

Learning from Chinese National and Nationalist Spectacles⁺

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Abstract

When anti-Japanese protests erupted in mid-2012 and commentators sought to put them into context, many historical events were mentioned, ranging from the Boxer Uprising of 1900 to the 1999 rallies triggered by NATO bombs hitting the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. This essay suggests that, despite the many differences between the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and the recent demonstrations by crowds angered by Japanese claims to sovereignty over islands that are also claimed by China, we can learn useful things from placing these spectacles side by side.

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JEL classification: *F52, H12, N45, Z13*

1. Introduction

How can looking backward help us make sense of the anti-Japanese demonstrations of mid-2012, which were triggered by disputes over control of small islands claimed by different East Asian countries? When commentators have addressed this question, their answers have pointed to various points in China's past. Look back to 1900, some commentators have suggested, noting that in the disastrous Boxer Rising young Chinese also lashed out in xenophobic ways.¹ Others have suggested looking back instead to 1919, when participants in the May 4th Movement were motivated by anger at Japanese incursions into territory they insisted rightfully belonged to China.² Look back to the Cultural Revolution decade (1966-1976), still others have said, noting how Communist Party leaders used impressionable youths to do their bidding in that period as well.³ Yet others have argued that the most relevant historical moments are relatively recent anti-foreign protests: 1999's anti-

NATO rallies, 2005 and 2010's anti-Japanese eruptions, and the anti-French agitations of early and late 2008.⁴

There is some value in revisiting each of the events just mentioned when trying to place the 2012 anti-Japanese protests into historical perspective. The 1999 through 2010 actions alluded to above, in particular, provide useful points of comparison. In all those cases, as in mid-2012, specific actions precipitated outrage at a foreign country. It was NATO bombs hitting China's embassy in Belgrade that sparked protests in 1999, the roughing up of a Chinese Olympic torch bearer in Paris that led to 2008 first anti-French rallies, and so on. And in all those cases, as in mid-2012, themes at the heart of recent "patriotic education" drives figured prominently in the rhetoric of the struggle. The street actions of 1999 through 2012 carried out in the name of protecting the nation, in other words, have all been shaped in part by a discourse about the need to remember Chinese national "humiliations" of the past that, while having roots stretching back to the pre-1949 era, has been given renewed emphasis and distinctive twists in textbooks and classroom since Tiananman – a period during which the authorities have tried with special vigour to instill in new generations a sense that it is important to remain mindful of old wounds. Another common thread linking the anti-foreign outbursts of 1999 through 2012 is that, in each case, the Chinese Communist Party leadership, despite its obsession with stability and harmony, has shown a willingness to allow and sometimes thrown its support behind the agitations – at least initially, though often later moving to rein the struggles in.⁵

As attractive as it is to compare the mid-2012 protests to anti-foreign outbursts of the recent and not so recent past, however, my focus here will be on what we can learn from placing the demonstrations beside a very different sort of historical event. Namely, if we treat the mid-2012 public actions primarily as political spectacles rather than as protests *per se*, I will argue, they can be paired usefully with the lavish gala held to open the Beijing Games on August 8, 2008.

2. Spectacles of Mid-2008 and Mid-2012: Comparisons and Contrasts

At first, it may seem that bringing together China's glittering Olympic moment and the recent nastiness of anti-Japanese street actions could highlight nothing but contrasts. In the middle of 2008, after all, the key slogan was "One World, One Dream" and global audiences were wowed by a Chinese mass performance that began with a quote from Confucius referring to the pleasure of welcoming friends from afar.⁶ Four year later, the sounds coming out of Beijing and other Chinese cities that grabbed international attention were not ones made by determined drummers drumming but by angry chanters chanting. And their words spoke of something very different from the value of

promoting goodwill between China and other countries. They referred instead to the need to settle scores with Japan, violently if necessary.

More specific contrasts between the spectacles of 2008 and 2012 relate to location and the role of historical allusions. The site of 2008's spectacle was a single Beijing stadium, whereas in 2012 the streets of more than one hundred Chinese cities served as staging grounds for the drama. The 2008 gala choreographed by filmmaker Zhang Yimou was filled with nods to history, but lacked explicit invocations of foreign invasions of the 1830s through 1940s and direct reference to Chairman Mao or the Mao years (1949-1976), whereas in discussions associated with the 2012 demonstrations much was made of the Rape of Nanjing in the 1930s and some participants carried portraits of Mao.⁷

