

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3595>



The Chinese CP, Japan and the South China Sea : Past & Present

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV476 - September 2014 -

Publication date: Thursday 11 September 2014

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We are publishing below the “Foreword” [1] to the Japanese edition of Au Loong Yu’s China’s Rise: Strengths and weaknesses [2]. This edition comes at a time when a violent territorial dispute opposes Beijing and Tokyo over the Diaoyu (Chinese name) or Senkaku (Japanese name) islands. The author addresses readers of the Japanese archipelago in particular, explaining why it is necessary today to unite against the claim of either government to assert its sovereignty over distant and depopulated islands, while he himself in his youth had “defended the Diaoyu” initially for nationalistic reasons and later on for internationalist ones. This foreword is an opportunity for an historical review of Chinese nationalisms and for a cutting critique of big-power chauvinism manifested today by the Chinese Communist Party against the smaller Southeast Asian countries, among others.

My debut in the social movement took place when I was 14, in 1971, and it was coincidentally in the campaign to defend the Diaoyu Islands [Senkaku Islands to the Japanese]. A raw sense of nationalism underpinned my involvement then and this unrefined state of awareness had been in the making since I was much younger. But it was not nurtured at my school. Under British colonial rule, the pathetically little amount of knowledge on China that I learned from my primary school virtually boiled down to merely the stories of two iconic individuals – that of Confucius and Sun Yat-sen. I was aware of Japan’s invasions of mainland China and Hong Kong, and the sense of nationalism that they have fostered, but all these were sourced from the memories of the adults around me and word-of-mouth stories. Every now and then, my Dad would talk about “the fall of Hong Kong” into Japanese hands and in particular a story that arose from that period – that “in reaction to a passerby failing to salute him, a Japanese soldier pulled out his bayonet in no time and plunged it into that person’s back in a “swish”, killing him in one hit”.

My history in defending Diaoyu

The radicalised youth of that generation soon polarised into two major currents – the nationalists and left internationalists. Most of the radicalised youth identified with the former, and among this group, most would unconditionally support the “Guo Cui tendency” [translator: touted as representing the quintessence of the Chinese culture], a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) front. The pro-Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists were very much on the fringe already by that time. The liberalism-inclined youth who had a strong sympathy for the battlers at the bottom of the social pyramid also constituted a distinct current, but they had by then avoided political actions against both the colonial government and the CCP.

Following a couple of years of soul searching and observations, I eventually arrived at a socialist position and subsequently became a member of a Trotskyist group. That was 1976 and nationalism was no longer appealing to me. Whenever I read about anti-Japanese resistance efforts under the Kuomintang, I couldn’t help dissecting in my mind the whole conception of nationalism. A satirical folk rhyme during the Anti-Japanese Resistance era was spot on. It said, “while those in the frontline are starving, some in the rear are gorging”, referring to the KMT fat cats and laying bare the harsh reality behind the spin of a “homogeneous national community”, when in fact social disparities remained as stark and polarised as ever. This can be expressed by the following old Chinese saying: a hierarchy of the colours of one’s clothing – three grades – and the dishes one consumed – nine levels. In today’s terms, this is the dichotomy and contradiction between the elite 1% versus the remaining 99%. However important the question of national independence is, resolving this question alone would not take one far. What independence would essentially mean in that case is that the privileged classes within the national group would be in a privileged position to oppress and exploit the fellow members of that national group, leaving the system of oppression and exploitation intact. This very much encapsulated the reality of China under the KMT.

While things were not as bad under Mao's China, one could not simply sweep the existence of social inequities in that period under the carpet. While social disparities in Mao's days were far fewer than in KMT China, this by no means suggests that the problem was insignificant during that era. Moreover, unless one adopts the Maoist approach of setting one's sight only on the economics but not the politics and turning a blind eye to the one-party dictatorship, which was virtually a one-person dictatorship, a gross violation of the most elemental of political equalities, should one not admit that stark polarisation between the overlord rulers and their subjects was still very much alive and kicking in Mao's new "Chinese nation"?

