Rightful or Subversive Images?

The Specter of Mao Zedong in Chinese Nationalist Demonstrations

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Note to Readers: This paper is in the process of evolving from a class assignment into a more in depth study of symbols in Chinese nationalist demonstrations. I am still in the process of gathering and coding images, but this is my initial take on explaining the presence of Mao Zedong images and their possible implications. Thank you so much for reading, and thank you for your feedback!

Abstract: Widespread protests took place in 208 of 280 of China’s prefectures over the course of August and September in response to the Japanese government’s purchase of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. While these protests were thought to be facilitated government, protesters carried images of Mao Zedong, and made critical statements implying that the deceased leader would do a better job handling foreign policy than the Chinese Communist Party. The use of Maoist iconography was not as widespread in the anti-Japanese protests of 2005, or that of 2010. The recent rise and fall of Bo Xilai suggests that there were new opportunity structures for utilizing Maoist iconography, and that this tactic could be classified as “rightful resistance.” Historical memory plays a role in when Maoist imagery is used in anti-foreign protests however, because of the deeply divisive legacy of Mao in regards to the Cultural Revolution. Images of Mao are primarily used when constructing the antagonist as an “imperialist.” Moreover, in Chinese nationalist politics, no only is the antagonist othered, but the Chinese self-identity is “othered.” Nationalist protesters criticize not only the foreign presence, but the Chinese leadership that allowed that to happen.
In the 2012 anti-Japanese protests took place across China denouncing the sale of the Diaoyu Islands to the Japanese government. One of the most striking features of these protests was the image of Mao Zedong on many posters across multiple provinces. The number of posters bearing Mao’s image increased as the anniversary of the Japanese Invasion of Manchuria neared. There was little iconography of the deceased leader in either the anti-Japanese protests of 2005 or that of 2010. Mao was the venerated founder of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and therefore associated with the success of its leadership. Yet, the chants and comments of protesters suggested chasm between the actions of Mao and those of the current leadership. Protesters shouted phrases such as “Chairman Mao, people really miss you,” and declared that no

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1 These islands are known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan. The Islands are administered by Japan. The country claimed that the islands were part of its territory since 1895. The US renounced claims to several territories in the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951, but Japan argues that sovereignty over the islands returned when the US ended its
2 The protests in 2005 were a reaction to Japan’s history textbooks, which glossed over the country’s actions during World War II, and the possibility of Japan requiring a permanent position on the UN Security Council. The researcher has thus far only found one image of Mao after perusing both major online news sources and blogs from the 2005 protest period.
one would dare infringe on Chinese territorial sovereignty were he still alive. These phrases suggest a lack of confidence in the present regime, or even goad the regime toward further action.

Why have images of Mao become a more prominent part of the repertoire of anti-foreign demonstrations, and what do they indicate about how demonstrators react to the Chinese government? This paper seeks to build on the contentious politics literature in the Chinese context, and provide a bridge for the inclusion of nationalist demonstrations in examining protest strategies and tactics. Social movement scholarship has largely left nationalist demonstrations repertoires out of their investigations (Amenta 2014, Weiss 2014). When nationalist protests have been studied, it has mostly been to determine the conditions under which they occur, or to further debate the origins of nationalism in China, and the extent of nationalist sentiment exists within the country (Weiss 2014; Reilly 2013; Wang 2012). Tactics, such as the utilization of iconography in nationalist protests, has not been examined.

The political process model provides insight into how the state structures the opportunity for protest, incentivizing popular contention that appeals to the central government (Chen 2012; O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006). The CCP actively promoted nationalism from the 1980s onward, but attempted to distance itself from the figure of Mao because of the promotion of economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. The 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Protests, however, coincided with the rise and fall of the leader of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, who promoted both populist measures and a Maoist revival. Bo Xilai’s legacy created a new opportunity to utilize imagery of the former chairman to pressure the government. The transition between the leadership of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping made the government more vulnerable.
While there is considerable evidence that elite politics and the leadership transition played a role in the Mao iconography in the 2012 protests, a fuller explanation of the phenomenon needs to incorporate both historical memory and a more nuanced, fluid conception of identity. Posters of Mao are utilized in Chinese nationalist protests where activists employ narratives of imperialism. In Chinese nationalist protest, not only is the antagonist “othered,” but the Chinese self-identity is “othered” as well. Callahan (2004) stipulates that the discourse of Chinese national humiliation necessitates criticism of both the “foreign invaders,” and the Chinese leadership that allowed it to happen. Self-criticism and redefinition are important aspects of the construction of Chinese nationalism. The use of Mao Zedong imagery can therefore criticize, and seek to redefine the CCP leadership, rather than simply appeal to it.

**Righteous Resistance and the Contentious Politics Literature**

There have been few attempts to systematically study the mechanisms involved in Chinese anti-foreign demonstrations in their own right and fewer still that investigate the tactics within these demonstrations. For Weiss, this is a huge oversight since the government faces a dilemma in promoting nationalism (2014). She argues that the Chinese Communist Party attempts to utilize nationalist mobilization to signify to other international actors its resolve surrounding certain policy goals, and to boost support for the regime. Nationalist demonstrations have the potential to be destabilizing to the regime, however, because “once protests gain momentum… they are difficult to control and can easily turn against the government” (3-4). Attempts to repress nationalist protests can seem to the domestic populace to be a betrayal of the “national myth”, leading to a rejection of the current government (Weiss 2014, 20). Susan Shirk

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3 Weiss’s *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations* is one of the first to systematically study when and where Chinese anti-foreign protests occur by comparing instances where the CCP suppressed protest, versus allowed it to occur.
(2007) echoes Weiss’s concern, claiming that nationalism played a role in toppling the two regimes prior to the CCP: “mass movements that accused leaders of failing to defend the nation against foreign aggression brought down the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the Republic of China in 1949 (7).”

