

# Senkaku : Historical Structure of China's Anti-Japaneseness\*

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## “Anti-Japanese Sentiment and its Formation Process”

How has China's anti-Japanese sentiments been formed? To understand its origins, we must look into the matter deeper than Japan-China diplomatic quarrel on the surface; we must gain a perspective on the historical structure that originates in the traditional nature of China's intricate worldview, which spans politics, ideology, and society.

Since the fierce Chinese backlash to the Japanese government's purchase of three islands of the Senkaku Islands in September 2012, Japan-China relations have been in a challenging phase. There have been no signs that the Chinese government will relax its hardline stance, and the increasing anti-Japanese attitude exhibited by Chinese people in “demonstrations” and elsewhere does not seem like it will abate easily. Although the majority of Japanese people would not consider that Japan was entirely blameless on what happened in the past, they probably feel that the intensity of China's words and actions are a fair share of the problem.

Figures from different specialties have provided no small amount of commentary on the developments thus far, the current situation, and the response Japan should now take. As an outsider in that regard, it would not be very meaningful for the author to discuss the issue in the same context. Therefore, this essay will attempt to provide a China-based historical perspective on the issue's origins and structure. Hopefully, this will aid deeper thought on the situation before us and how to respond in the future.

## The history of China's relations with Japan and other foreign countries

Whether the issue is the Senkakus or anti-Japaneseness, we must understand the overall nature of China's foreign relations because from the Chinese perspective, these issues are part of relations with Japan, a foreign state. And when we do so, we must not ignore what is generally referred to as Sinocentrism or the Sino-barbarian dichotomy.

In ancient times, China boasted an overwhelmingly advanced civilization in East Asia. Naturally, this was why China felt superior to surrounding countries and did not make proactive efforts to learn about other parties' domestic affairs or intentions.

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The inevitable result of China's disdain is a vague understanding of its own borders.

“The (Chinese) Emperor is the head of the world under heaven. For he is above. The barbarians are the feet of the world under heaven. For they are below” (Jia Yi's words, cited in “The Book of Han”).

This is prototypical language in Sinocentrism and the Sino-barbarian dichotomy.

From the outset, the relationship between China and surrounding countries “under heaven” is vertical, like the “head” and “feet” of a person, and is inseparable. A line cannot be drawn to demarcate between the two. There is no strict definition of where one begins or ends, just like the head and feet of the human body.

That is why China's concept is that there never existed any international borders between itself and other countries, and even if there were anything resembling a border, it was not necessarily distinct and it could be easily moved at will.

The concept of territory and national borders became entrenched in China beginning in the 20th century. Furthermore, it was only because China felt an overwhelming sense of crisis from foreign pressure applied by the Great Powers and adopted the concept as a countermeasure. To avoid encroachment and partition by the Great Powers, the Chinese defined the scope of what constitutes “China” and desperately attempted to defend it. Borders are lines that show the geographical areas which a state must defend to the last. Those areas inside the borders are territory.

Accordingly, the critical issues for the Chinese are the subjective question of where exactly China believes that its extent begins and ends and its balance of power with other states. The primary problem is not: whether China has the conditions, principles, or mindset of international relations between modern states, which is based upon territory and national borders; whether China conforms to them; or what the intentions or interests of other parties may be.

To reiterate, we must not forget that to the Chinese, national borders and international relations have, when we consider the longer history, been foreign concepts that were only imported a century ago as a means of resisting foreign pressure. From their perspective, their worldview and conception of the outside world have a history extending more than 2,000 years, and once the sense of crisis subsides, the conventional thinking will naturally rear its head again.

Of course, since international relations based on territory and national borders are currently the global standard, China would for the moment follow along. But this is no more than a means to an end and cannot earn more respect than the respect China has for itself. This is especially true when it comes to the neighboring states to which China long considered itself superior. Japan is no exception.

A case in point is the superimposition of Chinese concepts under the conventional Sino-barbarian dichotomy with terminology used in modern international relations. For example, the term “dependency” today refers to a part of a territory, and a “vassal state” is a state that does not possess full sovereignty. The Chinese words used for these terms today, however, did not have the same meaning in the past. Even if a state exercised full autonomy in its internal and external affairs, as

long as the state accepted formal superiority of China, the state could be referred to as a “dependency” or “vassal state.”

The characters are the same, so partly for that reason, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese have consciously and unconsciously mixed up the past usage of “dependency” and “vassal state” with the modern meanings.

At work is the old thinking that largely ignores borders and wields modern international relations as a means to an end. The transformation of the dependencies of Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang into Chinese territory, and the accompanying ethnic issues that have arisen, provide a good example. We can understand border disputes with India and in the South China Sea in the same context. Of course, the Senkaku Islands are no different. Even China's remarks the other day referring to Okinawa as a “vassal state” and “dependency” are a problem of the same nature.

