films and TV programmes that have regularly 'evoked the memories of China's years under foreign exploitation', usually towards Taiwan, the US, and Japan (Brady, 2008, 187). It also accounts for the imposed Chinese patriotic education in schools, the requirement for CCP members to learn about China's history of 'national humiliation', and the emergence of 'red tourism', which encourages people to visit revolutionary and patriotic landmarks. Through all these activities, the government has ensured that an orchestrated nationalism has permeated all levels of life (Brady, 2008; Wang, 2008).

The instrumentalisation of nationalism has been further facilitated by Japan's sometimes questionable interpretation of wartime history. The worship of war criminals alongside regular soldiers who died in battle at the Yasukuni Shrine, the 'sanitising' of history in the Yashukan Museum and school textbooks, and public statements denying the existence of 'comfort women' (a name given to foreign women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army) have intermittently derailed contemporary bilateral relations.

The framework of analysis used in this article draws on the literature of both nationalism and propaganda. Several media propaganda methods, as identified by Chomsky (1997), are relevant to the Chinese case: keeping people distracted and disorganised; upholding a reality that falsifies history; parading external enemies by minimising domestic issues; and offering selective coverage of sensitive events while sensationalising others. After all, 'propaganda's intent is not to educate but to generate and direct emotion, to boil the blood while it narrows the mind' (Steuter & Wills, 2008, vii). And since the CCP lacks democratic legitimacy, propaganda endeavours to instil nationalism and cohesion (Edney, 2014), which in turn makes 'cultural governance' (see Perry, 2013) indispensable. Cultural governance includes cultural aspects such as 'collective commemorations, sites, relics, education campaigns'. In addition, it entails emotion work that 'make[s] people feel sympathetic to the party's agenda' and symbolic references to 'patriotism, national unification, and the splendours of Chinese tradition' (Perry, 2013). The regime also makes use of modern technology such as blogs, forums, and polls to

communicate with the audience. Propaganda goes well beyond institutional censorship and the threat of demotion, dismissal or even arrest, which enhances the party's control over the media (He, 2008). The social pressure of showcasing patriotism activates self-censorship in both democratic and non-democratic states. And lastly, while propaganda plays a crucial role in fostering nationalism and influencing public opinion in support of the party-state, it also signals the prowess of the state in ensuring social compliance and upholding the status quo (Brady & Wang, 2009).

Methodology

This research draws on 87 media articles and 31 interviews and uses discourse analysis. The media articles were selected from the *People's Daily*, the CCP's mouthpiece. The newspaper's online archive was used to retrieve articles from September to October 2010 and from August to September 2012 that reported on the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. Those articles that only briefly referred to the dispute in the context of a different topic were excluded. All selected articles were coded in NVivo, a software programme used for qualitative data analysis. The software aided in the identification of themes through automatic repetition of words that may have otherwise been missed through manual coding only, and in organising and representing the data. Discourse analysis followed Parker's (1992) steps: identifying topics and themes, analysing them in historical and cultural context, questioning how they arose, to whose advantage and disadvantage, and examining the direction and inferences for the kind of actions allowed or prohibited.

The media analysis was complemented with a multitude of bottom-up human experiences and narratives, less often heard. Some 31 interviews were conducted with Chinese scholars, activists and protesters. Interviewees were initially selected based on purposive sampling strategies and then by the snowballing method. In the first instance, Chinese academics who work on Sino–Japanese relations at some of China's most prestigious universities, including Peking University and China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing, and Fudan University in Shanghai, were interviewed. Researchers affiliated with public institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were also interviewed.

The activists interviewed were from China Federation of Defending Diaoyu Islands (CFDDI) and the Patriots' Alliance, some of the most well-known groups involved in anti-Japan actions, including the defence of the Diaoyus. A small group of protesters from Henan province was also interviewed. I had also planned to conduct interviews in Shandong and Hebei provinces, where large protests took place, but these interviews were cancelled due to concerns expressed by participants about the sensitivity of the topic at a time when President Xi was assuming power.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in China except for three that were done online. A Chinese interpreter was present for all interviews conducted in Chinese. Both the researcher and the interviewees had some knowledge of Mandarin as well as English language skills, and there was a mutual cultural understanding that enabled them to intervene to amend or query potential misunderstandings. When in doubt about whether the intended meaning was conveyed, the audio recordings were used for cross-checking information against the written notes, or the interviewees were contacted to clarify.