Many scholars assert that since citizens primarily appeal to the central government when protesting and petitioning for relief, the CCP is actually reasonably invulnerable. Elizabeth Perry argues that participants in contentious actions “usually go to great lengths to demonstrate their loyalty to central policies and leaders” advancing their claims within the “legitimate boundaries authorized by the central state” (Perry 2010, 13). Chinese petitioners and protesters have a high degree of “rules consciousness”; and utilize the dominant language of the political leadership at the time (Perry 2010).

Kevin J. O’Brien’s (1996) concept of “rightful resistance” complements Perry’s vision of the prominent protest tactics and targets. Rightful resistance appeals to the discourse and ideals of the central government in order to advance claims, often times performing loyalty while accusing lower officials of not being true to the law or the party. Citizens in Chinese villages cite the Organic Law, arguing that local officials are “disloyal” or not sufficiently communist for not carrying out the CCP’s mandate (O’Brien 1996). Citizens also strategically use the divisions between local and central leadership while advancing their goals (1996).

The literature on contentious politics in China predominantly focuses on the structural conditions that incentivize popular contention that is supplicant to the state, and how the state creates and shapes the opportunities and routinization of protest within the country. This is partly due to the influence of the political process model within this literature, which sees the

\footnote{For example, Chen (2012), Lee (2007)}
state as integral to understanding contention; it is either a party to claim-making, an arbiter in
claim-making, or the object of the claim-making (McAdam et al 2001). China scholars
underscore the CCP’s retreat from many social and economic areas of life through the 1980s and
1990s as playing a huge role in the facilitation of protest. This does not imply a decline in state
capacity, so much as a shift in capacity (Chen 2012, 13).

Xi Chen maintains that the CCP’s policy of devolving responsibility to the local level
created tensions that have cultivated the conditions for popular contention. The policies of fiscal
decentralization and local corporatism created incentives for local governments that is
misaligned with those of the central state. To be considered successful local administrators, local
officials need to demonstrate higher rates of economic development and maintain social stability
for a relatively short period of time. In 2001, the average mayor served only 2.5 years in that
position. Therefore, the salubrious qualities of their policies need only have a short shelf life.
This conflicts with the central government’s goals of long-term planning (Chen 2012). Therefore, “the central government’s attempts to coordinate and discipline local agents, as well as local agents’ efforts to outmaneuver such coordination and discipline, have had a powerful influence on the interactions between the government and petitioners” (2012, 63).

Intriguingly, while most segments of the population appeal to the central government,
Chen points out that there is greater distance between the government and ordinary citizens
because of the decline of work units (danwei). Building on Andrew Nathan’s insights, Chen
argues that over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, China moved from the unit system state-
society structure to a government-citizen model. The unit system featured organized dependency,
in which citizens relied on the government for a variety of goods including employment and
housing. Relationships between ordinary people and authority were particularistic, and there
were also dense transactions between the authorities and ordinary people in a relatively closed local community, allowing for widespread monitoring of citizens (Chen 2012).\(^5\)

In contrast, government-citizen model relationships feature a lack of dependence on authority figures for goods and services, universalistic, depersonalized relationships, and thin transactions between authorities and ordinary people, primarily located in public spaces. Agents of the state therefore have only temporary interactions with citizens, and are supposed to reward or sanction based on only categorized group identity. This allows individuals to potentially hide their activities from the state (Chen 2012). Chen argues that not only is surveillance more difficult under the government-citizen model, but sanctioning protesters has become more complex as well. In the unit system, salary reductions, jobs, and deprivation of titles could all be used in order to coerce workers into acting appropriately. Now citizens do not rely as much on government authority. Hard forms of sanction are more undesirable to the government, because they may accidentally exacerbate tensions between protesters and the officials (Tanner 2005, Chen 2012). This is particularly true of nationalist protests, where demonstrators can easily declare that “patriotism is not a crime” (Wallace and Weiss 2014).

Considering the CCP’s reduced capacity for both surveillance and repression, government officials often resort to relying on the *xinfang* system of petitions and small scale “troublemakers” in order to receive information about potential mass incidents and ensure stability. Minzner describes the xinfang system as a “petitioning” system that has existed since China’s Imperial period. Citizens appeal to the immediately higher level of institutions, to both inform them of problems with the lower level institutions, as well as seek assistance in a resolution. The central authorities utilize information from the xinfang offices in order to

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\(^5\) Some examples of unit authority relationships in China would be state-owned enterprises and collective enterprises (Chen 2012).
discipline local officials and ward off large-scale protests (Minzner 2006). At the same time, the central government makes it the prerogative of the provincial and local governments to ensure that protesters do not appeal to higher officials. The high cost of repression, as well as the difficulties in monitoring the population makes this a challenging task for local officials to carry out, however (Chen 2012).

