

Peace-building as collaborative effort by the people of China and Japan

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In the first months of 2005, fueled by the provocative moves of the Japanese state and rightwing forces, rallies and protest activities had taken place in East Asia. The mobilizations in mainland China drew a lot of global media attention, but apart from observing the tensions and hostilities between Japan and China, the interest of the global media was to speculate whether the street protests were manipulations by the Chinese government or people's resistances to the government.

Media reports from mainland China and Hong Kong at the initial stage of the mobilizations, and, in particular, internet discussions inside China before the government took a firm stand to disallow the dynamic debates, tend to suggest that the mobilizations in China had quite a high degree of spontaneity. That they had spread like wild fire in some major cities seemed not to have been incited by the government, only that they had gained space for articulation before government intervention. It could be said that the government was prudent at the beginning in its attitude towards the mobilizations, especially when "patriotism" was the call, and the government certainly also needed the ventilation of some popular sentiments as back-up to its stand against Japanese aggression in global politics. When the mobilizations began to expand and intensify, the government, unsurprisingly consistent in its suspicion of uncontrolled popular action, mobilized its propaganda and security mechanisms to put a brake to the popular mobilizations.

However, the brief articulation of popular sentiments in the form of street protests and internet debates deserves our analysis, but not so much out of any ideological interest in the relationship of the popular movement to the government. It is a cold war discourse of dualism to define Chinese people's movements always in relation to the government, depicting them either as puppets on the strings, or as heroic dissidence challenging the government's authority.

Rather, I think we should make an attempt to read the messages of the protests, decipher obstacles and possibilities for peace-building, and seek points of effective intervention by civil society groups in East Asia.

Anti-Japanese sentiments in China reside in the public imagination almost as

unquestioned patriotism. The heroism of the defence of the motherland and the righteousness of the fight against Japanese invasion are unquestioned in textbooks, mass media or common sense. Collective memory is shaped by reference to the Nanjing Massacre and the hard-won victory over Japan at the end of World War II. Certainly, the war should be fought against invaders, and there is no question about the criminality of the Nanjing Massacre or the acts committed by the 731 troops. However, when these war memories are conjured with new contentions over the Diaoyutai Islands, the history textbooks, or the Japanese prime minister's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, such sentiments appear so natural that in a way, they seem to exist on their own, dehistoricized and decontextualized. The "naturalness" granted to these sentiments can be an obstacle to peace-building efforts among the people of China and Japan, because they are too self-evident to warrant a deeper analysis into the nature of Japanese imperialism and the complicities of today's global powers, and most importantly, to see that the problem cannot be defined along simple national boundaries, and the solution also does not lie within national boundaries. The contradictions in the patriotic sentiments would become vivid when we ask the question, why do the popular resentments in China against Japan not correspond to a similar resentment against US imperialism which is the main ally of Japanese imperialism, supportive of Japan's amendment of its Constitution and bidding for permanent membership in the UN Security Council?

Lament over one's victimhood does not necessarily become a force against the aggressor and its evils, but instead, may become an impetus to aspire to mimic the aggressor, to be catching up with it militarily and economically. Hence, the prevailing drive is for China to modernize, with Japan as the rival but also the model. The lack of an alternative is obvious. China's self is not defined by its own internal dynamics and needs, but by its external enemy. With both subscribing to the fantasies of capitalist expansion which is expansion of commodification, capitalization and unlimited desire and greed, the clash between Japan and China as powers is also almost inevitable.

Alternative thinking in the Chinese popular movement has yet to fully reckon with the following facts: that for years, progressive civil society and people's movements in Japan have fought uphill battles against the rise of belligerent rightwing forces in Japan; that there have been movements against the amendment of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, against emperorism, against the use of rightwing versions of history textbooks, against U.S. military bases in Okinawa and other sites, against Japan's participation in the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" and dispatch of

Japanese troops to Iraq, against Japan's permanent membership in the UN Security Council; that there have been movements in Japan working hand in hand with Korean and Chinese counterparts to stage an international war crime tribunal to put the Japanese emperor and state on trial, and to file court cases against the Japanese state to demand its acknowledgement of, and apology and compensation for, its war crimes against the people of Asia. These social movements, themselves coming under the assault of the Japanese state and the rightwing forces, constitute a key partner in the East Asian people's struggle against the revival of Japanese militarism.

Only with such a reckoning can the full meaning of peace and peace-building efforts be grasped. In a recent visit to Kuangju, South Korea, I was impressed with a locally initiated project named Life-Peace Long March. A core group composed of Buddhist monks, protestant chaplains, catholic priests, farmer leaders and women activists have together launched a Long March for environmental and social justice, and the core group visits local groups in a sustained "caravan" type of discussions and debates. The reflections by some of the leaders are insightful. Out of such insights come bold propositions. One such proposition would certainly be against the mainstream statist or nationalist sentiments, and it challenges war-mongering mentalities: that the Korean-named Tokto Island and Japanese-named Takeshima Island, as currently a territory of contention between the two states, should be declared by the people of both countries as an island of peace and friendship, rid of sovereignty claims. This seems to be a wild idea, and one that would incur reprimands, if not charges of treason (How can one give up one's rightful claim of sovereignty! Such propositions work dubiously in the interest of the enemy!). It would indeed take a lot of courage to make such a proposition. Yet, such an idea also brings us to confront the root of the problem – of contentions over territorial and property rights of modern nation-states that have had a history of a mere hundred years or so in the case of East Asian countries.

If some movement thinkers and activists have the courage to make such a proposition for Tokto/Takeshima Island between Japan and South Korea, can we imagine such a proposition (just the idea of it, not to mention the question of practicality yet) for the island of contention now between Japan and China – the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands to be declared by the people of both Japan and China to be Islands of Peace and Friendship?

It is not a simple assertion of anarchism or anti-statist fantasy to discuss such propositions. When they are rejected as impossible rallying points for the movements,

and peace remains a word of lip service without substantial contents, then, the question does not lie with the small minority who makes such a “wild” proposition, but with the majority or mainstream, even in the movements, that are inscribed unthinkingly in statist, nationalist and modernist imaginaries that bring people together by means of polarizations and antagonistic tensions, rather than common projects which are planned and decided upon through people’s participation.

Genuine peace-building efforts involve a deep critique of one’s own history of nation-state building, and a reversion of pursuit of modernization which makes the scramble for energy and resources inherent in imperialist and militaristic ventures, which are inextricably linked to domestic exploitation of human and natural resources. For the people of China and Japan to pursue a common cause of peace, such issues need to be addressed from within in both countries, wherein lies a solid and sound foundation for collaborative efforts in peace building. In other words, while protesting against the Koizumi government’s rightist moves and extending solidarity to the peace movements in Japan, the movements in China should also resist China’s past and present road of modernizing to become a strong power, and link anti-imperialist moves to peace building efforts that minimize social polarizations, injustices and exploitations within China. Peace is not only the absence of wars and conflicts, but also the elimination of all sorts of manifestations and roots of violence in our economies, cultures and mentalities.