To avoid following Francis Bacon's epigraph of *de nobis ipsis silemus* ('we are silent concerning ourselves'), I attempted to remove my subjectivity about assumptions, feelings,

choices, experiences and actions through the process of reflexivity, by taking extensive interview notes and recording them when permissible, as well as keeping a fieldwork diary. I developed a good rapport with interviewees from the beginning, which also enabled snowball sampling. My nationality as a Romanian with lived experience under Communism, complemented by cordial historical relations between Romania and China, meant that I often received a warm reception. Having previously worked and lived in central China, and later having been a visiting fellow at Fudan University and researcher at the University of Nottingham, which has a campus in Ningbo, strengthened my credentials. Moreover, the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute was recent at the time when interviews were conducted, in 2014 and 2015, and since interviewees were selected on the basis that they worked on Sino–Japanese relations they were responsive to my invitation to be interviewed.

All participants were clearly informed about the content of the study and always had the option to withdraw from it. The majority expressed the desire to remain anonymous; accordingly, their personal data was securely archived and protected.

The semi-structured format of the interviews meant that discourse analysis could not be applied with the same level of accuracy as in the case of media articles. Nevertheless, a comparison of thematic patterns based on media articles and interviews was possible and provided an important appreciation of how nationalism towards Japan is understood in China.

State Media Analysis: Four Main Themes

Discourse analysis applied to the 2010 and 2012 media articles revealed four key recurrent themes: sovereignty, history, mistrust and reactivity (see Table 1). The dominant themes of ‘territorial sovereignty’ and ‘mistrust’ draw on Japan’s ‘historical past’ and current actions to present China’s ‘reactive’ stance to its neighbour’s ‘illegal actions’. These themes were identified through coding that is based on patterns and are also reflected in the word frequency (Table 2). The recurrence of the four themes was high and aligns with the often-used propaganda technique of drumming a message into the audience’s subconscious until resistance to it weakens.

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Territorial sovereignty and history

Territorial sovereignty was the most popular theme coded in the Chinese edition of the *People's Daily*, with 234 occurrences in 87 articles in 2010 and 2012, which makes it the centrepiece of the state media’s articulation of nationalism. Inevitably, sovereignty was placed into the historical context of the Shimonoseki Treaty and the peace treaties that followed World War I and World War II to substantiate China’s claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Phrases such as ‘China has indisputable sovereignty over the Diaoyu islands since ancient times’ were common in what appeared to be a standard template for most articles.

Sovereignty has long been at the centre of Chinese policy. On the one hand, China’s history of invasion by foreign powers from the 1839–1860 Opium Wars to World War II taught China the importance of asserting territorial sovereignty (Kim, 1994) for the survival of the nation. On the other hand, sovereignty is also closely linked to the party’s legitimacy and its greatest claimed achievement of unifying China and its people (Sandby-Thomas, 2011). Guang (2005,

497) says that sovereignty has been internalised by the party for so long that it became part of the state's identity 'around which nationalist ideas, sentiments, and practices can be mobilized'. Disputed territories therefore constitute trigger points for public nationalism, which puts the government on guard in case the public wave of nationalism turns against it for failing to protect China's national interest, but also enables the government to bolster its legitimacy and even pursue an assertive foreign policy.

History, the second-most popular theme coded, performs three important functions in the context of building nationalism. First, it reinforces China's domestic collective memory, in a particularly powerful manner when combined with sovereignty. Through historical lenses, Japan is condemned for its militaristic past, and in comparison, China's image is hyped:

> Japan has an utter disregard of the history, reality and the consensus reached by former leaders [Deng and Tanaka in the 1970s over the islands]; it underestimates the Chinese government and people's resolve and capability of guarding China's territory and sovereignty, and more importantly, it makes a flagrant challenge against the victory in the world's anti-fascist war and the post WWII international order (People's Daily, 2012a).

Second, history enables the Chinese government to highlight the transition from a 'victimhood' to a 'victor' narrative, using this achievement to fuel popular nationalism and hence its legitimacy. Most *People's Daily* articles follow a pattern of combining the themes of victor and victim. During the Maoist era, a 'victor' narrative dominated the retelling of China's history from the Opium Wars onwards. This 'highlighted the heroism of the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist masses in throwing off their chains and repelling the invaders' (Gries, 2007, 116). The 1980s marked a switch to the 'victim' narrative, dominated by the 'rape of China' (Gries, 2007, 117), 'foreign powers' brutality and Chinese misery' (Wang, 2008, 792) and 'vivid descriptions, concrete figures, gruesome pictures' of Japan's war crimes (He, 2007, 7). Such ghastly references to 'national humiliation' are absent from contemporary media reports, although Japan is not spared from historical accusations. The victim narrative is complemented by the victor narrative, emerging against the backdrop of China's extraordinary growth in recent decades. State media now regularly reminds its audience that 'the era of China bullying is long gone' (People's Daily, 2012b), marking China's metamorphosis into a great power that people should take pride in once again.