Minzner (2006) and Chen (2012) both contend that the xinfang institutions have the adverse effect of actually encouraging repetitive, organized, and large-scale demonstrations. Since petitioners know that the majority of petitions are never able to reach a listening ear, they will organize and use “trouble making” activities, such as sit-ins, protests, blocking roads, and marches to increase the odds of getting attention. These tactics make petitioners look more urgent and legitimate (Chen 2012). Popular preference for the xinfang system can actually undermine formal institutions, according to Minzner, because there is no official ending point to the petitioning system. So if petitioners do not accept the results of the formal institutions, they can continue to petition for years. In fact, Chen argues that “if a petitioner spent several years and traveled thousands of miles to persistently deliver his or her petition to the capital,” he or she will come across as having the most legitimate, or rightful claim to make (2012, 19).

Images of Mao in the 2012 Anti-Japanese Protests

In August and September of 2012, anti-Japanese protests broke out in China in response to the Japanese government’s plan to nationalize three of the Daioyu Islands. The Mayor of Tokyo, Ishihara, had started a popular fundraising campaign to buy the privately-owned islands, forcing President Noda’s government to respond. The nationalization had surprised the Chinese government; all through August, Chinese officials thought there was a chance that the Japanese
government might re-examine the plan to purchase the islands from their private owners (Weiss 2014). Hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens took part in rallies, marches and vigils that took place over the course of a month in 208 out of 287 of the country’s prefectural cities (Wallace and Weiss 2014).

Chinese government officials took careful measures to manage the demonstrations that occurred in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. In Beijing, riot police stood in front of the barricaded Japanese embassy, police walked alongside the marches as well as invited people to join, and plain-clothed police mingled with the crowds (Fish 2012). Announcements were made over loudspeakers, calling for citizens to protest “rationally” and remember to show foreign media “the quality of the Chinese citizens” by singing the national anthem with serious facial expressions, as well as avoiding throwing bottles of water or playing with their cell phones (Beach, 2012). In Shanghai, the police escorted protesters in small groups in front of the Japanese consulate (“Anti-Japanese protests hit China cities amid island row” 2012). The streets surrounding the consulate were barricaded, and several thousand police outnumbered the protesters (“Thousands Protest in China…” 2012; FT Reporters 2012). Meanwhile, in Shenzhen, police used tear gas on civilians looting Japanese stores, as well as on some protesters trying to storm government buildings (Koyama 2012, Taylor 2012).

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) management, and in some cases facilitation, of protests caused certain commentators to claim that the protests were at least in part staged. Some Chinese citizens were skeptical of the demonstrations, citing “the identification of one man, who was photographed leading protesters in Xi’an with a megaphone in his hand and anti-Japanese slogans on his shirt, as a senior local police official (“Of useful idiots and true believers” 2012).” Charles Custer claimed that “the absence of China’s police is glaringly obvious, especially in
contrast to the vast numbers that turn up and start jumping in front of lenses and smashing cameras whenever a protest China’s government doesn’t like is scheduled to take place” ("Expressing Our Patriotic Fervor, Rationally, Legally” 2012).

Yet, commentators repeatedly noted the prevalence of posters of the deceased founder of the CCP, Mao Zedong.6 These posters were carried in many prominent cities, particularly at the apex of the protests from September 15th through the 18th, the anniversary of the Japanese Invasion of Manchuria and China’s National Humiliation Day (Lam 2012, “Escalating Protests Hit Japanese Companies” 2012, Park 2014, Alia 2012, Weiss and Wallace 2014). Some Chinese bloggers noted that in the 1980s, students marched with signs for Deng Xiaoping; now very few of Deng’s portraits or slogans were being held up (“PRC-Japan Tensions Grow Over Islands” 2012, Lam 2012).7 Moreover, the only other leader’s image to appear frequently in the iconography of the protests was that of the Japanese Prime Minister, Yoshihiko Noda. Images of Noda frequently featured him with his eyes cut out, face crossed out or torn, as well as decapitated (Imgur 2012, Taylor 2012).

Outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing, demonstrators shouted “Chairman Mao, people really miss you!” as well as “Chairman Mao, 10,000 years!” (Lam 2012, Park 2014, Fish 2012). In Xiamen, a poster pleaded “Chairman Mao, Japan is bullying us again” (Alia 2012). In Shanghai, one protestor yelled “It is unforgivable that the Chinese government is so weak-kneed. Only Mao Tse-tung's ideology can topple Japan's imperialism!” (“Escalating Protests In China Hit Japanese Companies” 2012). When asked about their posters and the former leader, demonstrators often made statements that derided the ability of the government to handle the

6 The most frequent image of Mao that appeared in demonstrations across the country can be seen in Figure 1.
7 Of the hundreds of photos the author looked at from contemporary newspapers and blogging sites, there was only one photo from a Taiwan newspaper that had pictures of a middle-aged Diao Xiaoping’s face, smiling (“PRC-Japan Tensions Grow Over Islands.” 2012).
conflict with Japan. One salesman said, “Mao Zedong was tough…Our current government is spineless. If Mao were alive, we would have already attacked Japan.” A teacher stated, “Our government is spineless on many things- Daioyu being one of them… The government has behaved the same year after year, making the public more nostalgic about Mao” (Tang 2012). Others asserted that “Mao would never let Japan get away with this,” and “If Chairman Mao were still alive, who would dare touch an inch of China’s land?” (Fish 2012, Alia 2012). One banner made an overt threat: “If Japan is not destroyed, someone will need to lie in Chairman Mao’s coffin” (Alia 2012).