Another difference between the Opening Ceremony and the anti-Japanese street actions of 2012 relates to degrees of government control. The CCP, which is keen to present itself as an organization that led battles against imperialism in the past and is now uniquely capable of protecting China from being bullied by other countries in a dangerous geopolitical era, tried to associate itself with and guide the mid-2012 protests. As already noted, this extended a familiar pattern. It had done the same with the anti-NATO outbursts in 1999, the anti-Japanese rallies of 2005 and 2010, and the anti-French upsurges of early and late 2008. And in some cases in 2012, the state did more than just attempt to steer crowds: especially near the capital, they moved to directly stage-manage demonstrations, sometimes ordering its paid employees, including policemen wearing plain clothes, to shout out slogans and parade.⁸ Only some anti-Japanese actions, though, were carefully choreographed events. There was often – as had been in the case of the protests of 1999, 2005, 2008, and 2010 – much more room for improvisation than there had been in the tightly scripted Opening Ceremony. And in 2012, as in the anti-foreign outbursts of 1999-2010, some demonstrators parted from the officially approved game plans for rallies. They slipped in slogans complaining about corruption, calling for reform or lamenting that China currently lacks a strong leader like Mao, giving an anti-government dimension to moments in these guided protests that had no counterpart in the public display of 08/08/08.⁹

A final 2008 versus 2012 contrast has to do with international responses to the events in question. By the outside world the Opening Ceremony was, on the whole, seen favourably. The foreign press did have some complaints. Commentators criticized elements of fakery, such as the beautiful voice of one girl seeming to come from the mouth of another who had been deemed more photogenic, and a degree of lock-step conformity in some set pieces that evoked the North Korean mass games. On the whole, though, outside observers found much more to applaud than to complain about in 2008,

liking the image that the spectacle presented of a China that respected its traditions but was eager to move forward and make friends. The year 2012's anti-Japanese displays, not surprisingly, were roundly condemned by foreigner observers, just as the anti-NATO, anti-French, and anti-Japanese demonstrations of 1999 through 2010 had been. These outbursts were interpreted as reflecting an aspect of Chinese politics that is stuck in the past rather than surging into the future, a signal that the country is still unready or unwilling to greet the world with open arms in the confident way that it did during the Olympics.

What, then, is there to compare rather than contrast?

One parallel between the spectacles of mid-2008 and mid-2012 is that both underscore the intense concern that China's current leaders have with trying to convince domestic audiences that conflicts between different segments of society and different factions within the top echelons of the Party are things of the past. The Opening Ceremony did this by emphasizing the theme of "harmony" and presenting China as a country in which everyone worked together for common goals. The recent protests did so by playing up an "us" versus "them" stance toward Japan, which was helpful for diverting attention from the Bo Xilai scandal.

A second important connection between the 2008 and 2012 spectacles has to do with the way coverage of them revealed that the long-term tendency of many foreign observers to underestimate the diversity of China's population is alive and well in the 21st century. For well over a century now, whenever entrancing or appalling Chinese group performances capture the world's attention, commentators in the West too often fall into the trap of forgetting just how selective a window these events provide onto the thinking of the massive numbers of people living in China. This can lead to overly simplistic sweeping negative comments about "the Chinese people", something that happened in 1900 with the Boxer Uprising, and overly simplistic and equally sweeping positive comments about this same large group of individuals, such as those that took hold when China and the United States were allied during World War II.¹⁰

We should not, therefore, be too surprised that in 2008 Zhang Yimou's show inspired a flurry of generalizations about such things as the positive feelings that "the Chinese people", as a whole, have toward Confucius and ancient history in general. This line of thinking also informed some high profile books on the country published in the wake of the Games, such as Martin Jacques's *When China Rules the World* and Henry Kissinger's *On China*.¹¹ The sense conveyed in many commentaries on the Olympics and in books such as those was that, leaving aside members of restive ethnic groups living in the far western parts of the country, such as Tibetans and Uighurs, and a small number of daring dissidents, who typically end up in jail or in

exile, the people of the People's Republic of China are on the same page on most things. The reality, though, is very different. For instance, while a lot of Chinese people admire Confucius, there has been a dramatic uptick lately in the resurgence of Taoism and Buddhism and millions of citizens of the PRC are now evangelical Christians.¹² Similarly, some Chinese have a reverential attitude toward the distant past, but in China, as in many other places, many young people (and not so young ones as well) could not care less about things that happened before they were born, let alone two millennia ago.