### **Anti-Japanese sentiment and traditional thought**

The growing tensions around the Senkaku Islands have created a storm of anti-Japanese movement in China. The anti-Japanese opinions they espouse cannot be taken at face value. They provide a glimpse of their incorrect, contorted, or non-existent knowledge of Japan, whether the subject matter is the Senkakus or an understanding of history.

It is easy to imagine that that lack of understanding comes from the lingering concepts of the aforementioned Sinocentrism and Sino-barbarian dichotomy. Therefore, the inaccuracy is impossible to ignore. However, the greater problem is that no matter how much one explains or presents evidence, they will not acknowledge that their misunderstanding is erroneous. They will surely refute it and refuse to make any revision or apology. To understand why, we must know how they think.

Traditional Chinese thought has been what we call Confucianism. There is not enough room here to go in-depth into the specifics of Confucianism, the once widely accepted system of education and learning that goes back some 2,000 years, so this essay will only cover two points concerning its character.

Firstly, as expressed by the mantra that “those who wish to rule the land must first cultivate their own characters, then manage their families, then govern their states; only then can they bring peace to the land,” Confucian thought ranges from relationships between individual people to domestic politics and the order of the world. Chinese thinking on foreign relations and of the Sino-barbarian dichotomy had a basis in that thought. Secondly, writings on Confucianism in general fall under one of two categories: the *jingxue*, i.e. studies of the Thirteen Classics, and the *shixue*, i.e. studies of the historical writings. The first point in this paragraph is self-evident, but the second one requires somewhat more detail.

The names of the two categories of Confucian writings describe them with no ambiguity. The former explains the espoused truths and teachings of Confucianism. Indisputably, these texts directly discuss ideology, so to speak. This is clear without a detailed explanation.

Rather, we should focus on the latter: the *shixue* and the related historical writings. This should

not be considered synonymous with regular historiography. The primary purpose of the history we imagine is to clearly identify and represent objective historical facts. This is the minimum obligation. This is not necessarily so in the case of the *shixue*. Historical facts deserve respect, and their accuracy should also be investigated thoroughly. However, historical facts serve as nothing more than specific cases to explain teachings from abstract, abstruse classical texts. The role and *raison d'être* of the *shixue* is to provide an easily understood explanation of the ideological rationales written in classical texts by using known past events as examples. Accordingly, the highest priority in presenting the historical facts is Confucian teachings. Even if objective validity is secondary, it is customary to present the facts of the relevant teachings and ideology.

Today, Confucianism is not a central idea in China, nor is it even a widely accepted system of education and learning. However, a separate ideology remains connected to the regime and authority, and the placement of indoctrination of that ideology at the center of education and learning is the same as in the time of Confucianism's prominence. Thus, presentations of historical facts remain explanatory examples thereof. The preamble to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China provides a case in point with its mention of recent history leading up to the Chinese Communist Party's assumption of power. There is no reason to inquire into whether that presentation is objectively accurate.

Of course, history in one's country tends to be connected with the state's authority and ideology. This connection is not limited to China. However, there are not many countries in the world that have such a long and established tradition like China.

When Confucianism was the widely accepted ideology, China's stance toward the outside world was to "expel the barbarians" in line with the teachings of the Sino-barbarian dichotomy.

In the 20th century, when Confucianism lost its status, the drive to expel the barbarians was also replaced. As in the aforementioned constitution, taking its place was anti-imperialism based on the Chinese Communist Party's ideology. Now, that focus has converged on anti-Japaneseness.

That is why the sentiment and emotions against Japan are not by any means induced by strictly accurate facts or cause-and-effect. Anti-Japaneseness comes first, after which it is given a rationale, and then it is imprinted by a suitable case. The problem of historical understanding is also a part of this rationalization. We can see this clearly when we consider that on September 27, 2012, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi appalled the world when he asserted during a speech at the U.N. that it is a "historical fact" that the Senkaku Islands were "stolen."

To China and the Chinese people, this is appropriately just and is how the world order should operate. Therefore, accepting the inaccuracy would be a suicidal act denying their own greatness and justification. No matter how much their logic may crumble, this is something they dare not do.

### **A social makeup that leads to "demonstrations"**

That anti-Japaneseness has incited countless popular "demonstrations," but Japanese people have felt that they repeatedly involve behavior that is too violent to be called demonstrations. This violence also occurred in the anti-Japanese demonstrations from seven years prior; it could be a distinctive phenomenon in modern China. Anti-Japanese demonstrations elsewhere, such as in

South Korea, do not necessarily involve this sort of behavior.