Third, history does not serve only as a reminder of the past, but also as a persuasive element of China's present legal claims over the islands. There were 46 such references made to international laws and treaties: 'According to the international law postulated after WWII in the Cairo and Potsdam Proclamation, the Diaoyu islands were returned to China' (e.g., People's Daily, 2012c). As Sutter writes, Chinese nationalism not only decries its past, but it 'involves a unique and strong sense of morality and righteousness in foreign affairs' (2012), often sought in history and international treaties.

The portrayal of sovereignty and history in the Chinese state media fits well within Perry's concept of 'cultural governance': it is marked by commemorations and the revival of historical events, while also hinting at China's current glory.

Mistrust and reactiveness

Mistrust and reactiveness are classed as a joint theme because the Chinese media argues that, since Japan 'cannot be trusted', China has been pushed towards a defensive-reactive stance.

First, mistrust was quickly linked to Japan's history: 'no matter how many years pass, due to its treacherous and deceitful attitude, Japan has no dignity and can never be a "normal" country' (People's Daily, 2012d). This 'lack of normalcy' is put down to Japan's fascist past; the word 'fascism' does not appear in 2010, but in 2012 it can be found in 11 sources, indicating that the government was taking a much stronger stance on the issue. Second, China was adamant in its view that Japan's purchase of the islands in 2012 was not only illegal but sly. Japan's Prime Minister Noda justified the 'nationalisation' of the islands as the only way to stop the right-wing nationalist Governor of Tokyo Shintaro Ishihara's own purchase of the islands; this was slammed as 'outright lies': 'Under the pretext of purchasing the islands, Japan's theft of Chinese territory actually exposed the sinister and insidious scheme of Japan' (People's Daily, 2012a). The mistrust is articulated further by the Chinese Foreign Minister, who contended that Japan was finding pretexts for sustaining its arms expansion, fortifying military alliances, and purposely being misleading about regional security concerns (Baruah, 2012).

The Chinese media's emphasis on Japan's untrustworthy actions is meant to highlight China's reactiveness and counter the view that under its newfound status as a great power it will challenge the regional order, as the Thucydides trap conveys (Allison, 2017). By portraying Japan as the aggressor, China justifies its mistrust and 'peaceful development' trajectory to both its people and international audiences. This in turn fuels public manifestations of nationalism against Japan. When seen in terms of Brady's cultural governance, the propaganda machine taps into the public's emotions to trigger sympathy and support among the public for its ensuing actions.

Dualities: Us vs them

Social identity theory postulates that people desire to belong to a group based on factors such as nationality, culture and ideology, to which they ascribe positive features, while they devalue outgroups (Mercer, 1995; Tajfel, 1982). The resulting dualities enable a government to sensationalise external enemies while minimising domestic issues, a propaganda tool Chomsky (1997, 34) warns about, and to strengthen nationalism among the Chinese people vis-à-vis Japan.

The themes of mistrust and implicit reactiveness were constantly reinforced using polarised us-and-them images that breeds anti-Japan feelings. Whenever Japan was 'absurd', 'ridiculous', 'naive', 'single minded', 'evil' and 'reckless', China was characterised as 'rational', 'legal', and 'valid' in spirit and action. The following media excerpt epitomises the contrast best: 'Moreover, Japan who initiated the war and ended up a vanquished country also needs to realize that when conflicts arise between justice and evil, brightness and darkness, there is only one possible outcome' (People's Daily, 2012e).

This choice of antagonistic language is a traditional propaganda technique that locks China and Japan in perpetual rivalry, where China has the rational, moral and 'physical power' upper hand over Japan (People's Daily, 2012f). Following Staszak's (2008) 'us-them' duality, while the Chinese identity is valued, Japan's is defined by faults and prone to discrimination. This intersubjective nature with which we regard the 'other' in turn allows 'us' to 'stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system' (Žižek, 2008, 49). In this case, it allows the CCP to boost its credentials as the defender of the Chinese nation against a historically untrustworthy and aggressive enemy.

