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China's Political Economy of Public Communication: complexifying a rights approach to information

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Abstract

In China, public information and media is a dimension of political communication and subject to political management. Understanding the function and complexity of information-based public discourse in China is important in understanding the conditions for cultural rights. The aim of this article is to offer an insight into the complex role of information in China, and why 'cultural rights' cannot be assumed to be a single category of inquiry. Indeed, any form of rights in regard to cultural expression, production and distribution, needs to be understood in the context of the changing political imaginary of the Chinese nation-state – an emerging nationalism based not on imperialist militarism and territorial expansion but on cultural self-determination. This article constructs an historical-critical narrative on the emergence, and major instances, of the growing political management of public communication as a strategy of nation-building through cultural revival.

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Introduction

The role of information does not occupy a particularly visible place in the broad spectrum of Human Rights provisions. Unlike freedom of speech, which has a provenance in many ancient political and civil rights and privileges, information as a concept is both multivalent (subject to many meanings and appropriations) and also the object of significant transformation (most notably, the role of communications technology and digital media). In terms of law, legal practice and the 'rights' dimension, information is submerged in a multitude of discourses and debate – on communications and media, regulation, distribution and markets, government, public authorities and governance, political communication and the public sphere. It is in this last discursive arena that this article is situated.

As a generalisation, the subjects of political communication and the public sphere have only concerned human rights to the degree that they are conditions, or facilitate, other rights – principally, of course, the right to freedom of speech and the concomitant public debates and usual Press-based public discourse that free speech implies. Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which is reiterated as Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966) asserts as follows: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers“. A self-evident fact all too easily ignored is that this, and most other, articles of the UDHR are either inoperable, insubstantial or of little effect, without shared information (offering, for example, an understanding of facts and procedures, the content of decisions, an understanding of causes and contexts, the ability to make judgements or assume a position in a given debate). Information is central, and makes possible both political communication by government, and public realm discourse by citizens or social institutions. It is one thing to propose a 'right', it is another to know, communicate, access and to claim or exercise that right in political, social or cultural contexts.

Information is central to the empowerment of citizens to know of, and claim, their rights. Other articles of the UDHR arguably assume this: concerning the rights to life and freedom – articles 2-7 – justice and fair public representation – articles 8-12– mobility, belonging and privacy – articles 13-17 – Article 18's crucial 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion' – association, membership and equality up to article 23, and up to article 30 providing the conditions for human fulfillment and flourishing, through work, leisure, education, culture and community). It is difficult to see how these spectrum of rights are substantive at all without the availability of information identified by Article 19.

Aside from the general observations on how information has become a central fulcrum of social and economic life – the 'information society', the 'knowledge economy' and models of globalisation built on these concepts (like Castells' famous 'network society' concept, and so on) – the actual rights to information itself remains problematic. Every society tends to its own privacy, confidentiality and State secrets laws, and moreover all societies have their own approach to informational accuracy, truthfulness, representation, and the conditions of factual, verifiable and evidential sources of information. The policing of information, across political communication, publication, print and broadcast reporting, research and public debate, crosses many spheres of law and order. The interest of this article is in the status of information itself, and the 'rights' to information – particularly where this information is central to the formation of public knowledge on the national body politic, identity, political values and the matrix of perceptions around the relation between one's country and the rest of the world. There is an area of cultural research not altogether developed, and this concerns the relation between information, knowledge and national cultural identity, and moreover, how national cultural identity is constructed through a political management of culture, as a significant dimension of the relation between political communication and the public sphere.

Traditional mass media (radio and TV broadcast

and the Press) as policy areas (subject to law) were usually kept apart from the arts and cultural policies, perhaps obviously because of their centrality to the political relation between State and citizen. Through the history of the Twentieth Century, the purported freedoms of speech, the press and public debate, were crucial to political distinctions between 'liberal' and 'totalitarian' societies. While a few 'totalitarian' still exist (North Korea, for example), the spectrum of political orders has arguably grown; and in the age of the internet and of terrorism, the political management of public media and communication has become complex, and not altogether self-evident to observers or indeed transparent to researchers (whether in democratic societies or others). One cannot simply look at the legal apparatus, or the laws and regulatory frameworks, of a country and blithely proclaim that society possesses 'free speech' as indicated in the second clause of Article 19 of the UDHR. Whatever counts as 'speech' (in the UDHR, opinion and expression) is heavily mediated by social institutions, a communications infrastructure, a range of organisations engaged in representation and distribution, and a highly segmented, stratified, public.

The purpose of this article is a negative one, insofar as it aims to offer an informed and research-grounded insight into the complexity of contemporary information and its role within a politically managed public sphere of communication – how information today is far more complex than the assumption of the UDHR's assertion that "Everyone" must have a right to "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". As noted above, the presupposition of this article is that rights are contingent upon information, and its argument is that information is less a body of knowledge channelled around through media technology than a context-contingent conflict of discourses all subject to a complex infrastructure of political management. In this framework, traditional Western assumptions on 'free speech' as a central criteria for a just and fair society is less relevant than the apparatus of the political management of information and the veracity and verifiability of that information as it is made