Nevertheless, I still supported the defence of Diaoyu Island. That support was not based on nationalism anymore but was anchored on internationalism. China at the time had not long ago emerged from its semi-colonial legacy in the wake of a revolution from below – driven by its toiling classes – whereas Japan was an imperialist country, which during the cold war sought to contain China hand in hand with the US. The CCP regime was certainly not as socialist as it proclaimed to be (under its rule China was not a socialist country, not even a society in transition to socialism). But it was anti-imperialist, however limited that might be, and was a more progressive force compared to Japan. Anything that helps advance the territorial gains and power base of imperialism, such as Japan's occupation of the Diaoyu Islands would, should clearly be condemned. This was the very reason why I and other comrades continued to support the defence of Diaoyu. Another point of consideration was the disparity in the balance of forces between the two contending camps – that of the powerful Japanese-American alliance versus a weak China. The moral framework applicable to the relations between nations coincides with that which guides human relations on one issue – i.e., one should side with the weak to stand up to the bully.

Today, I no longer support the defence of Diaoyu. The twin considerations just outlined do not exist anymore. Not only is China today neither anti-capitalist nor anti-imperialist, it has in fact reverted back to capitalism – and is of a despicable variety. With the CCP as its nucleus, China's bureaucratic capital thrives and gorges at the cruel expense of the Chinese people. While pretending to defend China's national interest on the one hand, it had no qualms pulling the rug from under the rural population's livelihoods in order to gain entry into the World Trade Organisation, bankrupting the rural economy in the process and pushing the resulting marginalized 250 million destitute rural population into the cities as wage earners. Whenever these internal migrant workers sought to strike for their rights and exercise their freedom of association, the CCP gave them a big whack over their heads with its repressive state machine in order to help the private capitalists (which includes also a fair chunk of foreign capital) to sort them out in a bid to keep the wheels of the exploitative machine turning. In this process, had the CCP refused to tango with US imperialism, the global sweatshop on Chinese soil wouldn't have been possible. As it turned out, the CCP regime had no problem selling the country's impoverished poor, figuratively speaking, and natural resources, for which they raked in and amassed huge foreign exchange earnings.

Gradually, China became not only the world's top goods exporters, it also started commanding a similar supremacy in capital exports. Before long, the "drama" of the rise of Chinese capital moved to scene two, in which it cast its economic tentacles around the globe as all multinational corporations do, targeting especially the underdeveloped countries, perpetuating economic colonialism. The toilers of these lands were exploited and their environments ravaged in its wake. In Peru, China's Shougang/Capital Steel Corporation has cracked down on its workforce there for their trade union activism, resulting in frequent strikes as workers refused to surrender to their management's attack. In Burma, the locals protested against Chinese mining firm Wanbao for polluting their local environment. In Greece, China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) wielded a big axe and sacked a good chunk of the workforce in Greece's biggest port after it acquired a slice of the port's ownership. To reward COSCO for this audacious move, the Greek government offered it an even bigger stake in the port. (This prompted the maritime workers' unions of 16 countries to issue a joint statement on March 16, 2014, condemning the Greek government's move).

When China first embarked on its journey to revert back to capitalism three decades ago, the Chinese and Japanese economies were more complementary to each other than competitive. With China's long climb up the technology ladder ever since and its metamorphosis into one of the world's biggest capital exporters, the two countries are now

more like rivals than a complementary pair, especially in Asia. This dynamic frames the macro environment in which the two governments' contention for Diaoyu/Senkaku takes place. This contest is no less an extension of the hegemonic expansion of these two powers in Asia, which will bring nothing but harm to their toiling populations no matter which side grabs the upper hand.

Lastly, the century-long scenario of a weak China staring at a strong Japan has given way to a more even handed enmity between two powers. So in the current context, the need no longer exists for the people's movement to intervene to give the weaker party a hand to stand up to the bully.

The resistance against the Japanese invasion is still vivid in the Chinese people's living memory, as is evident in the anti-Japanese resistance content of the Chinese national anthem. Yet with China's rise as a major power, we should understand that it no longer risks falling victim to another invasion. China's own biggest enemies do not come from without anymore but are found in the twin evils of an utterly wicked bureaucratic dictatorship and bureaucratic capitalism. Similarly, if one says Chinese nationalism under Japanese occupation was progressive in its social content, Chinese nationalism today can only be reactionary in its social character and has nowhere to go but down the path of great Han chauvinism.