Galvanised inclusiveness

In addition to ascribing negative attributes to Japan and positive ones to China, the intensive use of personal and possessive pronouns, particularly 'we' and 'our', in the *People's Daily* is a marker of persuasive tactics aimed at polarising the two identities (Bramley, 2001). It is also, importantly, a means of creating consensus and unity among the Chinese people. A frequency word search in *People's Daily* articles in 2010 and 2012 shows the personal pronoun 'we' has 100 references in 39 articles and 'our' has 74 references in 23 articles. Common usage includes: 'we will be taking strong measures', 'we resolutely safeguard our sovereignty', 'we should remember history' and 'we should be rational and obey the law'. The use of personal pronouns is meant to reinforce the idea that 'a society shares all its interests in common, without division or variation' (Fowler, 2013). In other words, the Chinese government sets the trajectory of popular nationalism. Another way of achieving this outcome is through the government's claim that 'all' people take the same stance towards Japan. '*All* Chinese people unite together' from '*all* political parties, organisations, ethnic groups' because '*all* walks of life have expressed strong indignation and severe condemnation' (People's Daily, 2012f; emphasis added); likewise, '*every* Chinese who has a sense of justice would be filled with indignation, *every* Chinese who has a sense of uprightness would be filled with vehemence' (People's Daily, 2012g; emphasis added). The end objective of this strategy is to embed set views within the very fabric of society so that any deviation from this norm becomes unacceptable. Those who deviate risk being labelled as 'traitors' which potentially activates self-censorship and minimises opposition. This propaganda approach serves to create cohesion between the party-state and the public against those who may undermine stability or propose an alternative discourse (Edney, 2014, 185), which in turn enhances the CCP's legitimacy.

Censorship

Censorship in non-democratic states is pervasively used to dictate the 'red lines' of reporting. In China, censorship has long stifled discussion on sensitive topics such as Japan. In 2010 and 2012, the media often failed to report protests, despite their popularity. Instead, only a few very vague references were made, with no location or number of protesters being mentioned. For example, the *People's Daily*'s Chinese edition made just one mention of 'demonstrations' in 2010 and two in 2012; no details of the location or size of the demonstrations were included, but instead a positive twist was added to nationalism : 'in *a lot of places* in our country, people, especially young people, spontaneously take to the streets to protest against the illegal "purchase" of the islands by the Japanese government, to express their patriotism and to show the unwavering attitude of Chinese people' (People's Daily, 2012d; emphasis added). This sits in stark contrast to the approach of the international media, which provided wide coverage of the protests. This domestic censorship supports King et al.'s (2013) argument that (online) negative comments about officials are not necessarily censored, but collective actions are. The fear of uprising is ever-present. This is best exemplified by the censorship of protests that turned violent on 17 September 2012 when more than 2,000 protesters clashed with armed police in Shenzhen and tear gas was used to disperse the crowds that attacked a CCP facility to vent their anger at China's failure to protect its national interest (Minemura & Koyama, 2012). After this incident, for the first time since the nationalisation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, the *People's Daily* called for restraint by stressing the importance of 'civilised and lawful [patriotism] […] the essential qualities of every citizen'. To ensure compliance, censors blocked videos and search terms related to the demonstrations. The intensification of censorship signalled the government's concern that anti-Japan protests could turn into a range of grievances against the government's one-party rule.

The intensity of the online censorship is best illustrated when followed chronologically. A search for 'Japanese embassy' (日本大使馆, *Riben dashiguan*), the place of the initial protests, on Sina Weibo, one of China's most popular microblogging websites, returned more than a million results on 15 September. The next day, however, only a censorship notice could be found (blog.Feichangdao.com, 2012). On 18 and 19 September, as protests turned violent, other key terms were blocked on Sino Weibo: 'anti-Japan' (反日, *fanri* and 抗日, *kang Ri*), 'beating', 'smashing', 'looting' (打砸抢, *daza qiang*), and 'thug' (暴徒, *baotu*). To avoid any signs of violence from being reported, on 15 and 16 September photos of the looting, vandalising and anti-Japanese protests were removed from Weibo (Henochowicz, 2012a).