available, represented, distributed and edited (doctored, censored or altered) – and thereby forms a public sphere. The object of this article is the largest and legally most complex information infrastructure in the world – the national media and regulatory bodies of the People's Republic of China. The article will not investigate the political infrastructure itself – the vast Press, media and broadcast industries, or the distinct operations of the twenty or more government ministries, such as the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, and the State Council Information Office, or Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and so on. Rather, this article will adhere to what, arguably, is the biased focus of the UDHR – the 'public' availability, access, circulation, knowledge and debate, in which and with which a citizen can engage and contribute to a substantive public discourse on the world as it really is (and, by implication, for the furtherance of a fair and just society). The article draws on surveys of Press and broadcast reporting of major events of public concern, notably the handover of Hong Kong and ongoing political disagreement with Japan. Its purpose, however, is to demonstrate how assumed distinctions between fact and value, information and commentary, can be collapsed or dissolved with a broader national project of self-assertion. Within this project, information is no longer simply conceived as indigested fact or 'data' (and hence we will not make reference to 'freedom of information' or 'right to know'). Equally, the article does not make reference to the rights regime for information, starting with the 1998 Aarhus Convention (UN Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters). This article is concerned with a more fundamental political reality – the role of information in the rising nationalism of China, where central to 'culture' is public knowledge on one's country, its people, and its relation to its neighbours and the rest of the world. This subject is internal to the values that motivate identification, belonging and allegiance, and the relation between the State and citizen, and the formation of national identity itself. This article argues that the political culture of national identity must be understood through understanding the political management of

informational infrastructure – not as a technical apparatus but as meaning-production and public representation within the broader ideological meta-narratives of moral self-assertion (a nation’s fundamental appeals for legitimacy). It is only in understanding this that we will begin to be able to define what ‘rights’ actually means for individual citizens in China.

The rationales for propaganda, censorship and the political management of public information

Epitomized by the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement, the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, various social and political upheavals that have taken place both within and outside China since 1978 seem to issue a clear warning on the destructive effects of un-managed information (or, the failure to wield the power of propaganda effectively). Keenly aware, also, of flawed past attempts to employ propaganda in promoting class struggle – its role in the personal apotheosis of Mao’s era, the phenomenon of ‘Western ideological contamination’ and ‘bourgeois liberalization’ (common political phrases) resulting from the first decade of economic reform, and so on – the post-1989 government era in China has been engaged in systematically researching, expanding, upgrading and modernizing a media-based infrastructure of propaganda. In China, ‘propaganda’ is not, as in the West, a synonym for false or biased and self-interested representation. It is a form of political communication management, encompassing huge realms of available information, intelligence, media and internet, entertainment and culture, national identity, history and memory, social and political solidarity. Propaganda is a central political responsibility somewhat characterised by a paranoia of counter-revolutionary lies or the spread of misinformation and mis-trust often used by the capitalist West against communism in the Cold War era.

Shortly after ‘the June 4th incident’ (Tiananmen Square protests), Premier Deng Xiaoping officially criticized the party for being slack in paying attention to ideological and political “work” (si

xiang zheng zhi gong zuo) – for the formulation and maintenance of socialist ideology should be regarded as a guiding principle of the party-state and central to its political tasks (Deng, 1989). After Deng’s resignation, his successors repeatedly emphasised the development, construction and dissemination of communist values and ideologies as the party’s fundamental principle – which has explicitly continued today with Premier Xi Jinping. Drawing specific principles from China’s historical achievements and perceived mistakes, with significant comparative research on other countries, China’s civil servants, social scientists and propaganda executives have undertaken a systematic research of China’s history, culture, and the economic and social conditions of the country, carefully constructing a scientific foundation for the strategic and operations management of the State propaganda system (Zheng, 1999, pp.22-23). The Communist Party (CPC) has been actively absorbing the global lexicon and theoretical discourses of mass communications, public relations, psychology and political communication selectively adopting and integrating them into the new national propaganda strategy (Brady, 2008, p. 69). Propaganda officials are encouraged to “master the theoretical knowledge, employ modern research methods, and spend time among average people to understand the thoughts and feelings of the masses” (Yu & Chen, 2008, pp.35-37). Since 1989, the propaganda system has been largely expanded and upgraded, aiming to maintain and consolidate the legitimacy of the CPC as the ruling party of China.

When propaganda and thought-work are regarded as the life blood of the party-state (Brady, 2008, p. 1), how to effectively implant the party’s ideologies into people’s minds becomes a major aim and theoretical problematic within the deliberation of propaganda officials. Fully aware of the people’s weariness and distrust of blatant political ideologies, the party propagandists’ strategy has evolved from forcible indoctrination to instilment and guidance (Chen, 2007). As Liu Yunshan (2017), the Minister of the Central Propaganda Department demanded:

Media and news workers should be adept in obtaining wisdom and inspirations from people's languages and constantly innovating ways of expressions. [They should] reduce doctrinal approaches, stay away from stereotypical tunes and avoid big and empty words (jiadakong), make affords to form the reporting style of 'telling the truth', using new languages, and speaking short words (shuo shihua, shuo xinhua, shuo duanhua).

The party-state needs an attractive, creditable and influential media sector to be the dominant voice in China's post-WTO era where information and communications technology is exerting heavy global ideological influence and multinational media giants are casting covetous eyes on the lucrative market. The aim is to construct a heterogenous media sector that intrinsically and ultimately serves as the party mouthpiece and 'eyes and ears' and that is able to satisfy heterogeneous consumer needs but compliantly follows the party's propaganda strategies and political values. The Chinese press has itself been transformed from a pure propaganda organ to an audience-oriented sector constructing 'social realities' (Li, 2009; Zhao, 2008, p. 21).