For this project, images of Mao were gathered from web searches conducted on the search engines Google and Baidu (a Chinese search engine) in both English and Chinese. Visual data, including camera footage and photography, is ideal for examining the symbols protesters utilized in demonstration events. While video footage and photography can be edited and curated, creating potential observer bias, by collecting data on the same events from both public and private sources I will be able to mitigate the bias effects. The search terms utilized in both languages was “2012 Anti-Japanese Protest” and “Diaoyu Island Protest 2012.” So far, these searches have yielded hundreds of photos. Over 150 have been coded according to date, location, source and the presence of Mao iconography in the photograph. These images come 17 different news and blog sources, including outlets such as The Atlantic, the New York Times, Sina Weibo, Zimbio and Anglao.com.

Of these 150 coded images, 35 have prominently featured images of Mao Zedong. The majority of these images came from Beijing, though there were also images from Shanghai, Xiamen and Shenzhen as well. There were instances of photographs of the same Mao poster, as evidenced by marks and rips on the poster (Figure 2). The discernable overlap in posters would
bring the number down to 31 observable instances of Mao iconography within the data. Figure 2 contains one of the most prominently displayed Mao images in the Beijing protests. A preliminary examination of 42 images and 4 video footage compilations from the 2005 protest has uncovered only one image of Mao. There were few images of other historical Chinese heroes as well, out of all of the 150 images collected of protests in urban areas, there are only two posters of Sun Yat-sen (Baidu 2012). Furthermore, the Sun Yat-sen posters were surrounded by protesters carrying Mao posters, which can be seen in Figure 4.

![Image of a protest with a Mao poster]

**Figure 2: Beijing demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy on September 16th, 2012 (Zimbio 2012)**
Figure 3: Protester in Shanghai on September 16th, 2012. The sign reads “Chairman Mao, we miss you” (Chang 2012)

Figure 4: Protesters hold up both Mao Zedong and Sun Yat-sen images in September (Mala.cn 2012)
If the protests were controlled by the CCP or expressed genuinely nationalist sentiment, why would protesters make remarks that undermined the perceived strength of its leadership? Even more intriguing is the question of why were appeals and images of Mao prevalent in 2012, when they had not been a feature of either the 2005 protests against the possibility of Japan receiving a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, or the 2010 protests concerning a Chinese fishing vessel that had hit two Japanese coast guard boats (Park 2014). Mao’s visage did appear in the iconography of the 2008 anti-French protests regarding the Olympics (Ramzy 2010, “China Protests French Retailer Carrefour” 2008).

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8 The 2005 anti-Japanese protests also concerned Japanese textbooks whitewashing the occupation of China (Park 2014)
9 Japan had returned the boat and the crew early on, but had held the captain, Zhan Qixiong, for nearly two weeks (Ramzy 2010).
The increase in nationalist discourse could be akin to “rightful resistance.” Wallace and Weiss (2014) reported that while demonstrating against Japan in 2012, some protesters found ways to introduce unrelated grievances into their banners and tactics. In Hunan, one banner read “Laid-off workers protect the Diaoyu Islands” (2014, 9). Marching with images of the founder of the CCP could in fact be appealing to the central government with an authority-approved discourse. The CCP promoted nationalism from the 1980s onwards. Members of the Princeling generation, the children of Chinese Communist Party Elders, resurrected Maoist cultural elements over the course of the 2000s, which may also have inspired protesters (Lam 2012). While there were criticisms of the central government, those that criticized it still asserted their loyalty to China against perceived Japanese oppression.

**Government Promotion of Nationalism and the Maoist Revival of Bao Xilai**

From the 1940s through the 1960s, Mao Zedong and the CCP did not strategically utilize nationalist discourse to uphold the regime (Wang 2012). Rather, the CCP focused on perpetual class struggle, and a universal assault against capitalists everywhere. The Kuomintang (the KMT) had previously invoked the idea of salvation from China’s “humiliation” during the 19th and early 20th century to gain support. Furthermore, while Mao had claimed that the CCP ended the anti-Japanese war, he chose to avoid direct military confrontation with the Japanese where possible in order to preserve his forces. The depletion of the KMT's resources during the Anti-Japanese war made it easier for the Communists to defeat the Nationalist party afterwards (Wang 2012).

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10 This was an appeal to an elite audience rather than a populist appeal. Zhao (2004) notes that Chang Kai-shek only made half-hearted attempts to engage the peasantry.

11 Zhao (2004) points out Mao Zedong was very moved by nationalism himself. In an interview with Edgar Snow in 1937, Mao said that his political consciousness was profoundly shaped by a pamphlet he read in middle school describing the dismemberment of China. "I remember even now that this pamphlet opened with the sentence: 'Alas,
While the CCP may not have employed nationalist discourse, Zhao highlights that the CCP owed much of its success against both Japan in the 1930s and the KMT in the late 1940s to nationalist mobilization among the peasantry (2004). Additionally, the CCP’s emphasis on China's isolation and the necessity of being prepared to defend against foreign powers helped bolster support for Mao and the Communist party from the Great Leap Forward through the Cultural Revolution (Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 2005).

Both Wang and Zhao agree that the death of Mao Zedong created an ideological vacuum that stimulated renewed nationalist discourse. Deng Xiaoping had intended to create a popular impetus for a market economy by launching a campaign to ‘reassess’ and criticize Maoism, but this alarmingly led to the “three crises of faith”, in which Marxism, socialism, and the party were all questioned (Zhao 2004, 211). As Zhao remarks, “Communist ideology, now of interest to hardly anyone outside the political elite, was seen as self-destructive and guilty of …having kept China poor and backwards” (2004, 211). The government’s promotion of market reforms expedited the degeneration of Communism as the basis for legitimacy: the “socialist” market did not seem that much different from the capitalist market the CCP supposedly detested (Zhao 2004).