The CCP's foreign policy after its reversion to capitalism

I do not defend Diaoyu anymore. By that I mean I would not support China as a country taking actions, let alone waging a war, to defend Diaoyu. I would not support the people taking actions to defend Diaoyu either. To do otherwise would only add fuel to the fire. This does not mean that I support Japan's continuing occupation of Diaoyu. A Japanese left writer who refused to support Japan's occupation of Diaoyu/Senkaku elaborated his position as follows: "We have always rejected the claim of Japan having sovereignty over 'Senkaku' and this is based on that fact that Japan's occupation of 'Senkaku' was inextricably linked to its colonialisation of Taiwan which resulted from the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95. Even international law would not recognize such an act of war as legitimate." [3] Especially since Shinzo Abe came into power, his administration has become the most rightwing of all Japanese governments in many years. His success in the militaristic push in allowing its armed forces to engage in "collective self defence" [in the name of defending its allies] illustrated the point brilliantly. We cannot allow this rightwing government to have its way on the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue.

In all fairness, one has to register that the Japanese government bears a greater responsibility in escalating the Diaoyu/Senkaku contest lately. The CCP's long-standing position on this issue has been to let the sleeping dog lie. But the Japanese government unilaterally breached this decades-long consensus by nationalizing the ownership of the islands.

While the CCP did not stir up the latest round of the row, one has no basis to have faith that it would resolve the disagreement in the best interests of the peoples in the upcoming tussles. Therefore, not only should the people in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan not continue their actions to defend Diaoyu, they should lose no time in forging an alliance with the Japanese people with the aim to build a peaceful people's movement across the two nations and join forces in opposing any militaristic actions that the two governments might undertake on the issue.

Two decades back, an anarchist cultural activist in Hong Kong once remarked that the Diaoyu Islands should belong to the fish ["yu" means fish in Chinese and the literally meaning of Diaoyutai, the Chinese name for the islands, is that it is a "fishing platform"]. If this proposition was not very convincing then, it should be a lot more persuasive now. Why not turn the Diaoyu Islands and their surrounds into a protected marine zone. We should under no circumstances

consent to the rulers of the two countries degenerating into military confrontations over the islands, let alone starting a war in their name.

If one does not find the CCP's original position on the Diaoyu issue (to shelve the contention over the island's sovereignty) over the top, one has to admit it is much more arrogant over the developments in the South China Sea. In the name of inheriting the "nine dash lines" rights of the Republic of China under the rule of KMT, it hugely expanded its claims of maritime territories, triggering objections from many countries. Unlike its policy towards Japan in which it proposed putting the contention on hold, the CCP has resorted more and more frequently to armed actions to assert its way in the South China Sea. I am not an expert on international law and would not be able to discuss the issue in that framework. Rather, I would like to have a closer look at the standard nationalist assertion, led by the CCP, that they "would not yield even an inch of the country's sacred territory". This is nonsense. The CCP has ironed out border issues time and again with its neighbours in its nearly seven decades in power. Has it always asserted adhering wholly and completely to the land inherited from the Qing Dynasty or the Republic of China? Obviously not. It certainly was not the case in its border deal with North Korea after the People's Republic of China was founded.

"In this period... the CCP central leadership has gradually laid down the guiding principles with which it would deal with the country's border issues. Firstly, it would uphold a peaceful foreign policy under which it would resolve border differences through negotiations and would not resort to armed actions to change the status quo. Secondly, the border negotiation archives from the late Qing Dynasty, the Beiyang government [translator: warlord government of northern China after 1911] and the KMT government could form the legal basis for future deliberations; three principles must be upheld in scrutinising the historical archives – one must acknowledge the historical facts; while not severing oneself from history, one must identify the trend of historical developments; one's approach to history must take full consideration into the circumstances of today and of the nation's current policies. Thirdly, with respect to China's border issues with its neighbouring countries, "for those that had been sorted out in old agreements should be dealt with according to the general principles of international law"... But in its handling of the Sino-Korean border question a couple of years later, China did not seem to have adhered to the general principles of international law, i.e, to embark on the border negotiations on the basis of the 1909 treaty. Instead, China gave up a big area in the source region of the Tumen River and agreed on a border more or less in accordance with North Korea's demands. This is how the Heavenly Lake, a 98 square kilometre chunk of land that was entirely China's originally, became 54.5% owned by Korea, with China's ownership shrinking to 45.5%. With respect to China's territories in the Tumen River source region, the land area that China gave up amounted to roughly 1200 square kilometres based on the concessions China made since the 1909 Kando Agreement to the 1962 Sino-Korean Border Treaty, and estimated by way of changes in the old and new maps [4]."