From Mao's Cultural Revolution to Deng's Reform and Opening-up to Jiang Zemin's Three Representatives and Hu Jintao's Harmonious Society, the CCP has transformed itself from a revolutionary party representing the interests of proletariats to a party in power representing the interests of the overwhelming majority of Chinese people and China's economic, technological and social development. Officially introduced in the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' policy vision further defined the party's ultimate aim and ideology as achieving 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation'. In its 65 years of ruling, the CCP has grown from a Marxist-Leninist party to a party claiming to be the embodiment and defender of China's national interests, the propeller of economic achievement, the inheritor of China's multi-millennium culture and history and the beacon of hope for the nation's future revival (Cong, 2013). Accordingly, the strategy of propaganda work has been

transformed from stressing revolution and class struggle to national unity, social stability and political trust, with the semi-commercialised media sector being an indispensable national apparatus. As an important means to achieve these aims, nationalism has been at the top of the CPC's agenda of media propaganda.

The centrality of public media to the new Chinese nationalism

Although it is ideologically misconceived to understand nationalism as a constituent element of a communist nation (at least, since the very concept was firmly rejected by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and "the working class has no country" later became a prevailing slogan of international socialism, chanted by the CPC in its embryonic period). Yet, the party's strategy of calling on the unification of the Chinese people in resisting Japan and saving the nation vis-à-vis the China Nationalist Party's "Pacifying the Interior before Resisting External Aggression" policy is a major reason why the CPC successfully mobilized the masses and expanded from an extremely disadvantaged party with only 70,000 members to a dominant power with 1.2 million allegiances during eight years of the Anti-Japanese War (Jia, 1997, p. 809). After the establishment of the new China in 1949, Mao continued to resort to nationalism as the core component of his anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolution. Threats posed by the US-led Western imperialist powers, the restoration of capitalism in China, and the Soviet Union's deviation from Communism were frequently propagandized to arouse people's fervour in such movements as the Vietnam War, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution to defend the motherland and compete with 'people's enemies'. As a communist party, the CPC's ruling regime is largely built upon nationalism (Chen & Zheng, 2012, p. 77).

After the Cultural Revolution, the early period after China's reform and opening up saw a decrease of the party-state's emphasis on nationalism with paramount importance being attached to economic development and a relatively liberal political environment promoted by the reformists within the central government.

However, the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square Movement and the purge of such high-ranking officials as the CPC's General Secretary Zhao Ziyang impelled the ruling officials to restore the power of nationalism to divert people's attention from the government's brutal suppression. This would be accomplished by transforming people's opinions on the subsequent political isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries from those actions being a direct response to government excesses to instead being a malicious attempt to suppress China's development. Emphasizing patriotic education and media promulgation simultaneously, China's propaganda since 1989 has been characterized by promoting 'wounded nationalism' by reiterating the nation's history of oppression and humiliation from the end of Qing Dynasty to the end of the civil war and depicting the CPC as the saviour of the Chinese people, protector from foreign invasion and the guide to national prosperity (Guo, 2004, p. 33; Chen, 2017, p. 83). Scholars and media practitioners who successfully orchestrate patriotic and xenophobic reports may win the ruling elites' ears and receive political rewards. He Xin, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, launched a self-titled 'Safeguarding National Interests Campaign' and firmly denounced the political reform and liberalism movement in the 1980s as subversive and destructive to China's socialist system and praised government's suppression of the Tiananmen Square Movement as safeguarding China's social stability and people's long-term interests (Li, 2004, p. 72). On December 11th, 1990, the *People's Daily* published a full-page report entitled 'A Dialogue between He Xin and Japanese Economist Professor X' and highly acclaimed his 'patriotic stance'. In the editor's note, the *People's Daily* claimed that He Xin's reports had 'generated a huge response both within and outside China, and created a widespread, comprehensive and prolonged sensational effect among the readers... a phenomenon that has never been seen in the newspaper's 20-year history.' (Sun, 1990). In 1991, He Xin gained an exceptional promotion and became a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Media outlets are active participants in constructing the political discourse of nationalism, because such reports are not only in line with the government's strategy but are also commercially profitable and frequently attract a large audience (Pan, Lee, Chan & So, 2001). Based on Whiting's (1995, p. 295) and Li's (2004, p.70) studies, we can identify three main forms of nationalism that mainstream broadcast and print media have promoted in China: *affirmative*, *antagonistic* and *corrective*.

Affirmative nationalism centres on 'us' and promotes achievements and national pride under the governance of the CPC. *Antagonistic* nationalism depicts 'them as hostile others who disrupt our national interests, identity or pride vis-à-vis a responsible government and unified people as defenders'. *Corrective* nationalism focuses on the construction of 'correct' and 'rational' sense of allegiance and belonging when domestic antagonism deviates from or goes beyond the government's plan.

