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Mirrors of History: On a Sino-Japanese Moment and Some Antecedents

by Geremie R. Barmé

May 4 2005 marked the 76th anniversary of the iconic Chinese patriotic protest movement. It was the day in 1919 when students led popular protests against Japan's imperial ambitions in China. It was also a seminal moment in the historical construction of modern China, prefiguring and also influencing the rise of the Communist Party itself in 1921,and marking a stage in the cultural and social transformation that remains at the heart of modern Chinese identities.

May 4, Youth Day, and May 1, International Labor Day, now fall within a weeklong holiday in China. This year that holiday is being celebrated in many ways during a period of particular tension. There are reports of busloads of police and soldiers being deployed to protect Japanese interests in the Chinese capital and other cities; there are also reports of a high state of vigilance on the part of the authorities regarding any mass protests against Japan following from the outpourings of April.

One of the interesting aspects of official attempts to reign in volatile popular emotions, an aspect of no great significance but one wherein, I believe, we can catch a glimpse of the fascinating yet unsettling face of China's contemporary cheery authoritarianism, is the mass SMS (Short Message Service) mobile text messages that went streaming out to phone users throughout Beijing from the start of this holiday season. I believe that mass mailings of text messages were made by all the leading telecoms in Beijing at the behest of the Public Security Bureau (but, one wonders, who paid the tab?). They articulate in the truncated language of the SMS, something familiar to us all, the latest party line on public antagonism to Japan. Let me share three of the messages that were sent to me yesterday, May 4, from bemused and befuddled friends in Beijing with you:

'The Beijing Public Security Bureau would like to remind you of the following: don't believe rumors, don't spread rumours, express your patriotic fervor in rational ways. Don't participate in illegal demonstrations. –Wangtong Telecommunications wishes you a happy Labour Day!'

'Don't create trouble when all you want to do is help! Be patriotic, but don't break the law. Be a solid, law-abiding citizen.'

'Usually you're busy and exhausted, so let this be a happy Labor Day holiday week. We can only build a harmonious society if we are disciplined and respect the law.'

['Beijingshi Gonganju tiqing nin, bu xinyao, bu chuanyao, lixing biaoda aiquo reqing. Bu canjia feifa youxing huodong. Zhongguo wangtong gongsi zhu nin Wuyijie kuaile!'
'Bangmang buyao tianluan, aiguo buyao weifa, zuo yige zunji shoufade hao gongmin. Zhongguo wangtong gongsi zhu nin Wuyijie kaile!'
'Pingri manglu xinku, Wuyi changjia kuaile, goujian hexie shehui, dingyao zunji shoufa.']

As the mass protests against Japan unfolded in cities throughout China this April, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who was on an official visit to New Delhi, remarked at a news conference that:

"Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for its past, and wins over the trust of the people of Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibility in the international community."

Meanwhile, back in Beijing, Qin Gang, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, said when addressing the regular media briefing for foreign and Chinese journalists, that the protests were "totally spontaneous." Furthermore, reported China Daily the official English-language newspaper in China, they were "prompted by the Chinese public's dissatisfaction at 'the bad practice and attitude adopted by the Japanese side on its history of aggression.' " [1]

Indeed, we should note that through the media the Chinese authorities promote themselves as the natural representatives and energetic defenders of China's national interests (integral to the 'three representatives' [sange daibiao] catechism formulated by former Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who was in turn taking a page from the Selected Works of Mao Zedong), egging on nationalistic outbursts while at the same time retaining the right to repress them. The authorities would exercise this right when Shanghai's Liberation Daily published on 22 April an editorial in which a heinous plot with murky aims was spoken of in a prelude to the further suppression of mass unrest.

Facing up to history, respecting history, learning the lessons of history are all themes of both official and popular protests against Japan's officially-sanctioned textbooks, the visits of government officials to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo and the perceived failure of Japan as a nation to show full and continued contrition for the acts of imperial aggression throughout East and Southeast Asia before and during WWII.