At first, the CCP attempted to infuse the promotion of socialism with a nationalist component in the "three loves" campaign, "love of party, love of socialism, love of motherland" in 1982 (Zhao 2004, Ding 2006). In 1983, the leadership began promoting film projects that celebrated Chinese heroes, and advocating that everyone learn how to sing the national anthem. The anthem was played every morning in Chinese cities, while the Chinese flag was raised (Ding 2006).

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China will be subjugated!' It told of Japan's occupation of Korea and Taiwan… After I read this I felt depressed about the future of my country and began to realize that it was the duty of all the people to help save it" (96).
Scholars such as Alastair Johnston contend that state promoted nationalism in the after Tiananmen Square. Threatened by the domestic environment in 1989, the Chinese government strengthened internal cohesion by promoting the in-group identity through nationalism, and devaluing out-group identities. For instance, in Jiang Zemin's 1996 address to the National Congress, he divided the Chinese people into two categories: "The Chinese people… have the glorious tradition of loving freedom, pursuing advancement and persevering national dignity and sovereignty. They hate foreign invaders furiously. They particularly despise the scum of the nation who turn traitor for their personal gain” (Wang 2012, 125).

Throughout the 1980s through the 1990s according to Wang and Zhao, China’s leaders promoted nationalism on several fronts. They re-embraced the Confucian tradition, once hated as a source of backwardness, and restored Confucian temples in several provinces as important historical sites (Zhao 2004). The CCP designated historic sites associated with Japanese atrocities "patriotic education bases", such as The Museum of Testimony to the Crimes of Japanese Army Unit 731 in Harbin (Wang 2012, Shirk 2008). They redefined the requirements for membership in the party from being a member of the "vanguard of the Chinese working class" to being "the firmest, most thoroughgoing patriot” (Wang, 133).

One of the primary ways that China has attempted to engender nationalist sentiment among the civilian population was through patriotic education campaigns, starting in the 1990s. Students in elementary school watched patriotic films recommended by the State Education Commission. The government had the Marxist components of entrance examinations dropped, and patriotic education courses were added to high school and college curriculums (Zhao 2004). One of the programs featured in many Chinese universes was the "I am Chinese" program in

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12Japanese Army Unit 731 was a military unit that performed experiments with chemical weapons on thousands of Chinese citizens.
universities, which encouraged students to be proud of their heritage by focusing on the great achievement of the Chinese people throughout history, as well as the accomplishments of the CCP (Zhao 2004).

Zhao (2005) identifies the CCP’s nationalism as “pragmatic nationalism tempered by diplomatic prudence”, an instrument to unify the country during a swift, difficult transition to post-Communist society (132). While Mao Zedong was lauded as a national hero, the Party attempted to distance themselves from the founder’s image because of the unsavory aspects of the later part of his reign. The “three crises of faith” led to reluctance to condemn the deceased leader among CCP leadership. The furthest the party went in denouncing Mao’s actions during the Cultural Revolution was the statement in the Resolution on Certain Historical Questions of the CCP since the Establishment of the People’s Republic. The resolution “pointed out unequivocally that Mao’s ‘contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweighed his shortcomings’ and that ‘his contributions were primary, his mistakes secondary’” (Lam 2012).

The 11th Central Committee held that Mao Zedong Thought was appropriate to the historical conditions of his time. While the principles of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought were universal, the concrete circumstances of new historical conditions made certain Maoist policies obsolete (Chan 2003). One of the primary ways the CCP distanced itself from the founder was to try to eliminate, or at the very least gloss over, the cultural relics of Mao’s cult of personality. Statues of Mao across the country were destroyed (Lam 2012) “Red songs” that had been written under Mao’s leadership in the 1940s and 1950s had stanzas either changed or removed to take out direct reference to Mao (Lam 2012).

In 2007, Party Secretary Bo Xilai was put in charge of Chongqing, a megatropolis the size of South Carolina. Bo Xilai was a member of the “Princeling” faction, the son of one of the
elders within the CCP, Bo Yibo. With his eye on a seat in China’s ruling Politburo Standing Committee, Bo initiated a series of populist, conservative, cultural reforms within the region of Chongqing (“Bo Xilai’s Ouster Shows China Leaders Fear Specter of Mao” 2012). He oversaw the building of statues of Chairman Mao near government offices, factories, and universities. The Chongqing government also initiated a *changhong* campaign (“singing red songs”, referring to songs primarily from the period of Mao’s leadership in the 1940s and 1950s). Bo asked all residents to “learn by heart 36 Maoist-era ‘revolutionary songs,’” arguing that changhong was “a theoretical foundation for finding one’s roots in history, the return to ideals, the revival [of Chinese] race, and the rise of the nation (Lam 2012, 6).” His assistants text-messaged Mao quotations to citizens, such as “the world is ours; we must all take part in running public affairs” and “Human beings need to have [a revolutionary] spirit (Lam 2012, 6).” Even people in jail were required to take part in the changhong campaign and read communist texts (Hille 2011).