Although more than one type of nationalism may be resorted to in one single incident, media reports since the 1990s could easily be subsumed under the three categories. Frequently, affirmative nationalism is orchestrated in major national events such as the return of Hong Kong and Macao, the hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games, and the Kunming and Shanghai Expos. Antagonistic propaganda can be adopted in various international conflicts, such as China's territorial disputes with neighbouring countries; international criticism concerning China's political, social and human rights situations; military conflicts, such as the NATO bombing of China's embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the China-US military plane collision in 2001; and the independence and anti-China movements of Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong – "incited by hostile foreign separatists". Corrective nationalism aims at mitigating public anger and rectifying various grassroots xenophobic movements that are detrimental to China's foreign policies, government legitimacy and social stability, especially under China's recent strategy of 'peaceful development' and improving its international relationships. Governed by the

Central PD, media discourse on nationalism in a certain period is commonly formed and communicated around a main theme, with interconnected and accumulated reports to shape people's perception and guide further media statements and public discourse.

Affirmative nationalism and the handover of Hong Kong

Claimed by the CPC as its 'greatest achievement that will shine through the ages' (Hu, 2007), the 1997 transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China was a golden opportunity to disseminate the party's accomplishment in achieving national reunification, triumphing over Western powers and demonstrating China's national power. As early as the first half of 1995, a special preparatory team comprising party officials, diplomats and journalistic veterans, was established under the direct guidance of the Central PD and State Council, to be responsible for designing and supervising the propaganda campaign of the return of Hong Kong and especially the handover ceremony on June 1st, 1997 (Zeng, 2006, p. 261). The overall propaganda work was defined as a major political event, and media outlets at all levels were required to gradually 'preheat' the celebration, beginning on March 23rd, to make sure it reaches a climax on June, 1st. A positive media environment was demanded and any 'negative' news that would 'spoil the atmosphere' was discouraged until the end of the 15th Party Congress, which would be held in September after Hong Kong's handover (Wang, 2000, p. 277). In April and May, the Central PD and SARFT organized two exclusive workshops involving the chief editors of major party papers and managers of all provincial TV stations demanding a positive public opinion atmosphere. Reports concerning political issues that deviated from the 'guiding theme' and interviews of domestic and foreign politicians needed to be vetted by party officials before publication (Zeng, 2006, p. 265). The Central PD and Hong Kong and Macao Office of the State Council gave 16 official media outlets exclusive rights to cover reports from Hong Kong during the handover. Before departure, all reporters were

required to receive a two-month special training concerning Deng Xiaoping's 'One Country, Two Systems' policy, Hong Kong basic law, reporting style and wordings. Unsurprisingly, out of more than 600 reporters who were dispatched to Hong Kong, the vast majority were from CCTV, the Xinhua Agency and the *People's Daily*. Granted global exclusivity along with the BBC in the live telecast of the handover ceremony, CCTV sent its 'biggest media team and best equipment in history' consisting of 289 reporters including CCTV President Yang Weiguang, two helicopters, four broadcast vans and over 40 camcorders (Zhu, 1997).

Media represent history and thereby reconceptualise its present meanings (Stocchetti & Kukkonen, 2011, p. 46). Operating in accordance with the needs and boundaries of the party-state's ideology, Chinese media's depictions of historical events and their symbolic significance are frequently systematic and directional in nature (Guo, Cheong & Chen, 2007, p. 471). By examining the handover coverage of seven central party organs and two major provincial official newspapers from June 15th to July 5th, Pan, Lee, Chan & So (2001) identified a clear historical narrative portrayed by media outlets that consisted of two basic lines. The first line depicted a weak China humiliated by Western powers and the colonization of Hong Kong by the British Empire. Although people in Mainland China and Hong Kong were pining for the national reunion, China was unable to take Hong Kong back. The second part of the story praised a revitalized China bolstered by economic development and led by wise and resolute CPC leaders who successfully 'wash away the century-old humiliation' and reclaim the sovereignty of Hong Kong. The narrative ends by looking into the prosperous future of China under the protection and guidance of China's new leaders represented by President Jiang Zemin. In this historical script, the CPC is the national hero that saved the people from untold miseries while Western powers are the villains who humiliate and tread upon China. All governments prior to the CPC were incompetent, corrupt, weak and easily bullied and thus unable to lead Chinese people (Pan, 2000). Apparently, only selected historical fragments had

been extracted and reintegrated. The efforts made by China's Nationalist party to reclaim Hong Kong, and Mao Zedong's abstention from the handover of Hong Kong, were completely unmentioned in the script.

Closely connected to the historical script, the grand celebration of national unity was another focus of the media coverage. Cao (2000) examined nine national official newspapers published on July 1st, 1997, and found nearly 30% of the reports focused on national celebration as the main theme. In order to personify political events, family reunion was fused with the return of Hong Kong to better resonate with the mass Chinese audience. The media presented the convergence of thousands of Chinese people from every ethnic and social background on Tiananmen Square, dancing and chanting their happiness about national reunion, the gathering of Lin Zexu's (a scholar-official of the Qing Dynasty who forcefully opposed the opium trade) descendants pledging allegiance to the CPC and their gratitude for realizing the 'one hundred-year-old dream', the rallies of overseas Chinese celebrating the return of Hong Kong to the 'Chinese family', and President Jiang Zemin announcing his determination to achieve the complete reunification and revitalization of China, a joyful Chinese family united around the leadership of its family head — the CPC and its top leaders.