To stop nationalism from overheating, censorship was imposed even more broadly. Writer Lang Yaoyuan claims that not even one publication in Liaoning Province 'dared publish a citizen-produced "protect the islands" advertisement' because they 'must thoroughly adhere to Xinhua News Agency's manuscripts' (Henochowicz, 2012b). In a different instance, the Tokyo-based Overseas Courier Service Co. told the English-language *Japan Times* that Chinese customs officials had seized at least two entire October issues of Japanese newspapers delivered by air for distribution in China because they contained reports on the island dispute (Earp, 2013). Censorship enabled the government to keep the protests under control and preserve social stability, as well as to shape the discourse on nationalism. This reinforces Brady and Wang's point that propaganda is essential in signalling the power of the state in to ensure social compliance (2009, 781).

Card-stacking

'Card stacking' refers to the construction of an overwhelming case on one side of an issue while concealing the other through distractions, omissions and under/over emphasis (Sproule, 2001). In the context of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, it is the underemphasis of the domestic realm and the overemphasis of the external realm that requires attention.

The minimal references to the domestic realm led to suggestions that Chinese nationalism lacks empathy and is 'unable to understand the interests of other nations and ignorant of tolerance and compromise' (Riyun, 2009, 842). For instance, in 2010, when the Chinese fishermen were released, Prime Minister Noda was heavily criticised for 'bowing down' to China's pressure. As a result, public approval of the Cabinet fell dramatically to just under 50 per cent (Kyodo News, 2010). However, this side of the story was never published by the *People's Daily*.

Similarly, while there could be other perceived 'enemies', the Chinese government has carefully crafted a selective memory. For example, on 16 July 2012, 36 crew members of a Chinese fishing vessel entered Russian waters and clashed with authorities who opened fire (Henochowicz, 2012c). This news was immediately censored by the Chinese government who did not want to alienate its ally, Russia, or to deflect the anger of nationalists from Japan to Russia. This resonates with Chomsky's (1997) argument about how the state can select news to deflect attention from uncomfortable topics, so that it serves those in positions of power. Japan therefore continues to stand out as the 'enemy' if it is politically convenient for the CCP to do so; a transparent account of history would be too damaging to the ruling party's legitimacy and China's status in international relations.

The Chinese government was certainly able to set the media agenda and promote nationalistic themes such as sovereignty, history and mistrust through a range of strategies, but the

government also had to rise to the expectations set through the seeds of mistrust and nationalism towards Japan that it had sown over the years. For example, a survey that followed the 2012 events revealed that 63.6 per cent of Chinese expressed full agreement that China is right in its claims over Diaoyu/Senkaku (Chubb, 2014, 50). Failing to act in line with the 'norm of nationalism' it had set, especially given reports that suggested that the surge in nationalistic acts may have taken even the Chinese government by surprise (Burcu, 2021; Minemura & Koyama, 2012; Sieg, 2012) may have otherwise left a dent in its legitimacy.

Alternative Perspectives: Academics, Activists and Protesters

The Chinese government promoted its own version of anti-Japanese nationalism, but how is anti-Japan nationalism portrayed by other actors? Does the state version resonate with academics, activists and protesters? This section draws on interviews conducted during fieldwork. It is worth noting that when interviewing Chinese academics and researchers a degree of self-censorship may be at play; for this reason, as well as for ethical considerations, most interviewees were anonymised.

Consensus on nationalism, territorial sovereignty, and history

Territorial sovereignty and history, particularly the 1839–1949 century of humiliation, ranked high among all interviewees when discussing nationalism in relation to Japan and the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. They were always mentioned together, generally reflecting the views of the media discussed earlier but with some nuances that varied across actors.

Of the 16 academics and researchers interviewed, eight spoke directly and at length about the sour Sino–Japanese history, usually with an emphasis on the Opium War, the Shimonoseki Treaty, and World War I and World War II treaties. The interviewees often deemed offensive the idea that the government *constructs* anti-Japanese nationalism. A Professor of History argued that 'The government did not create anti-Japan nationalist feelings, history did' (Interview, academic D, 2015); similarly, a researcher affiliated with the Foreign Ministry explained that 'no one needs to teach people because they can see by themselves what Japan did; they have their real feelings and judgements' (Interview, researcher E, 2014). Others remarked that 'history' may appear instrumentalised due to commercial interests and the vast censorship on themes considered to be sensitive by the government; the flourishing of anti-Japan materials in media, art or research may hence wrongly be interpreted as a campaign led by the Chinese government (Interviews, academic F & G, 2015).