Bo Xi Lai also made policy and legal choices that sought to call to mind the legacy of Mao. Building upon Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao’s promotion of the “scientific theory of development” which sought to rectify growing inequality within China, Bo introduced what Lam refers to as “a kind of crypto-Maoist ‘red GDP’” growth model that attempted to be egalitarian and non-exploitative (2012, 8). He declared that “As Chairman Mao said as he was building the nation, the goal of our building a socialist society is to make sure everyone has a job to do and food to eat, that everybody is wealthy together… if a few people are rich, then we’ll slide into capitalism” (“Bo Xilai’s Ouster Shows China Leaders Fear Specter of Mao” 2012). Cadres from the city were commanded to go to villages on the weekends to work in fields in nearby villages at least one month per year (Hille 2014). He also took on the mafia within Chongqing, rooted out corruption among police and prosecutors who were taking bribes, and set up “police pavilions in
the streets to make residents feel safer” (Hille 2011, “Bo Xilai’s Ouster Shows China Leaders Fear Specter of Mao” 2012, Lam 2012).\(^{13}\)

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^{13} The “strike the dark forces” campaign arrested 24 “big time crime bosses” within a period of six months, and more than 200 mid-to-high ranking officials in Chongqing’s law-enforcement and Judicial Bureau for bribery. The Chongqing government were able to confiscate 1.7 billion yuan, or 27,759,084 in ill-gotten funds (Lam 2012). The way Bo conducted these criminal cullings were worrisome to lawyers such as He Weifang, who noted the high amounts of executions and the side-stepping of criminal law procedure in trials (2011).
The Maoist revival spread to other parts of China. Near the Chairman Mao’s birthplace, a 32-meter high torso of the leader as a young man was built. The leader’s contributions were spotlighted in the 2009 movie, *The Founding of a Republic*, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, (Lam 2012). The changhong campaign nearly went nation-wide as the CCP neared its 90th birthday. Radio and television stations broadcasted “‘red ditties’- which lauded the larger-than-life exploits of nationalist heroes and ‘proletariat paragons’- at regular intervals” (Lam 2012, 6).

The resurgence of Maoist culture stumbled, however, when Bo Xilai was fired as the leader of Chongqing municipality. His police chief and right hand associate, Wang Lijun, fled to the American Consulate in Chengdu, after they allegedly conspired to prevent the investigation of his wife, Gu Kailai for the murder of a British businessman, Neil Heywood. Bo Xilai also stood trial for embezzling millions of dollars (“Why is the Bo Xilai case so important” 2012). In a press conference, Wen Jiabao stated,

“We have not fully rooted out the evil legacy of the errors of the Cultural Revolution and the influence of feudalism…without successful political reforms, we cannot possibly carry out full economic reforms, and gains we have made so far in our reform and construction could possibly be lost, new problems emerging in society cannot be fundamentally resolved, and tragedies like the Cultural Revolution could potentially happen again” (Gang 2012).

Red song concerts were curbed in Chongqing, and the new propaganda police replaced the 15-minute “Everyday Red Song Singing” segment, with a 45 minute “Weekly Collections of Red Songs” that would run every weekend (Yu 2012).

Considering the widespread infusion of Maoist cultural symbols and ideas before the fall of Bo Xilai, nationalist demonstrators may have utilized the image of Mao in order to tap into
what they saw as the newest turn in political discourse. Furthermore, O’Brien argues that rightful resistance involves seeking out divisions in the leadership (1996). To the extent that the CCP associated Maoist images, songs and chants with Bo Xilai’s populist policies, this may have been a strategy to utilize those fault lines in the leadership.

Moreover, by utilizing the language of Mao, demonstrators could effectively highlight and demand action on one of the key aspects of Bo Xilai’s policies, the Chongqing Model of development involving “Red GDP,” a “code word for economic development that is geared toward the needs of the masses- not dictated by the greed of privileged classes such as the country’s estimated 30 million millionaires” (2012, 8). Bo Xilai had warned of the increasing inequality levels, stating that it was reaching levels that would lead to unrest (“Bo Xilai’s Ouster Shows China Leaders Fear Specter of Mao” 2012). Bo’s egalitarian rhetoric had also been advocated by the Hu-Wen administration, Wen Jiabao had previously stated that “social equality and justice should shine even brighter than the sun” (Lam 2012, 8).

**Historical Memory, Identity and the Image of Mao**

While the usage of Mao imagery could in part be “rightful resistance,” taking advantage of the political opportunity provided by Bo Xilai’s rise and fall, historical memory must also be taken into account. Wang (2012) argues that historical consciousness is the connection between official nationalism narratives propagated by the government and bottom-up responses to it. He cautions that, though patriotic campaigns did provide biased accounts of Chinese history, they were still based on real loss and pain suffered by the Chinese people during the century of humiliation. “Loss of family members, homes, and land all contributed to these traumas, which
have been passed down one generation to another in the telling and retelling... Today’s youth feel strongly connected to this history that their parents or grandparents experienced” (227).

There are also generational differences surrounding the historical memory of the calamity of the Cultural Revolution. He Weifang in speaking out against Bo’s policies in Chongqing, recalled returning to school after Mao’s death,

“Our teachers too had only just returned to campus life after the ‘terrible decade’ during which they were suppressed, and they spoke of the lawless days of the Cultural Revolution, chapter upon chapter of human suffering. A number of teachers could not hold back the tears. Actually, all of us students had also experienced the Cultural Revolution first-hand, and all of us one way or another treasured this course of study in law (2011).”