Although a few scholars have studied how the major party organs covered the handover of Hong Kong, none of the existing literature paid attention to the role played by the then fast-growing, non-official, media enterprises. After an examination of 14 major evening newspapers of 12 provinces across China on July 2nd, 1997, we can find an extremely similar discourse in even more commercially-oriented media outlets. Ten of them published Jiang Zemin's speech in the handover ceremony and praised the CPC's achievements on the front page and two on the second page, a clear indication of a mandatory requirement imposed by propaganda departments to reprint reports from the Xinhua Agency. The historical script appeared in 12 of the 14 papers, but a 'hardship and prosperity in the same boat' approach was taken, emphasizing the

region's close connection with Hong Kong. The *Guangzhou Daily* published a story under the headline One Hundred Years of One Heart" describing in detail how people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong fought side by side against Western invasion during the Opium Wars, the close economic, cultural and linguistic relations that tied the two regions together, and the eventual reunion of the two "closest family members" (Yang, 1997). Located much further from Hong Kong, Nanjing's *Jingling Evening News* published a report depicting the common suffering and humiliations that were caused by the Treaty of Nanjing and an interview with 300 Nanjing-born Hong Kongers who "rejoiced with excitement about their return to the Chinese family" (Lu & Li, 1997, p. A2). With a focus on local residents, all of the newspapers used at least two pages in covering the celebration of people from various walks of life and words such as "family reunion", "family celebrations", "mother's arms", "wash away one hundred years shame" were terms repeatedly used. For multi-ethnic regions such as Gansu and Yunnan, the united merriment between Han people and minority groups was clearly a focal point. The *Chun Cheng Evening News*, a subordinate newspaper of Yunnan's provincial party organ, spent the whole fourth page reporting festivities held at Yunnan Nationalities Village where people from Han and other 25 nationalities "singing and dancing like siblings", mingled together to celebrate the return of Hong Kong "to the arms of the motherland" (Chen, 1997, p. A4). The coherence between official and non-official papers clearly indicated that the supervisor-subordinate relationship exists between the leading party organs and their market-oriented subsidiaries. According to the chief editor of the *Chun Cheng Evening News*, a special conference was organized by the Provincial PD and the editor-in-chief of Yunnan's party organs, demanding that every media outlet in the province "follow the Central PD's campaign strategy and use Hong Kong's handover as an opportunity to comprehensively promote patriotic education" (Zhang, 1997).

However, unlike the central party's organs' focus on political events – (which emphasised the CPC's achievements, Hong Kong's new government

policy, and grand national celebrations at such political landmarks as Tiananmen Square) (Cao, 2000, p. 669) – the non-official papers tended to portray the stories of grassroots individuals, which might have resulted from their inability to acquire first-hand information and more consumer-oriented market strategies. All of the notable commercial newspapers devoted at least two papers to interviews with ordinary citizens and to readers' letters and celebrations at the grassroots level to depict a more genuine nationalism, a strategy not taken by major party organs but to which the average readers can easily relate. According to an editor of the *Xinming Evening*, a newspaper located in Shanghai, the paper did not give much attention to spectacular scenes but was more concerned with heart-touching stories, such as ordinary citizens' feelings about and reactions to the return of Hong Kong. One of the articles the editor felt most proud of was published on July 2nd when the newspaper covered three middle school students climbing onto the top of a wayside bus at 12:00 on July 1st, "when the big screen on the Shanghai Television building displayed the rise of the fluttering Chinese national flag". The students suddenly took out a white placard saying "Xiaoping, do you see it?" In an instant, the nearby crowd burst into applause and cheers, many with tears running down their faces (Sun, 1997, p. 15).

Antagonistic and corrective nationalism: the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute over the Diaoyu Islands

Coinciding with the prolonged 'wounded' national history that has been widely disseminated through patriotic education and media discourse as an important propaganda strategy, *antagonistic* nationalism has the potential to boost patriotism and improve government legitimacy. However, its side effects, such as xenophobia and even chauvinism, which can be incited by anger and hatred, could obviously tarnish China's international reputation (and at the extreme end of the spectrum effect instigate social unrest, give rise to people's criticism against China's foreign policies, and have an impact on bilateral relationships or even the government's international status. As pointed out by Guo,

Cheong & Zhong (2007), there is a difference between what is called 'latent' and 'manifest' nationalism. If the 'latent' is a rooted cognition (that, in this case, the party-state has been consistently implanting into people's minds), the 'manifest' (and concomitant offensive behaviours) may indeed backfire (pp.468-469). Therefore, the Chinese government's decisions on whether to widely promulgate or stringently restrain information on various international disputes in recent decades have been made based on careful planning involving political, social and economic effects and outcomes.

For decades, the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands (also known as the Senkaku Islands) has been at the centre of territorial disputes between China and Japan. Consisting of a group of small barren islands in the East Asia Sea, this region offers rich fishing grounds and potential oil and gas reserves (Dixon, 2014, p.1058). Claimed as a part of its territory since the 16th century, China acknowledges Japan's temporary control of the Diaoyu Islands during the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895. However, for China, Japan should abide by the Cairo Declaration (1943) and the Potsdam Declaration (1945) and return the islands to China. Declared as an integral part of its territory, Japan denied China's ownership of the islands before the first Sino-Japanese War and has since refuted demands to hand over the islands by international postwar statements. Before the 2012 dispute and its gradual escalation into aggressive nationwide protests in China, there had been two major conflicts over the ownership of the islands in the 1990s that also resulted in anti-Japan movements. The 1990 dispute was triggered by the Japanese press reporting the government's decision to renovate a lighthouse on the Diaoyu Islands and recognize them in its official navigation chart. In the same year, a Japanese official member publicly denied the existence of the Nanking Massacre when being interviewed by American media. Large-scale demonstrations later took place in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the situation was intensified by Japan expelling protesters' attempts to land at the islands (Sha, 2005, p.61). In 1996 Japan declared an exclusive economic zone around the Diaoyu Islands, and right-wing officials decided to build a