I remember well as a young scholar living in Kyoto in 1982 hearing about and then being party to the heated discussions of Chinese students at Kyoto University when the first ructions regarding Japanese high-school textbooks appeared. The texts being protested against then used the vocabulary of modest obfuscation to describe the egregious acts of aggression in China, in particular at the time of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the bloody occupation of Nanjing and the invasion of East China. Such popular discontent has been a feature of the creation of the 'public' since the end of the Cultural Revolution. The outrage and despair felt by Chinese colleagues then has, in later generations, only grown as new texts, even if only marginal within the Japanese education system, feed into a perception that China's neighbour continues to avoid confronting its—albeit imperial—past. There is an abiding—and even mounting—sentiment that 'Japan' continues to be insensitive to the feelings of others in the region in regard to that past, and that it is a nation that is incapable of redressing those wrongs through meaningful, substantive and sustained acts and expressions of official contrition. This is also despite the fact that the issue of comfort women and the atrocities in Nanjing are now mentioned in some texts, even if inadequately. At the same time, continuous regional unease and even hostility towards Japan appears to have encouraged and legitimated a resurgence of neo-nationalism in Japan itself.

Injunctions such as Premier Wen Jiabao's to learn from history and not to repeat the mistakes of the past are common in China today. Indeed, such admonitions have been characteristic of elite political pronouncements, historical writings, thought and philosophy in China from well before the Christian era. The classical expression yi shi wei jian, 'use history as a mirror' (in which one reflects on one's own image), is still in common usage.

However, some commentators—dissenting writers on the Chinese-language Internet, and scholars and political scientists internationally—were much exercised by Wen Jiabao's magisterial and, they observed, patronizing statement. Many were quick to point out that, if the Chinese government wants to invoke history as a guide to the present, and to use it as a standard by which countries should measure themselves, then China and the Communist Party that rules it, should take a long hard look at their own woeful record. Many said that China itself has little respect for the truths of history or that as a nation it was incapable of formulating a suitably responsible attitude to its own past (be it that of the deadly 1950s, the suppression of the Lhasa Uprising, the famine of the early 60s, the Cultural Revolution era, or in regard to more recent popular ructions such as the repression of peaceful mass protests in 1989 and 1999).

Adding further to the overlapping of histories, and accounts of atrocities and violence—and I don't raise these to confuse the issues being discussed today, but as a way to alert this audience to the complex historical cross currents that flow through the private and Internet discussions and debates concerning these very fraught issues—is the presence in mainland China these last days of Lien Chan, head of the KMT, formerly the ruling party in Taiwan, and prior to 1949 the party at the heart of the Republic of China's government.

For at this juncture we should also be mindful of the fact that for over 40 years, the Chinese Communist Party as the ruling party on the mainland invoked the crimes, the mass murders, the deadly policies and the class warfare essayed by the KMT as a justification for its rule and its ruthless repression of opponents. For its part, the KMT government on Taiwan never tired in its propaganda against the 'Communist bandits' on the mainland to speak of the brutality, violence and mass murders being perpetrated by their enemies, the victors in the Civil War of the late 1940s and the founders of the People's Republic of China. A rhetorical pitched battle between these contenders for national political and cultural legitimacy was once bellicose and incessant. It continues today with different actors and in muted form.

Having said this, let me speak of histories of a more recent provenance, histories that are also related to protests, outpourings of emotion and questions of constructed truthfulness.

First, a snapshot from twenty years ago. On 19 May 1985, a soccer riot broke out in Beijing after a match between the Chinese and then independent Hong Kong soccer teams at the Worker's Stadium in the Chinese capital. It was the first large-scale spontaneous riot in the capital since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Angry crowds overturned cars, stopped taxis and harassed foreigners. Anti-foreign slogans were chanted and many violent clashes took place involving police and militia. Numerous international media reports spoke of the hooligans involved as being like the Boxer rebels of 1900 who sacked foreign legations in the imperial capital; an inchoate mob involved in a xenophobic frenzy. Reports also noted that the rioters were particularly venomous in the verbal attacks on Japan.

The then noted Beijing novelist Liu Xinwu wrote a controversial account of the incident called 'Zooming in on May 19' (Wuyaojiu chang jingtou). It is a reportage, or semi-fictional reconstruction of the events of that night. He spoke not of hooliganism as much as the mass anti-foreign sentiment that had been welling up in the capital for years as rich foreign investors, especially other Asians, flooded into the city and vaunted their superior material lifestyles. He also wrote in detail of the mounting sense of outrage people felt at the corruption and political opacity of the party rulers, as well as of the general disquiet people felt towards a government that seemed to be pandering to foreign interests, in particular Japan.