Younger citizens never directly experienced life in Mao Zedong China. Red songs and Mao imagery have a completely different meaning than the chord they strike for those directly affected by Mao’s policies or the transition. Furthermore, while citizens in China are encouraged to share their stories and accounts of trauma under Japanese occupation, there government provides no such incentive to divulge the details of violence that took place during the Cultural Revolution. Bo Xilai’s own mother was kidnapped by the Red Guard in Guandong, but public records do not make it clear if she was murdered or committed suicide (Gartner 2012). This further creates contrasting emotional historical memories in regards to Maoist imagery.

Part of the legacy of the Mao Zedong, according to Central Party School theorist, Li Junru, was leading “the Chinese people in their struggle against the reactionary rule of imperialism and feudalism, so that the Chinese race could stand tall among the people of the world” (Lam 2012, 8). The role of Mao fighting imperialism in the Chinese historical imagination is a profound influence in when and where his image appears in nationalist protest. For the two anti-foreign protests that featured narratives containing elements of imperialism, in
the form of historical enemies encroaching on perceived Chinese territories, Mao posters are present. The 2012 anti-Japanese protests highlighted the Chinese experience of repression under Japanese occupation on National Humiliation Day, and concerned territory that had been taken from China by force in the 19th century (Park 2014). The 2008 anti-French protests erupted because the French government expressed sympathy with the Tibetans in the run up to the Beijing Olympic Games, as there was demonstrations and rioting going on in Lhasa. In Qingdao, Shandong Province in April of 2008, one sign said “Say No to Carrefour! Say No to French Imperialists! Strongly Protest Britain and France Invading China in 1860! Strongly Protest [Britain and France] Slandering Our Olympics in 2008! (“Protests Target CNN, Carrefour, and BBC” 2008). During the anti-French protests a video on appeared on Sina Weibo regarding the Olympics and Lhasa that started with an image of “Chairman Mao, sunbeams radiating from his head. Out of silence came an orchestral piece, thundering with drums, as a black screen flashed, in both Chinese and English, one of Mao’s mantras: ‘Imperialism will never abandon its intention to destroy us’” (Osnos 2008).

In the anti-US protests that took place after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, protesters focused on US militarism as being similar to that of Nazi Germany, rather than to that of an imperialist power (Mackinnon et al 1999). Posters of President Clinton with a swastika on his head, as well posters of bombs falling marked those protests. There were no chants for protection from Mao. Park argues that while the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 did denounce the recent whitewashing of Japanese textbooks concerning the occupation of China, the predominant focus was on keeping Japan from receiving a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, rather than Japan performing acts reminiscent of the one hundred years of humiliation China had suffered (2014). Furthermore, Park argues that participants in the 2005
protests chose to specifically avoid the image of China’s former leader. Demonstrators thought that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were erroneous in normalizing relations between Japan and China in 1972 (2014).

Figure 7: Young demonstrators hold up this poster during the demonstrations that took place after the NATO Bombing of the Chinese Embassy. The sign says “Devil who eats people” (Houdard)
The utilization of Mao during protests that feature imperialist narratives suggests that activists are not always concerned with the state. Rather, since Mao was the hero who saved China from imperialist and feudal forces, it indicates the character of the enemy. The presence of Mao helps construct the enemy as a former imperial aggressor, up to their same old tricks.

Use of images of Mao are limited, however, because their repetition does remind some Chinese of Mao’s cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution, alienating them from the nationalist protests. One blogger wrote, “During Mao’s era, the intelligence and morality of the society and civilization was regressing rapidly. We can even say that we entered a dark age of barbarism” (“China: Return of Maoists in Anti-Japan Protests Brings Anxiety” 2012). Another blogger, Fan Xiaoyang, wrote “When compared with Japanese militarism, the harm that Maoist
Leftists have brought to China is much bigger” ("China: Return of Maoists in Anti-Japan Protests Brings Anxiety" 2012).

In addition to an awareness of how historical memory affects protester strategy, a more nuanced, fluid concept of identity is needed in order to understand the full utilization of images of Mao in nationalist. Identities and goals can be changed by the mobilization against “others” and the strategies themselves. “While national and ethnic identifications hold emotional resonance, identities are multiple and fluid, and can be activated by symbols and experiences” (Brubaker 2001).

Gries (2001) argues that there are emotional dynamics to nationalism in the Chinese context completely beyond the state’s purview. Johnston’s theory that the CCP promoted certain constructions of in-group and out-group identity does not necessarily eliminate bottom-up emotional reactions for Gries. Utilizing letters of condolences to the Chinese newspaper of the three journalists who died in the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Gries argues that national traumas can actually hurt individual self-esteem (2001). Gries posits that individuals have a social and a personal identity. To the extent that we associate with a group, we can gain collective self-esteem. Consequently, when one’s social identity is connected to their country and their country experiences a national tragedy, individual self-esteem can be affected. In this context, Chinese citizens were further motivated to seek justice and retribution in order to restore collective and personal esteem (2001).

For Callahan (2004), Chinese nationalist discourse surrounding humiliation often involves “othering” the self. “National humiliation joins all Chinese in a performance that is both critical and self-critical. China needs to not only ‘other’ Japan and the West, but ‘other’ itself by way of a thorough self-criticism” (Callahan 2004, 207). Chinese public culture focuses
not only on foreign invasion, but the corruption and weakness among domestic officials that allowed it to happen (2004). Callahan cites the launching of the original “National Humiliation Day” in 1915, an unofficial holiday that would not be made a state holiday until under the Nationalist regime. “There was much political discussion about on which day the humiliation should be commemorated: May 7, when Japan made the Twenty-one Demands, or May 9th, when the Chinese president accepted them. Criticize self or criticize other? This debate was never settled” (2004, 210). Ultimately, Callahan sees the discourse of national salvation as tied to that of national humiliation, “opposition to Japan knit together the various classes and regions of China…. Chinese sovereignty can be asserted only after hit has been the humiliated” (2004, 211).