much larger solar powered lighthouse, which led to an even larger anti-Japanese movement organized by Chinese communities on a global scale, especially in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Pan, 2007, p.75). However, despite the widespread popular indignation and innumerable petitions for anti-Japanese protests in mainland China in 1990 and 1996, the Chinese government firmly decided to prohibit any demonstrations and black out information concerning the disputes and consequent overseas protests in order to maintain social stability and 'friendly relationships between China and Japan'. Chinese students had to obtain relevant information from the BBC and VOA and resort to foreign media to express their anger (Dong, 2003, p. 197). According to Downs and Saunders (1999), being economically dependent on Japan and seeking to consolidate its unstable international position, the government's approach to the Diaoyu Islands disputes in the 1990s were a trade-off made by the ruling elites to prevent the negative ramifications of nationalism as defined above.

For China's government, the 2012 Diaoyu Islands dispute broke out under a context that was dramatically different from and much more complicated than the situation in the 1990s. Internationally, China had become an influential power and had overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy. Maintaining a friendly Sino-Japanese relationship was no longer at the top of its agenda. Actively participating in global affairs, the Chinese government had become more proactive to demonstrate its international leverage. However, in accordance with Deng Xiaoping's 'hide one's capabilities and bide one's time' policy, President Hu Jintao formally raised the term 'peaceful development' and continued to portray an 'unthreatening' China and avoid direct international confrontations (Guo, 2006, p.2). Domestically, the polarisation between the rich and the poor, the contradictions between the interests of the government and the general public, as well as the serious official corruption, had aroused great wrath among the general public. The arrest of the high-ranking official Bo Xilai and his subordinates in March also attracted much unwanted attention. In addition, the government's foreign policies had frequently been

criticized by Chinese people as being too 'soft' and unable to represent the attitudes of the mass public, which had severely damaged government legitimacy (Zhao, 2004, p. 77). Under this circumstance, employing antagonistic nationalism to divert people's attention and consolidate government legitimacy was a viable option. Coverage of the dispute and its various ramifications throughout the incident indicated a resilient propaganda strategy by the government that constantly modified itself and aimed to employ antagonistic and corrective nationalism to distract attention, bolster patriotism and government legitimacy, mitigate social unrest and use people's demands to legitimise its 'aggressive' foreign policies, military actions and pursuit of natural resources.

Unlike national events such as the handover of Hong Kong, which gave the government sufficient time to orchestrate a campaign strategy, international disputes frequently take place abruptly with unpredictable follow-ups taken by foreign governments, and therefore require prompt decisions in the initial stage. When Tokyo's Governor Shintaro Ishihara triggered the territorial dispute by announcing the local government's plans to purchase the islands on behalf of the central government from their Japanese 'private owner' Kunioki Kurihara on April 16th, the Chinese government reacted in a way that was not unlike its typical response to international disputes. On April 17th, the Chinese Foreign Ministry (2012) remarked that "any actions taken by Japan concerning the Diaoyu Islands and their affiliated Islands are illegal and futile, these [Japan's plans to purchase the islands] cannot change the fact that the Diaoyu Islands belong to China". The next day, the *People's Daily* published a report on page 21 (international news) that stated in detail Shintaro Ishihara's announcement and quoted China's official response, without making any comment (Yu, 2012a). Unlike the *People's Daily*, the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* and the *Guangming Daily* commented on Japan's announcement as a "farce" that was plotted by 'Japanese right wingers, which hurt the Chinese people's feelings, damaged Sino-Japanese relations (Wu, 2012), and portrayed Ishihara as a "trouble maker" who is

repudiated and widely criticized in Japan (Yan, 2012a). An examination of the coverage of the three most important central party organs from April 17th to the end of May revealed that in the early stage, the Chinese government planned to mitigate the influence of Ishihara's announcement. Over that period, the *Guangming Daily* and the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* did not publish any report concerning the dispute apart from the foregoing ones on April 19th, which was even less than in March when the two outlets published three articles concerning the islands' sovereignty. Carrying eight articles about the issue, the *People's Daily* focused on the "ambitions" of Ishihara as an individual and the importance of Sino-Japanese relationships. Six of these articles appeared on page 21 where international news is covered, and two on the front page covering China's Prime Minister and Vice Prime Minister meeting Japanese politicians, respectively. On April 20th and May 2nd, the paper published two editorials arguing that 'Ishihara is using the Diaoyu Island as a political 'show field' in order to seek political advantage (Zhong, 2012a) and that he intended to 'directly disrupt the Sino-Japanese relationship by his extreme statements' (Liu, 2012). The *People's Daily* also covered various political meetings between Chinese and Japanese high-ranking officials and quoted their remarks that emphasized solving the dispute to ensure a good bilateral relationship (e.g., Yang, 2012; Tan, 2012). Except for reprinting the government's official response, few local official and non-official newspapers made their own comments on this issue during the period.