In China's Search for Security, Andrew Nathan & Andrew Scobell have pointed out that "not all of China's territory has been nonnegotiable. Over the years, Beijing has yielded 1.3 million square miles of claims to North Korea, Laos, Burma, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and other states in order to settle territorial disputes. [5]"

The CCP's big-nation chauvinism

The CCP has never relied on just one principle (its proclaimed territories) to guide its negotiation over contested borders. Nor did it never "yield not even an inch of its territory". Rather, it weighed the relations between itself and the contending nation, their relative balance of forces as well as "the party's fundamental guiding policies" at the time. First and foremost, China has been much more arrogant in its territorial contests in the South China Sea because the contesting parties in South East Asia are all small countries. But equally important is the fact that "the party's fundamental guiding policy" has undergone fundamental changes since China's reversion back to capitalism. Since the CCP came into power in 1949 until the early 1970s, revolutionary and anti-capitalist rhetoric was still the order of

the day for the CCP and it sometimes even overdid it. Not only did it keep the CCP's chauvinism in check, it made the CCP even appear at times internationalist to an extent. When Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai met Asian leaders in that period, they would invariably apologize for the invasions of their land by Chinese dynasties of the past. This approach also applied to China's relations with North Korea. Mao said to the visiting Kim Il Sung in 1958:

"Historically, China has not treated Korea well and therefore our ancestors were indebted to your ancestors... Your ancestors said your border [with China] was along the Liao River. But you see, you have been pushed [translator: further east] to the Yalu River." [6]

Nowadays, the official media tirelessly puts out propaganda boasting about how "China has always been a peace-loving country throughout its ancient history and that it has never invaded other countries", or that "that piece of territory has always been China's from time immemorial". While Deng Xiaoping has laid down emphatically the foreign policy of "hiding one's talents and biding one's time", and had suggested to also shelve the contention of the South China sea disputes with neighbouring countries, now the Xi Jinping government, knowing full well China's increasing sway and appreciating the distraction that an external threat would play in deflecting mounting contradictions on the home front, has turned increasingly arrogant in its foreign policies, especially in relation to its small Asian neighbours.

Why was there such a change? The overhaul in the CCP's class character constituted a qualitative change that brought about a further qualitative transformation on the part of the CCP, both on the ideological plane and in the material arena. Foreign policies are likely to be an extension of a country's domestic politics, and domestic politics is little more than a tool of class interests. If even the class character of a regime has been turned around, domestic politics and foreign policies can hardly stay the same. While China sought after "self reliance" during the Mao period, it submerged itself deep into global capitalism in the post-Deng era for a share of the riches. In order to prop up its role as the sweatshop of the world and for the sake of more foreign exchange, the country has become dependent on imports for half of its petroleum needs as well as for raw materials of all sorts while relying on exports to fuel half of its economic growth. China has even now become a major capital exporting nation. Economic expansion inevitably brings about political and military extension, and this logic is the fundamental reason why the CCP would inevitably become more and more plagued by big-nation chauvinism.

Rather than resorting to violence, a country should endeavour to establish its exact border through amicable and peaceful means, even more so when the borders at stake are remote islands hundreds and thousands of kilometres away from its principal shores. Obviously, a solution that involves some concessions is always a possibility. Concessions are even preferable when the contesting party is a country that is much smaller than your own. There is no such implicit notion as "conceding not even an inch of one's territory" or else what negotiation is there to have. If a country could sign away thousands of li (1 li = 0.5 kilometres) of its territories in the past and would now "concede not even an inch" of its land, it is only either because its rulers have undergone a qualitative change or it is putting on airs with its much smaller counterparts and believes it has the right to launch a military offensive or to "teach them a lesson". This is why Mao's China, notwithstanding its shortcomings, had earned the respect of the workers, peasants and anti-colonial movements in a whole variety of countries. Whereas today, placards from the common people protesting against capital from mainland China and calling for it to "go back to where it came from" are commonplace from Africa to Asia. What is even more worrying is the CCP's highhanded readiness to stomp out opposition of all stripes, especially that from among the toiling masses. That's why in the eyes of the workers in other countries, they found it hard to differentiate between the CCP rulers and the Chinese people and fail to appreciate that they are not one and the same thing.