Not surprisingly, then, the Chinese people were not all on the same page when it came to the question of whether the Opening Ceremony did a good or lousy job at presenting the country to the world. As Geremie Barmé noted at the time in *The China Beat* blog/electronic magazine, some intellectuals were critical of the spectacle's handling of China's past, one lamenting that he had looked forward to see Zhang Yimou offer up a "banquet" of delectable historical morsels, only to get a "hot-pot" of elements from the past thrown together in a hodgepodge fashion.¹³ And in a recent essay for the *Diplomat*, Susan Brownell stressed that parallels between the Olympic Opening Ceremony and state-run North Korean spectacles were part of the Chinese debate about the event as well as the Western discussion of it, which is significant in part because many Chinese feel that its neighbour represents how China used to be before a more enlightened period in its history began.¹⁴

Soon after the latest uptick in anti-Japanese sentiment began in mid-2012, it became clear that it would be another year when generalizations about what "the Chinese people" think and feel would get more play than they deserve. The first thing that sparked my concern on this front was a passing comment, in an otherwise admirable *New York Times* op-ed by political scientist Peter H. Gries, which referred to "most Chinese" feeling that "the Japanese are 'devils'".¹⁵ Yes, the character for "demon" is embedded in a term sometimes used in China to refer to the Japanese. And, yes, patriotic education drives have gone to great lengths in recent years to keep alive the memory of the Rape of Nanjing and other acts of Japanese aggression among those who lived through them (a very small percentage of the nation's populace by now) and, more importantly, inculcate a second hand sense of horror about these events in the minds of later generations. It is a big leap, though, to move from these two points to saying that "most Chinese" view "the Japanese" as less than human. Many people in China are capable of thinking that what Japan's soldiers did in China decades ago was absolutely appalling without assuming that everyone who now lives in that country is devilish. Even some who may use the derogatory term that includes the word for "demon" do not necessarily feel this way about the people who now live in Japan, and the same goes for those who take part in anti-Japanese demonstrations.

Just as we need to remember that the presentation of Chinese culture in the Olympic Opening Ceremony was a selective creation, we need to keep in mind that even the largest of the 2012 protests involved just a fraction of the population of any Chinese city. And the people who joined those rallies, like participants in many mass actions, did so for varied reasons. Some were doubtless motivated by a visceral hatred for all Japanese people. Others, such as policemen paid to demonstrate, were just doing their job. Still others may have been angered by what the Japanese government had been doing *vis-à-vis* the disputed island, but still admired some things about Japan and its people. In addition, based on my experiences as an eyewitness of the anti-American protests of 1999, which were triggered by NATO bombs hitting the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, I would guess that there were some people involved in the 2012 protests who marched simply because of their eagerness to take part in a protest of some kind, any kind.¹⁶

As for those who did not march, we should keep in mind that, just as some Chinese felt uncomfortable about the image of their country that the Opening Ceremony conveyed, some Chinese were embarrassed by or critical of these spectacles. One person in this camp was the novelist, racecar driver and enormously popular blogger Han Han. He wrote powerful essays in 2008 about the hollowness of those years' partially orchestrated anti-French demonstrations, and even more trenchant ones in 2010 about the anti-Japanese eruptions of that year, suggesting that it was hard to take seriously manifestations of so-called public opinion in a setting in which one was free only to speak out against the mistakes made by a different country's government, not one's own. Not surprisingly, in September of 2012, he weighed in critically on the streets actions once again, albeit in somewhat less acerbic ways than in the past. This time he stressed the foolishness of thinking that smashing a Toyota somehow proves that one was a patriot.¹⁷

Han Han's opinions are especially worth noting since each of his posts is read by hundreds of thousands of people, at least some of whom must find his opinions on issues like this congenial or they would give up reading him. His insistence in post after post that there are many ways to demonstrate that you love your country, only one of which is to focus outrage at any other nation, is no isolated expression of just a single idiosyncratic person's viewpoint. And in 2012, there were other widely read writers who made similar statements, including some, like Han Han, who are independent thinkers but by no means "dissidents" in the sense of being primarily concerned with criticizing the government and working to radically transform China.¹⁸ It is significant as well that Han Han and other writers sometimes have much more positive things to say about mass actions very different from the anti-Japanese demonstrations: large gatherings – and there were some of these during the summer and fall of 2012, just as there have been each of the preceding years

– that find people clamouring for a toxic plant to be closed or moved, so that their children have a better chance of growing up healthy.

It is interesting in this light to note the contents of an essay that journalist Helen Gao wrote for the online edition of the *Atlantic* while the anti-Japanese protests were underway.¹⁹ It describes an online poll conducted in China over the summer in which readers were asked what kind of citizenship they would like a child of theirs to be able to claim if he or she was born on one of the disputed specks of land, which are known as the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese, the Senkaku Islands in Japanese, and are claimed by the government of Taiwan as well as by Beijing and Tokyo and have been a focus of attention for activists in Hong Kong as well as other parts of the PRC. The comment thread for this admittedly unscientific sampling of Chinese opinion suggests that, in answering, respondents weighed patriotism against a desire for their offspring to be able to speak out for things they believe in, breathe clean air, and eat food that is safe. Many respondents answered that they would like this imaginary child to be a citizen of the PRC, of course, but many said they would rather have their offspring grow up Taiwanese or Japanese or at least with the distinctive form of Chinese citizenship that residents of Hong Kong can claim.