No significant announcement or follow-up measures took place on the Japanese side from Ishihara's announcement on April 16th to the end of June, and the Chinese public's reactions remained stable (Zheng, 2014). Nevertheless, there were indications that Japan was very likely to take further measures against China and that the dispute would continue to escalate: Ishihara undertook active domestic canvassing activities aimed at politicians and the general public, Japanese 'netizens' launched the 'buying Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands) movement', and a poll conducted by Yahoo Japan indicated that 92% of respondents supported Tokyo purchasing the

islands (Warnock, 2012). It was during this period that the Chinese government decided to deliberate on a propaganda campaign highlighting antagonism and patriotism. Based on a complete examination of the media coverage of the *People's Daily*, the *Guangming Daily* and the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* from the beginning of June to the end of October, three stages of the campaign can be identified – divided by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's decision to implement the nationalizing process of the Diaoyu Islands on July 7th and Japan's official declaration to nationalize the islands on September 10th. Four main themes of media coverage are also identified throughout the period. They are China's official response, the grassroots response to Japan's purchase of the islands in the Chinese community, Japan's actions and official announcements, and international reports and opinions. News coverage of national conflicts often tends to adopt a variety of discursive strategies, such as emphasis, omission, authoritative sources, and justifications, that favour the values and actions of the in-group nation and portray a negative evaluation of the out-group nation (Chan, 2014). Attaching importance to different themes in different stages, the propaganda work was aimed to accomplish different purposes. However, throughout the period, a completely positive media discourse was formed on China while the Japanese side was depicted as totally negative.

In terms of sheer numbers, the period from June 1st to July 6th did not witness a significant increase in news coverage of the dispute since the three most important party organs published only 10 articles and local newspapers still rarely touched this topic. However, a clear change in discursive strategy can be observed since, unlike depictions of the dispute as incited by Ishihara and 'Japanese right wingers' for personal political motives, party organs shifted the blame and criticism to the Japanese central government and began to accuse Japan of using the islands to obstruct China's development. Eight out of the ten articles are subjective comments written by newspaper journalists or editors, which indicated a clear intent to guide both media and public opinions. Four of the six articles published by the *People's Daily* appeared on page 3 (the page for important

domestic news), a sharp contrast to the coverage in April and May when the dispute was categorised as ‘international news’. Apart from criticizing the Japanese government for ‘associating with Ishihara and his ilk’ to distract domestic people’s attention from Japan’s sluggish economy and political chaos by propagating a ‘China threat theory’ (Zhong, 2012b), the *People’s Daily* also mentioned the Japanese people’s antagonism by referring to a poll indicating ‘84% of the respondents either dislike or relatively dislike China’ (Zhong, 2012c). The *Guangming Daily* lamented that ‘courageous’ politicians are unlikely to emerge against Japanese right wingers and accused the Japanese government of supporting Ishihara (Yan, 2012b). The *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* also argued that “Judging from the current situation, people have to suspect that Japan’s central government is willingly cooperating with Ishihara and is even resolved to carry on to the end.” (Wu, 2012a).

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda’s announcement on July 7th expressing Japan’s central government’s intention to implement the nationalizing process of the Senkaku Islands (the Diaoyu Islands) marked a significant escalation of the dispute and an increase in news coverage in China’s major party organs. From July 7th to September 9th, a total of 40 relevant articles were published in the three party newspapers (22 were carried by the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, 11 by the *People’s Daily* and 7 by the *Guangming Daily*). Among these, 17 appeared as ‘important domestic news’ and one was on the front page, indicating a significant emphasis on the dispute by the media outlets. Eighteen reports paid close attention to Japan’s latest “aggressive” actions and announcements, signifying a focus on promulgating various “offences” in the media discourse. Although after three decades of commercialization, professional journalism has become a key word and objective reporting about facts is regarded as an important principle in China’s media sector (Zhao & Guo, 2009, pp. 533-534), reports concerning Japan in this period were far from objective. When stating ‘facts’ about Japan’s movements, subjective words such as “plot” (tu mou), “attempt” (qi tu), “presumptuous” (wang cheng), “farce” (nao ju),

“threaten” (yang yan) and “so called” (suo wei) were frequently used before and after quoted remarks and activities. When reporting on Noda’s announcement on July 7th, the *People’s Daily* stated: “In recent days, Japan played a series of ‘farces’ on the issue of Diaoyu Islands... Noda once again presumptuously claimed in a press conference that the ‘Diaoyu Islands are a part of Japan’s territory, there isn’t any problem concerning their ownership’” (Hua, 2012). Covering Ishihara’s movements, the *Xinhua Daily News* reported: “On August 27th, Tokyo’s Governor threatened to continue submitting his plans and land on the islands in person... in order to collect evidence for the ‘islands purchasing project’” (Guo, 2012). Focused on Japan’s actions, 10 of the 18 articles used subjective words to impose writers’ doubts, sarcasm or criticism. In sharp contrast, when China’s official responses were reported, authors only quoted speakers’ remarks in complete sentences without any omission, addition or subjective interpretation, which seemed to indicate the authority of the Chinese government and subordinate journalists with no right to judge. In the five articles focused on China’s official response, the Foreign Ministry Spokesman’s similar announcements on various occasions were repeatedly quoted: “Diaoyu Dao and its affiliated islands have been an inseparable part of the Chinese territory since ancient times. Nothing can sway China’s will and determination in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty. China has expressed its strong dissatisfaction and grave concerns about Japan’s highly irresponsible remarks” (People’s Daily, 2012).