If that is the case, then anti-Japanese sentiment and speech should be considered something separate from “demonstrations” and other such campaigns and behavior. Dogma and ideology are the things of the educated class or were in existence beforehand, but the recent phenomenon of violent behavior in “demonstrations” is not being carried out by the educated class alone.

The excuses given by those “demonstration” participants for their violent behavior are usually the same ideological remarks issued by the authorities. However, as to the question of whether they sincerely believe these things, or whether they personally have reasons that compel them to directly join the backlash with physical force, the answer is clearly no. In that case, why do they engage in such behavior?

Some say the riotous behavior in these “demonstrations” is comparable to the action taken by the Boxers in 1900 or the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution because it caters to the wishes of the government. For the author, however, it brings to mind more minor historical events, such as the rebel movements of the late Ming dynasty or the anti-missionary riots during the late Qing dynasty. The former was a series of frequent anti-government rebellions by urban residents in the early 17th century, while the latter was an outbreak of assaults on Christian missionaries and churches in the late 19th century. Both occurred in different eras and had different objectives. Nevertheless, what they share in common is that the educated elite played the role of instigators inciting violence by the masses.

The local literati at these times did not share the same interests as government authorities and they often participated in rebellions and resistance. In both the urban riots and the attacks on Christian churches, the masses were manipulated by the literati to engage in behavior that represented the latter's intent.

However, this does not mean that there was solidarity or shared sentiment or interests between the literati and the masses. In fact, it was quite the contrary. Both were of such different social status that they would not unite as one. Furthermore, the literati were fiercely competitive against their peers, while commoners were engaged in a struggle for survival against each other. In either case, the competition was so intense that it compares to nothing in Japanese society.

Under these circumstances, if there were any advantage to be gained, the only option to achieve distinction for the educated elite was to employ discourse, while for the uneducated people it could only mean taking action. Whether appeasing or rebelling against government authorities, the motive was the same, and when there was a major incident, the voltage would jump.

It was especially the case for the commoners, who took action to rise up, that employing violent means was the most obvious choice. If that violence were to justify dogma advocated by literati, there would be a declaration of “public indignation” against corrupt forces and action to bring justice. And if the violence were just, then its legality was of no concern. In China, even the murder of a treacherous emperor was espoused and practiced as the expulsion of a disqualified monarch. In the past, the determinant of whether such action is right or wrong was Confucianism. Today, it is the ideology of the Communist Party. In that sense, the idea that “patriotism is innocent” has a long history and deep roots.

For the authorities, the educated elite are essential as a mouthpiece for ideology. However, there is no guarantee that the elite or literati will always be aligned with the authorities' intentions. As it turns out, the commoners are a necessary tool of the elite who will take action to translate their thought and speech into action. However, employing this tool entails risk. Each of the three parties has its ulterior motives. If one feeds the fire too much in their incitement of another, there will be a scramble to extinguish it. This mutual dependency and tension are a relationship that has persisted since the 17th century.

## **Conclusion**

As this essay has shown thus far, the issue confronting Japan-China relations at present is certainly not a simple diplomatic problem. Whether it be the Senkakus or anti-Japaneseness, the issue originates in the historical substance of China's complex worldview, which spans politics, ideology, and society. This means the problem will not be resolved soon.

If this has been an essential aspect of China, then we could consider the current issues a temporary focus on Japan that happened to come up in the longer course of Chinese history. The same issues have the potential to arise or already have with other countries in a different respect. The historical framework of China's worldview is not confined to Japan-China relations. This perspective could contribute to an understanding of the situation in unexpected ways.

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## **Addendum**

This essay originally appeared in a Japanese journal published in November 2012. Accordingly, the contents of course reflect the situation at that time about a decade ago. Terms such as "nationalization of the Senkaku Islands" and "anti-Japanese demonstrations" provide a case in point and the situation has dramatically changed since then..

Over the past decade, China has steadily grown into a great power. Xi Jinping, who had recently become the head of state at that time, has now solidified his grip on power like few others. After taking a favorable turn from the anti-Japaneseness of that time, Japan-China relations seem to be worsening again amid the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S.-China tensions. As for "demonstrations" by the masses, it is well known that in Hong Kong they have been suppressed after garnering attention for the territory's democracy movement. These developments have made it plainly evident that the affairs of the world change at a fast pace.

However, this essay's argument was not about the current affairs of the world, but rather the historical framework of China's essential worldview that at times provokes certain situations. Even after ten years, it is unlikely to have changed much. The confrontation around the Senkaku Islands remains the same and we have seen no dramatic improvement in Japan-China relations. Even if the form or the target changes, the question of how to control public "demonstrations" is one for the Chinese government to answer, as it has always been.

Having a better understanding of the historical framework in which the roots of that issue lie would certainly not be a wasted effort when observing and assessing China's forthcoming speech

and actions. This is the reason for the translation and republication of this old text. (October 11, 2021)