
When Sino-Japanese relations hit a rocky patch at the turn of the century, a wave of publications appeared on the somewhat under-researched topic of China’s Japan policy. Discussion tended to centre on the question of whether the state is losing its control over foreign policy due to the rise of nationalistic public opinion in an increasingly open and pluralistic society. James Reilly’s book takes the level of scholarship in this debate to a new level. It is outstanding for its painstaking and comprehensive analysis of large amounts of various types of Chinese texts—from journal articles to television productions and Internet discourse—to interviews with policy makers and activists and observations drawn from the time that the author has spent living in China.

This book also deserves praise for locating the debate on the relationship between nationalism and Chinese foreign policy in an extensive discussion of theories of social movements. Much light is also shed on the general pattern of how popular surges in anti-Japanese sentiments upset state policy, only for the state to then hit back and suppress dissent and return to the status quo ante. The author does this by analyzing factors such as social pluralization, state propaganda and education policy, elite politics, and external factors.

Although this fills in a lot of details, the broad outlines of this story are already well known. Reilly’s conclusion is also rather frustrating because it lacks focus, and seems to just repeat the somewhat obvious argument that policy outcomes are the result of tensions between society, the state and external events, when a more parsimonious model of the particular conditions under which either the society or the state becomes dominant is what is needed. In this respect, the book is tantalizingly frustrating, because it tends to draw back from exploring in sufficient depth the valuable insights that are scattered through the text.

This can be seen in Reilly’s reluctance to fully explore the importance of elite politics, a focus that he dismisses as a kind of “unfalsifiable” Pekingology, despite stressing in his conclusion that populist movements tend to have more impact on policy outcomes when there are divisions at the top of the CCP. Moreover, his argument draws heavily on the work of Alan Whiting when looking at how anti-Japanese protests played a role in the downfall of Hu Yaobang in the elite struggles of the mid-1980s. Because he does not consider how wearing the badge of nationalism can be used to pursue a wide range of political strategies against the ruling elite, he also overlooks some important phenomena, such as the alignment of the Hong Kong Democrats with the patriotic “Defend the Diaoyu Island’s Movement” or the way in which pork
barrel military politics might be tied up with nationalistic projects like the building of aircraft carriers.

Given the tendency for China’s leaders and establishment academics to claim that policy options are limited by the pressure of nationalistic public opinion, the book could also have made much more of Puttnam’s “two level game” theory of international negotiations, which Reilly uses to draw attention to the possibility that decision makers have an interest in presenting nationalism as a constraint on their actions when bargaining with other states. This opportunity is lost in the bigger focus on the question of how the “smart” state is able to maintain a “delicate balance” between CCP rule and “passive tolerance.” Yet by presenting the state as being able to effectively moderate but not control social protest and political dissent, Reilly could be falling foul of Beijing’s two-level game strategy himself.

This can be seen in the way that using the smart state model allows Reilly to arrive at a fairly sanguine view of Beijing’s ability to avoid any spill-over of nationalism into an aggressive foreign policy, while also using the spectre of popular nationalism to absolve China’s leaders of any blame for assertiveness. CCP initiatives to manufacture nationalism, like the patriotic-education campaign, are thus given relatively light treatment. The state is also presented as a victim of anti-Japanese public opinion when Koizumi was prime minister of Japan, having to leave positive initiatives to academics and experts until he left office, despite the fact that top policy makers knew exactly when the Japanese premier’s fixed term was due to finish, and only had to put the genie of populist nationalism firmly back in the bottle and bide their time while preparing the ground for the “new starting point” in relations.

The fact that Reilly roots the “responsive authoritarianism” of the “smart” authoritarian state in literature on the stability of regimes in the Middle East must also raise interesting questions over just how useful this model is for deciding how much control the Chinese regime has over popular nationalism. The fall of Arab dictatorships since this book was written may indeed shed light on the viability of the Chinese political system as the CCP goes through its leadership transition, but the conclusions may now be somewhat different than Reilly’s proposition that authoritarianism can prosper while societies become stronger and more diverse under the forces of globalization. At one point he even goes so far as to claim that the only difference between authoritarian states and democracies is the extent of government influence because there is “a broad consensus that governments deeply influence public opinion” in both types of state (210). While such a piece of solid scholarship is essential reading for anybody interested in Chinese nationalism and foreign policy, recent events in the Arab world should also allow its central thesis to open up some fascinating debates about the relationship between public opinion, foreign policy and the stability of the Chinese state.

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