Four other interviewees did not delve into historical matters but hinted towards history when describing strong anti-Japanese feelings at the societal level (Interviews, academics G, H & I, 2015; academic J, 2014). Only three interviewees clearly stated that anti-Japanese nationalism was Chinese state propaganda. One noted that:

> We Chinese have a misunderstanding of Japan. China's propaganda has never mentioned that Japan apologised, that they offered free interest loans. After China's liberation, we tend to consider Japan our imaginary enemy, when an internal threat happens, we focus on the outside 'other' (Interview, academic C, 2015).

The party 'misappropriated China's history' in relation to Japan to boost its legitimacy (Interview, academic C, 2015) and created a 'staged play' in which 'youngsters have to act as

patriots to gain certain benefits from the government' (Interview, researcher K, 2014). These interviewees did not deny the existence of anti-Japanese feelings at the roots but attributed significance to the government's instrumentalisation of history. As one scholar expounded, 'popular nationalism is both natural and instrumental', based on history and instigated by patriotic education (Interview, researcher K, 2014). Similarly, another interviewee (researcher H, 2014) stressed that 'history is both a reason and an excuse' for the problems between China and Japan.

Among the six activists interviewed, history also clearly trumped all other themes and was interlinked with the protection of China's sovereignty and core interests. Tong Zeng, a well-known activist supporting the campaign for compensation from Japan for Chinese World War II victims, holds 'great anger towards the Japanese government because based on its national interest, it denies the truth [of history], escaping from true responsibilities […] [by] still acting in the pre-war style, which is against the development of history' (Interview, 2014). All protesters interviewed referred to the same two themes to describe their nationalism in relation to Japan, with none questioning China's actions. Their views came very close to those expressed in the *People's Daily*, while the academics tended to present a more nuanced perspective on the topic.

Mistrust and reactiveness

The Chinese respondents I interviewed almost unanimously agreed that the tense Sino–Japanese relations in both 2010 and 2012 were unilaterally triggered by Japan, which reflects the high level of mistrust harboured against Japan. This was identical to how the state media portrayed the situation.

12 of the 16 academic interviewees clearly blamed Japan for the dispute in the East China Sea, while four evaded the question. By way of illustration, academic L from a prestigious Chinese university saw Japan as being culpable for starting the islands disputes in both instances because 'Japan cannot face up to a strong China if they don't change policies, so Abe tries to unite Japan by creating incidents such as those from 2010 and 2012' (Interview, 2015). Foreign observers of the dispute differentiate between the 2010 and 2012 incidents because in 2010 a video emerged that showed the Chinese trawler appearing to purposefully swerve into the Japanese coast guard vessel. However, even in this case, the common view among Chinese interviewees was that Japan was in breach of the 1972 informal agreement between the Chinese and Japanese Prime Ministers, Zhou and Tanaka, to shelve the issue of the islands. This agreement set a customary expectation that Japan would not apply domestic laws to trespassing fishermen but would instead chase their boats out of the disputed areas (McCurry & Branigan, 2010). Researcher M, an International Law expert and professor, insisted that:

> Regardless of the video, the ruling party of Japan chose a different policy from the previous government and broke the 2008 agreement China and Japan had on maintaining consensus and peace in the East China Sea […] The Democratic Party chose to resort to an aggressive action and arrested the captain (Interview, 2014).

Given the nationalisation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in 2012, Japan was almost unanimously described as the party that had challenged the status quo. This argument relies heavily on Japan's dismissive attitude towards China's repeated warnings against such move. Just the weekend before the nationalisation of the islands, on 11 September 2012, on the

sidelines of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation summit held in Russia, Hu Jintao warned Japanese Prime Minister Noda against the 'illegal' nationalisation of the islands (Perlez, 2012). Officials from Japan's Foreign Ministry also cautioned Noda about the growth of anti-Japanese movements in China and urged restraint in the government's actions (Zakowski, 2015). The former US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, stated that the US had also warned Japan at the time (Japan Times, 2013). As Interviewee L (2015) put it, 'The Chinese president asked Japan not to nationalise the islands and Japan did exactly that the next day. Japan lost its credibility'. By disregarding these recommendations, Japan fuelled China's mistrust and nationalism.

Additionally, the Japanese government was criticised for giving in to pressure from its own nationalists (Interview, academic J, 2014) by intensifying coastguard patrols in the area (Interview, academic F, 2015) and engaging in 'military moves' against China (Interview, researcher N, 2015). A professor closely linked to official circles saw the problem as stemming from the leadership of Prime Minister Abe, who replaced Noda after his resignation in December 2012:

> Abe is not popular with the public, so he tries to create tensions to portray China as a threat to expand Japan's military power. Before he took power, Abe said he would not resort to war to regain the islands, but after he took office, he changed his mind as he is using force now (Interview, academic O, 2015).