Liu rejected foreign reports that the rioters were just like the Boxers of 1900, reports that claimed also that the rioters were similar to the Red Guards who wreaked havoc in Beijing and throughout China in 1966-67. He said that the Boxers, soldiers in a rebellious army who believed that they could deploy the spiritual forces of ancient China to protect themselves against the bullets and bayonets of foreign troops, had invoked the spirits of legend and traditional fiction to come to their aid. Their chant he says was:

'Heavenly spirits, earthly wraiths
We beg all masters to answer our call…
To lead 100,000 heavenly troops…'

Now, Liu said, it was not about warfare and victory, and he made up a new chant that he believed better reflected the aspirations of China's young people in the mid 1980s:

'Heavenly spirits, earthly wraiths
We all want to have a good time…
We want jeans,
We want discos and Washi cosmetics,
We want Sharp, Toshiba, and Hitachi electrical appliances,
We want Suzuki, Yamaha, plus Seiko and Citizen…' [2]

An appreciation of this interaction with the foreign, one of attraction and concomitant rejection, fascination and revulsion, material lure commingled with emotional repugnance is, I would venture, important for a deeper understanding of this dynamic. It is a central dynamic within the intellectual, cultural and political realms of late dynastic and modern China, and one persuasively discussed by both Gloria Davies in a major new work, and by Peter Gries in his China's New Nationalism. [3]

Liu Xinwu, who was one of the stars of post-Cultural Revolution writing,was criticized by the authorities for depicting this sense of social anomie. For the authorities were deeply concerned about mass sentiment regarding Japan. The general support for the new post-Mao regime had been shaken by the egregious efforts of Hu Yaobang, the head of the party, to forge closer links of friendship and cooperation with Japan (including organizing a mass visit of Japanese young people to China which I remember being particularly galling to openly outraged and hostile citizens of Nanjing); and one of the elder figures in politics, Liao Chengzhi, had been pilloried for his support of Japan. The sentiment that Liu described so powerfully in his account of the 1985 riot, found voice once more in a far more popular work of 1988 when the tele-series 'River Elegy' (Heshang) was screened nationwide.

In what was the most popular show of its kind broadcast in China up to that time, the narrator said:

Over the past century we have continually been losers. First we lost to England, then to the Eight Powers during the Boxer Rebellion, then to the Japanese. Having finally gotten rid of the Japanese, New China enjoyed a short period of pride and achievement. Who was to guess that when we finally woke up from the thirty-odd years of internal turmoil we had created, we would find ourselves in the company of nations like Tanzania and Zambia? Even South Korea and Singapore were ahead of us. And as for the Japanese, they

were the ones laughing, now that they were back with their Toshibas, Hitachis, Toyotas, Crowns, Yamahas, and Casios. [4]

Secondly, we can focus in on 1989. Although it has been common for people to talk of the mass national protests of the spring of 1989 which led to the bloody repression of 4 June, as a 'democracy movement', for those who were witness to it, and who heard the slogans and read the pamphlets produced by the protestors in Beijing, there was also a powerful undercurrent that was pointedly anti-corruption, anti-privilege, and critical of a government that was perceived as having given in to major foreign nations on trade deals and issues of national pride. In particular, Japan. Indeed, Zhao Ziyang, the Premier turned Party General Secretary, was directly targeted during the early weeks of the 1989 protests as being a man deeply involved in the incursion of foreign, in particular Japanese, capital in China. He was derided, among other things, for enjoying golf with his foreign friends….

These are just a few examples of the kind of public outpourings in the 1980s that already give us some insight into mass sentiment and the form of popular expression that it can take and the nationalistic undertow that runs through them. I recall these things here to provide something of a context to the ugly events of this April.

One could say there is a certain pattern of the past discernable in the way the authorities have run these protests. We have long seen in China political campaigns and mass movements that follow a similar pattern or political logic. This is a logic familiar to us from the 1956-7 Hundred Flowers/Anti-Rightist period, as well as from the early stages of the Cultural Revolution in the mid 1960s. But let me summarize my view of this 'logic' with a crude summary:

There is an issue of official or presumed popular concern, the authorities urge people both within the apparat and more generally to speak out. A period of public fervor, both orchestrated and spontaneous, unfolds. This may be egged on so that mass sentiment can find expression but also be gauged. Then things go too far; the authorities are alerted to the fact that events could get out of hand and the outpourings could turn nasty or, more to the point, they could be used by ill-disciplined malcontents to be directed against the power-holders themselves. There are cautious and then more strident calls for order, followed by cautionary detentions and arrests. These are accompanied by official statements, which usually take the form of editorials in leading newspapers. The tone is set byauthorities higher up. It is declared that a sinister and long-planned plot has been uncovered. A few schemers are taking advantage of mass sentiment and the correct expression of popular dissatisfaction to further their own insidious aims and realize unspeakable goals. Their heinous desire is to disrupt society and derail modernization. Such unscrupulous individuals must be exposed and dealt with. Innocents should be vigilant and not be taken in; they must not spread rumours or encourage gossip. They should obey the laws and not be duped by rabble-rousers. What follows are exemplary arrests, trials and convictions. As all protest is repressed, people feel manipulated, mass sentiment is not assuaged, and the underlying problems that sparked the outpourings in the first place are not addressed in any meaningful way.

In conclusion, I would suggest that there is another historical moment that has had a profound impact on the forging—and the fragility—of the Sino-Japanese relationship. I would like to take another step back in time. This time, however, it is not May 4, 1919 or May 19, 1985, but rather September 27, 1972. This is the day on which Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, met in Beijing with Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei during his ground-breaking official visit to the People's Republic. As a result of that meeting and the attendant discussions by the leaders and their officials, Sino-Japanese relations entered the present stage of what is called 'normalization'.

The US-based historian Yinan He has noted in his paper 'National Mythmaking and the Problems of History in Sino-Japanese Relations' that:
The Chinese government was rather quick to accept Japanese superficial apology and concede claims for war reparation in exchange for early diplomatic normalization. Shortly before Tanaka's visit to China, the CCP Central Committee issued an internal policy document stating that Sino-Japanese normalization would first of all "contribute to the struggle against the American and Soviet hegemonism, especially the Soviet revisionism," but also [be] useful for opposing Japanese militarist revival, liberating Taiwan, and mitigating tensions in Asia. [5] It was clear to China that a quick Sino-Japanese normalization was highly profitable in strategic terms, compared to which settling historical account was considered [to be of] secondary interest. [6]

For his part, Mao Zedong, the party chairman who, along with his premier Zhou Enlai, was designing post-Cultural Revolution China's reengagement with the world, saw the history of the past and the relationship of his party's rise to power in a very particular way.
When he met with Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka on 27 September 1972, Mao Zedong expressed his views with characteristic irony.
Mao: We must express our gratitude to Japan. If Japan didn't invade China, we could have never achieved the cooperation between the KMT and the Communist Party. We could have never developed and eventually taken political power for ourselves. It is due to Japan's help that we are able to meet here in Beijing .

For his part, Tanaka used a vacuous and abstract formulation in regards to the war of a kind that has become all too familiar since this encounter. He said,

"By invading China Japan created a lot of trouble for China."

[Following an intervention by Mao, in the official communiqué regarding Tanaka's visit this was expressed somewhat more clearly as, "The Japanese side is keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious damage that Japan caused in the past to the Chinese people through war, and deeply reproaches itself."]

Mao's riposte was:

"If Japan hadn't invaded China, the Chinese Communist Party would not have been victorious, moreover we would never be meeting today. This is the dialectic of history."[7]

In that one simple exchange, the foundations for the unsettled and continued unsettling Sino-Japanese relationship were laid out.

This then is a mirror of History.

Notes:
1 Zhao Huanxin and Hu Qihua, "Japan told to face up to history, reflect on protests," China Daily, April 13, 2005.
2 Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, eds, New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices (New York: Times Books, 1992), pp.275-76.
3 New Ghosts, Old Dreams, p.274.
4 Gloria Davies, "Reflections on Cultural Integrity and National Perfection,", cht.6 in Coping with Theory: The Language of Critical Inquiry and China (forthcoming); and Peter Gries, China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp.31-40.
5 Delivered at the "Conference on Memory of War," 24-25 January 2003, MIT.
6 "Guanyu jiedai Riben Tianzhong shouxiang fang Hua de neibu xuanchuan tigang [Internal Propaganda Outline Regarding the Reception of Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka], September 7, 1972," in Mao Zedong, Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987-1990), Vol. 13, p. 316.

7. See Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao ziliaozu, ed., Xin Zhongguo waijiao yu lingshi gongzuo, ziliao juan san (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1987), pp.127-8; and Mao Zedong de guoji jiaowang (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1995), p.41.

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