May the Chinese and Japanese peoples join hands in launching a people's peace

movement across the two nations

The Chinese nation under the rule of the CCP obviously is not a homogenous community with identical interests. This nation in fact comprises two opposing “national groups”, that of the top 1% and the remaining 99%. The former “nation” is despotic, shameless and greedy, and could not care less for the interest of its own country. This is why many of the ruling strata probably have foreign bank accounts with fat balances as a stash away for their families and for their indulgence as and when they migrate overseas. The latter “nation” is oppressed, being trampled upon, exploited and fooled. A survey conducted by the NetEast.com website in 2006 found that 64% of Chinese interviewed would dearly wish they “would not be a Chinese again in their next life”. Their top reason for this aversion is that “being a Chinese earns one very little respect”. [7] We wish whenever the people of other countries rise to protest the harm that Chinese capital has inflicted upon them, that they would take care not to afflict collateral damage on the innocent parties. A case in point was the blanket indiscriminate attacks on Chinese people in Vietnam in May this year.

Similarly, the Chinese people also need to realise that there exists actually two “Japans” – a “Japan” of the zaibatsu/financial magnates and bureaucrats and a “Japan” of the toiling masses. It is the former “Japan” that should really be held responsible for the wars of aggression and economic expansionism, whereas the other “Japan” has always warmed my heart. Many leftwing and progressive groups in Japan have for years strived hard to counter Japanese imperialism where they could, which has included the Japanese government’s move to lift the ban on its military from engaging in so-called collective self-defence. In the days when we were still defending Diaoyu, we benefited for years from the solidarity support of Japan’s Bridge magazine. Moreover, friends from the Japanese trade unions have also shown internationalism to me through their actions. In November 2010, I took part in the “Tokyo East Rights and Entitlements General Offensive” which the Zenrokyo/National Trade Unions Council put on in spring and autumn every year. One of the cases that the offensive featured was the wages in arrears and unpaid compensation of five Chinese trainees [translator: they were workers to all intents and purposes but in name]. A Zenrokyo delegation accompanied the trainees to their employers to press for their demands. What follows was a report I wrote then of that event:

“Mr Hiroshi Nakajima of the Zentoitsu (All United) Workers’ Union and Mr Kishimoto, the commander-in-chief of the “Tokyo East Rights and Entitlements General Offensive” (Tokyo East Union), accompanied those trainees and other workers to the employment agency. The boss refused to negotiate with them initially. Then the whole mob of us barged into the boss’s office, forcing him to back down and start negotiating. When I bid farewell to the trainees upon my pending departure, I recalled in my chance encounter with some Chinese in Japan well more than a decade ago that they told me that only the left wing trade unions would stand up for them and be ready to extend a friendly helping hand against abuses from their bosses or the cops. The saying that “all men are brothers” (and sisters) is more relevant than ever to the labouring masses.”

I have had the chance to talk to the friends from various labour movements in Europe, the US and beyond during my visits to those places in the past decade or so, and have time and again come across with situations in which the selfless spirit of internationalism came through. Karl Marx’s adage that “Proletarians of the world unite!” hasn’t passed its use-by date.

July 7, 2014

Translated from the Chinese original by Eva To. Translation reviewed by the author.

[1] Entitled "May the Chinese and Japanese peoples join hands in forging a people's peace movement across the two nations".

[2] Merlin Press, Resistance Books and IIRE (2012).

[3] Down with "Territorial Nationalism"!, Junichi Hirai?translated by Zhao Wen. <http://www.workerdemo.org.hk/0001/2...>

[4] The Resolution of the Sino-Korean border dispute (1950-64), Shen Zhihua and Dong Jie, 21st Century Publisher. [translated from Chinese <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/issu...>

[5] China's Search for Security, Andrew Nathan & Andrew Scobell, Columbia University Press, 2012, page 196.

[6] Shen Zhihua and Dong Ji, op. cit.

[7] <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class...>