This “othering” of self can be seen in the reactions of Maoists within the New Left in the wake of the 2012 anti-Japanese protests. Han Deqiang, creator of the Maoist website “Utopia”, hit an 80 year old man during the Daioyu/Senkaku protests in September, 2012, for snarkily replying “miss my ass!” to protesters chanting “Chairman Mao, the people really miss you!” He wrote on his blog “when confronted with someone unreasonable, who makes defamatory remarks to our nation’s founder with the intention to destroy Chinese people’s unity and to serve the Japanese interest as a traitor… I would rather be arrested than letting them showing off and creating a scene” ("China: Return of Maoists in Anti-Japan Protests Brings Anxiety" 2012). A professor at Central University of Nationalities, and leader among the left, Zhang Hongliang wrote on his Sina Weibo account after protests declared: “Compatriots, if we don’t eliminate the traitors among us, a chaotic war is inevitable! … Aside from the posters of Chairman Mao which covered the motherland during this glorious September 18 patriotic movement, another major achievement has been that all the race traitors are now exposed” (Kennedy 2012). Through
redefinition and criticism of the self, Maoist activists can use the narrative of national humiliation to lead to national salvation.

The criticism of the self in nationalist mobilization can have an anti-regime component because, as Gries and Zhao argue, the Chinese government may still strategically employ nationalism, it is losing control over the trajectory of nationalist discourse (2004). During Mao’s reign, the party could claim that its success was fused with the nation into an inseparable whole because the population saw it as providing leadership both during the War of Resistance and the Civil War (2004). “Only communists, in other words, could be genuine Chinese nationalists” (Gries 2004, 180). The same cannot be said under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Furthermore, the language of nationalism is no longer fused with support for the party. The term the CCP uses for nationalist sentiment is “aiguo”, which means “loving the state”, or “aiguo zhuyi”, which means patriotism or love and support for China” (Zhao 2005,135). Rather than always employing these terms, popular nationalists often refer to the “motherland” and the “Chinese race.” Liberal nationalists and popular nationalists assert that they care so deeply about the fate of the Chinese “motherland” or “race” that they must have a say in politics (Zhao 2005, Gries 2004).

Nationalist use of Mao Zedong images can be self-criticism that leads to redefinition. This redefinition could include calls for at least the CCP’s reconfiguration and change in position. That does not necessarily mean a regime change from a one-party dictatorship, as Lam notes, the New Left accepts party leadership, if not the market-oriented changes carried out under Deng and Jiang. It does provide a potential basis for demanding more change in the composition of leadership than “rightful resistance” anticipates, however, since using these images can be directed at reforms at the very top of the government.
**Conclusion**

The paper has explored why Mao Zedong imagery was prevalent in the 2012 protests, but not as prevalent in other anti-Japanese protests, and why demonstrators carrying images of Mao challenged the policy of the government. Activist employment of images and references to Mao Zedong in the nationalist protests of 2012 shares many features with O’Brien’s concept of rightful resistance, and contemporary events did provide new political opportunities to use the image of Mao Zedong. While the Chinese government had promoted nationalism in China since the 1980s, after the Mao Zedong’s death, they had been uneasy about utilizing the leaders image and memorial. Bo Xilai and members of the Princeling generation reinvigorated Maoist culture through the singing of red songs, building statues of the founder of the CCP, and calling for more egalitarian policies such as Red GDP and the Chongqing Model. This would have provided a justification for citizens utilizing the language of nationalism and images of Mao in order to make claims on the central government, while asserting their patriotism. Rightful resistance usually appeals to a higher authority to step in against local authorities however; it could still be argued that activists sought to take advantage of the fault lines in the leadership that occurred with the fall of Bo Xilai and the upcoming transition in power.

Examination of strategic use of iconography must take into account emotional reactions to historical memory. As Wang points out, grassroots anger and connection to the century of humiliation has been passed down through stories and relatives, as well as tourist sites and museums. Discussing the tragedies that occurred during Japanese Occupation is not only condoned, but encouraged by the Chinese education system.

At the same time, generational differences lead to very different perspectives on Mao Zedong imagery. The government does not condone open exploration of the wounds of the
Cultural Revolutionary period and younger generations did not directly experience Mao’s policies. The image of the Founder of the CCP has therefore been utilized when nationalist activists’ narrative of their struggle as fighting a former imperialist power once again infringing on Chinese territorial sovereignty. This suggests that there is an aspect of Mao’s usage that is more about the construction of the enemy, than appealing to, or subverting, the state.

The work of Gries and Callahan indicate however that nationalist identity can provoke critique of the state. Callahan argues that the nationalist discourse of humiliation necessitates the “othering” of the self. Chinese nationalism not only blames foreigners for infringement on its sovereignty, but it looks to find the domestic actors that presented a weak front to the world. This can lead to a redefinition of the self, and who is included in the collective identity, as well as who is a traitor. Since the death of Mao Zedong, the fate of the party and the nation have been increasingly disconnected. Nationalists can therefore demand increased action by evoking the specter of Mao Zedong’s actions, or even changes in the composition in the leadership to be more reflective of Mao Zedong thought, rather than being supplicant to the state.
Bibliography