For others, the threat is more tangible. Researcher P (Interview, 2014) expressed concern over Shanghai's geographical proximity to Japan and welcomed the establishment of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), which was controversially established after the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku events. China's ADIZ overlaps with that of Japan and requires those engaging in possible incursions into China's sovereign airspace to report their transit.

Protesters appreciated Japan's technological development and the discipline of its people, but historical mistrust cast doubt over Japan's future (Interview, protesters B, 2014). Activists, like academics, perceived Japan as a potential military threat to China, but framed it in terms of 're-militarisation'. This fear stemmed from historical mistrust: 'It is our international duty to make Japan apologise; if they [Japan] don't truly reflect on history, in a way, we are "covering" Japan's murders and perhaps another war will start' (Interview, Tong, 2014). Despite being constantly monitored by the Chinese authorities and frequently harassed when staging anti-Japan actions, CFDDI activists believe that ultimately the 'Government and its people must learn to trust each other' since their goals of 'defend[ing] the people and borders' are the same (Interview, Li, 2014). For them, stability and national interests prevail over concerns of individual freedom of expression and other democratic principles. These activists are an illustrative example of Suisheng Zhao's apt observation that the government always speaks in the nation's name not only 'to create a sense of nationhood' but also to demand 'citizens [to] subordinate their interests to those of the state' (2000).

Dissensions of Nationalism

In the 1920s, the KMT was the first party to introduce the term 'party-state' (*dangguo*), which 'implied that the nation was defined conceptually and even geographically through its allegiance to the party' (Harrison, 2001, 193). The CCP has continued to follow the same approach that conflates the nation with the party, but interviews reveal a dichotomy between loyalty towards the state and the nation, especially when Japan is removed from the discussion.

The distinction between patriotism (i.e., loyalty to the ruling party and its political beliefs) and nationalism (loyalty to the nation) was made clear by all activists and protesters. Loyalty was clearly shown to the nation, to the land, and to the Chinese people, but not necessarily to the party. As one protester explained, 'Loving a country is a sense of belonging. If the CCP is the leader of the family, but it leads us the wrong way, we won't listen' (Interview, protesters B, 2014). Li Nan from Patriots' Alliance further described from a primordial perspective that the nation 'has much more power [than the state]' which stems from the fact that 'it has no border, as long as we all have the same blood' (Interview, 2014). More incisively, an outspoken critic of the government explained:

> [I]n China, dealing with nationalism is a red line, nationalism has to equal patriotism […] Chinese patriotism [defined as support for the party] needs the support of nationalism [support for the country]. Nationalism should be a common sense and feeling, but the government promotes ideological and political nationalism (Interview, academic C, 2015).

A well-known university professor, and Ma Licheng, a writer and long-time editorialist for the *People's Daily*, both had first-hand experience of the wrath of extreme nationalism. In 2002 and 2007, after they called for the need to overcome historical differences between China and Japan to improve bilateral relations, they were branded 'traitors'. The professor (Interview, Q, 2015) recounted that he received between 30 and 50 daily phone calls of complaints and threats over a three-month period. His address and phone number were made public, and the situation escalated to the point that he had to stop work and move out of his home. Protesters held demonstrations at the university, and they even filed a complaint at the local judicial court.

Emphasising the importance of the nation over the party-state can be destabilising for the government, particularly if it fails to meet the public's expectations – in this case, protecting China's core interests. The government is therefore keen to minimise this dissension, as reflected in the nationalist and state-affiliated *Global Times* (2014): 'while love of country and love of party are not the same, they are "certainly not contradictory either"' and '[t]rying to separate patriotism from the love of party is a "poisonous arrow" used by people with "ulterior motives" to undermine China's unity'. An editorial in the *Global Times* criticises those 'brainwashed public intellectuals in China' who teach people to believe that 'loving the country doesn't equal to loving the government and the party' (Global Times, 2014). Despite this indoctrination, in Japan's absence, popular support shifts from the party-state to the nation, indicating that without an external perceived threat, 'patriotism cannot muster the level of emotional commitment that nationalism can' (Connor, 1993, 387) because 'the state to which one owes allegiance may alter its borders, change its constitution, change its name, [and] even cease to exist through conquest or merger', so loyalty to the nation is continuously nurtured (Lind, 1994, 95). The Chinese government worries that loyalty to the nation may overpower loyalty to the party, so it is keen to avoid the separation of the two concepts. The party-state has always legitimated its claim to power by painting itself as the inseparable guardian of the Chinese nation (Liao, 2013, 547) and 'the maintenance of national integrity' (Christensen, 2002, 22) which inevitably requires the existence of an 'external threat'. Japan is an easy target.