3. Concluding Remarks

We can learn a lot about China from spectacles that make international headlines, as the Olympic Opening Ceremony did in 2008 and the anti-Japanese protests did four years later. If staged or simply permitted by the government, they can give us insights into the thinking of China's leaders. If participants get to choose to take part, we also get clues about their beliefs and passions. Equally importantly, though, are the things we can learn from the debates and discussions about these events that take place in dorm rooms and teahouses, on street corners and online. And from the alternative spectacles that take place simultaneously with or just before or just after the ones that get the most media attention – e.g., the “Not in My Backyard” quality of life demonstrations that broke out in Shanghai and Beijing in 2008 before the Opening Ceremony and in different parts of the Yangzi Delta just before and just after the demonstrations associated with the Diaoyu Islands.²⁰ If analyzing these spectacles is going to illuminate rather than mislead, though, we have to resist accepting the idea, put forward by the Chinese government and occasionally by foreign commentators as well, of a single unified Chinese worldview.

Notes

⁺ An earlier, shorter version of this essay appeared in *YaleGlobal*, September 24, 2012 <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/one-country-many-faces>>; it ran there

under the title “One Country, Many Voices”. Note: all urls listed in these notes were last accessed November 8, 2012.

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1. “Beijing Mixes Messages over Anti-Japan Protests”, *New York Times*, September 16, 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/world/asia/anti-japanese-protests-over-disputed-islands-continue-in-china.html>>
 2. “Protests Expose China, Japan Weaknesses”, *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2012. <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444450004578003574218898786.html>>
 3. “Anti-Japanese Protests ‘Prepared’: Ai”, *The Australian*, September 20, 2012. <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/anti-japan-protests-prepared-ai/story-fn3dxix6-1226478346384>>
 4. “Of Useful Idiots and True Believers”, *The Economist’s* Analects blog, September 18, 2012 <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2012/09/protests-real-and-fake>> (accessed November 7, 2012).
 5. See my “Student Protests in Fin-de-Siècle China”, *New Left Review*, no. 237, 1999, pp. 52-76, for more on these points with specific attention to the anti-NATO protests of May 1999. But note that I also argue there that it is misleading to draw too sharp a line between that 1999 struggle, on the one hand, and 1919’s May 4th Movement (which had its xenophobic as well as enlightened side) and the Tiananmen protests of 1989, on the other.
 6. See the various pieces on the Olympics in Kate Merkel-Hess *et al.* (eds), *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance* (Landham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
 7. “Chairman Mao Rears His Head in China’s Anti-Japanese Protests”, *Shanghaiist*, September 15, 2012. <<http://shanghaiist.com/2012/09/15/chairman-mao-anti-japan.php#photo-1>>
 8. Louisa Lim, “China Ratchets Up Rhetoric in Island Spat with Japan”, National Public Radio, September 17, 2012. <<http://m.npr.org/story/161271408>>
 9. See, for example, “Beijing Leaders ‘Walking a Tightrope’ over Violent Anti-Japanese Protests”, *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2012. <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1038692/beijing-leaders-walking-tightrope-over-violent-anti-japan-protests>>

10. The classic account of this phenomenon remains Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (New York: John Day and Company, 1958); see also, for an updating, Perry Anderson's discussion of Sinophilia and Sinophobia in "Sinomania", *London Review of Books*, January 28, 2010 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n02/perry-anderson/sinomania>>.
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16. See Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "Student Protests in Fin-de-Siècle China". See also the very interesting analysis Yi Lu provides in "As Recriminations over Anti-Japanese Protest Mount, Deep Division in China Emerge", *Tea Leaf Nation*, September 23, 2012 <<http://tealeafnation.com/2012/09/as-recriminations-over-anti-japanese-protests-mount-deep-divisions-in-china-emerge/>>; this piece argues that, beneath "a cocoon of nationalistic solidarity, the anti-Japanese movements last week revealed how much potential for fragmentation and disarray exists within modern Chinese society."
17. Liz Carter and David Wertime, "Han Han to Japanese Car Vandals: You Are Not Patriots", *Tea Leaf Nation*, September 18, 2012 <<http://tealeafnation.com/2012/09/han-han-to-japanese-car-vandals-you-are-not-patriots/>>; several of his earlier posts on anti-foreign can be found in Han Han, *This Generation*, translated by Allan Barr (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).
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20. For a good introduction to protests of this kind, focusing on recent events, see Christina Larson, "Protests in China Get a Boost from Social Media", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 29, 2012 <<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-10-29/protests-in-china-get-a-boost-from-social-media>>.