Other human right activists, lawyers and journalists who fight the state in courts or challenge it in public stand on the same side of the barricade on the Japanese question. One such example is Guo Quan, a political activist who has called for democratic elections in China while also initiating a boycott against Japanese goods during the Diaoyu/Senkaku incidents (Human Rights in China, 2011). Likewise, Yeung Hung, a Chinese political activist detained for taking

part in the 1989 Tiananmen activities, in 2012 skippered one of the boats that carried Chinese activists to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands (Radio Free Asia, 2014). Another activist closely involved with CFFDI anti-Japan campaigns described his fight against local governments that have illegally misappropriated farmers' land (Interview, activist A, 2013). The story of Li Chengpeng, a popular investigative journalist, has a similar beginning but a different ending. Once a fervent anti-Japanese protester, in time he shifted his criticism from the Japanese government to the CCP. He described himself as 'a typical patriot' who 'believed that "hostile foreign forces" were responsible for most of my people's misfortunes', and perceived Japanese citizens as the descendants of the soldiers who brutally killed Chinese civilians in the 1937 Nanjing massacre (Li, 2012a). After the powerful Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Li's view changed:

> It became clear that the 'imperialists' did not steal the reinforced-steel bars from the concrete used to make our schools. Our school children were not killed by foreign devils. Instead, they were killed by the filthy hands of my own people (Li, 2012a).

Ever since, Li has been a staunch critic of the government and in 2010 even ran for political office as an independent candidate. Amidst the 2012 anti-Japanese protests, he wrote online his own 'Confession of a Traitor' (一个卖国贼的自白) where he decried the anti-Japan boycott and demonstrations (Li, 2012b). It is cases like Li's that the Chinese government fears the most due to their power to 'hijack' state nationalism and turn people against the government. Recent studies of online nationalism show that Beijing should worry about grassroots nationalism, as criticism is often directed not only towards 'external enemies' but also at the government itself (Cairns & Carlson, 2016). Nationalism does not dominate social media spaces, but liberal thinking provokes backlashes from nationalist groups (Zhang et al., 2018).

Conclusion

With the aim of understanding how, why, and what type of anti-Japanese Chinese nationalism was articulated in relation to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in 2010 and 2012, this study analysed a range of perspectives, from state media to academics, researchers and activists. It has shown that common narratives of anti-Japan nationalism in the state media, including the themes of history, territorial sovereignty, mistrust and reactiveness, resonate with all of the actors interviewed. Several propaganda techniques, such as 'us vs them' dualities, galvanised inclusiveness, censorship, and card-stacking, were identified as useful tools in burnishing the state's discourse of nationalism.

The Chinese government carefully designs its discourse on nationalism to ensure criticism of Japan is not turned against the party-state, but at the same time it is challenged by new forms of nationalism. Some of the anti-Japan voices are emerging online or in street protests and have proven at times to be more hawkish than the party, while others have clearly identified a dichotomy between loyalty to the nation and to the state, despite the government's attempt to unify the two. Despite some convergence on key themes and government propaganda, nuanced streams of Chinese nationalism were identified. Nationalism is not solely an elite instrument, but is constantly reconstructed and reinterpreted by state and non-state actors. The Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute brought together different actors and discourses, each embedded in its own reality and pursuing its own definition of national interest and nationalism.

Although this study focused only on the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands case to reveal different facets, sources and strategies of promoting nationalism, its framework allows for similar analysis to be reproduced. In China, since Xi Jinping came to power, the propaganda apparatus has become more sophisticated and provides further avenues for research. China has departed from the stale style of traditional media and now engages more widely in disinformation campaigns (Wang & Burcu, 2020) and high-tech methods of social control (Hoffman, 2017).

All the nuances of nationalism highlighted in this article, and the increasingly sophisticated propaganda tools used by the party-state, indicate the malleability and changing nature of nationalism and suggest the need for further investigation into the emerging streams of Chinese nationalism.

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