Among the 18 articles concerning Japan’s movements, 12 also contained authors’ commentaries on the reported ‘offensive activities’. Unlike the dominant discourse in the previous period, only three commentaries continued to ascribe Japan’s actions to distracting domestic attention and suppressing China’s development. Commentaries in this period frequently connected Japan’s announcements and movements to the first and second Sino-Japanese wars (Xu, 2012), the Second World War (Guo, 2012), the Cold War (Ding, 2012; Sun, 2012a) as well as the Gulf and Afghanistan wars (Sun & Liu, 2012), denouncing Japanese right wingers as

extremists who denied Japan's invasion of China during the Second World War and who are attempting to abandon the post-war treaties to regain Japan's military power (Guo, 2012a). The Diaoyu Island dispute was claimed as a sign that the Japanese government 'harbours sinister intentions' (Sun & Liu, 2012), and 'will probably readopt militarism to launch wars abroad' (Sun, 2012b).

Media discourse in this stage also concerned the feelings at the grassroots level and depicted Chinese people as victims of Japan's actions. The phrases "seriously hurt Chinese people's feelings" and "trampled upon Chinese people's dignities" were frequently used and were often followed by reiterating the Chinese government's claim that it had lodged serious concerns and solemn representations and refused any claims made by Japan (e.g., Xu, 2012; Xin & Liu, 2012; Wu, 2012b). For years, this "concern", "representation" and "refuse" form of reaction has been regarded as an ossified official response when dealing with international disputes and has been widely criticized by the public as a sign of 'weakness' since no concrete government countermeasures are mentioned (Ma, 2014, p. 92). In fact, no government plans or measures that aimed to directly confront Japan's actions appeared in the three party organs' news coverage in this period, which was at odds with media's promulgation of Japan's militarism. Since the 'Japan threat' had been an important theme in the media discourse, it is unlikely that the Chinese government still intended to avoid confrontations and suppress people's antagonism in order to protect 'good Sino-Japanese relations'. A possible explanation is that the propaganda apparatus was deliberately portraying 'vulnerable and victimized Chinese' to impel the public to demand a strong foreign policy and to arouse their nationalistic emotions. Party organs in this period paid close attention to protesting activities against Japan at the grassroots level and portrayed the protesters as 'national heroes'. Covering Japan's decision to release 14 Chinese who had landed on the Diaoyu Islands and been detained by Japan, the *Xinhua Daily News* commented that "Chinese people all over the world have been deeply worried about the safety of these 'island protectors', for their

actions embody the united purpose and common will shared by all Chinese to safeguard their territorial sovereignty" (Xu & Jiang, 2012). When seven activists returned to Hong Kong, the newspaper reported that 'hundreds of Hong Kong citizens and mainland Chinese tourists witnessed the return of (the ship) Qifeng No. 2 with warm applause. People gave the seven "island protectors" flowers and placed garlands over their necks...".

Since Japan's announcement that it would implement the purchasing process of the Diaoyu Islands on July 7th, propaganda departments no longer discouraged official and non-official newspapers at the local level to report on the dispute. According to statistics provided by Huang (2014, p. 44), after a decrease of relevant reports published by local media outlets from April to early July, the amount of coverage concerning the dispute began to increase sharply from around July 10th. Since China's commercial websites are only allowed to reprint current political affairs news from newspapers (Stockmann, 2011, p. 193), and since Chinese netizens' awareness, attitudes and user-generated content are heavily dependent on information provided by these websites, and since market-oriented media outlets frequently cover netizens' opinions, the government's loosening control over media coverage of the dispute soon created an escalating information circle that significantly bolstered anti-Japanese nationalism across China. From August 16th to 19th, the first nationwide anti-Japanese protest took place and thousands of citizens took to the streets in major cities demanding that Japan leave the Diaoyu Islands (Oi, 2012). There were also protesters who held posters of Mao Zedong to demand that the government take a tougher stand on the issues of national sovereignty (Asian Correspondence News, 2012). Since all demonstrations in China require official approval and nearly all large-scale protests have been suppressed since 1989 as "mass disturbances" (Wang, 2012), the simultaneous protests across China's major cities were clearly approved and supported by the Chinese government. Although the protests were widely covered by foreign media enterprises, none of the three party newspapers reported the

incident, except for the demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassies, to prevent the protests from overheating. The Xinhua News Agency covered the story in its English version with an intention to send the prevalent 'anti-Japanese feelings' and Chinese people's demands to safeguard the national sovereignty to the overseas readers (Zhang, 2014, pp. 90-91).

On September 10th, Japan's central government officially claimed its decision to nationalize the Diaoyu Islands and pushed the dispute to its climax. From this day to the end of October, the three newspapers published 232 articles on this issue (52 by the *People's Daily*, 85 by the *Guangming Daily* and 95 by the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*), which is more than the coverage during the rest of 2012 combined. On the same day, China's Foreign Ministry immediately issued a statement arguing that "Any unilateral move made by the Japanese side with regard to the Diaoyu Islands and its affiliated islands is illegal and invalid... The time when the Chinese nation allowed itself to be trampled upon by others has gone forever. The Chinese government will not allow China's territorial sovereignty to be offended by others." The media discourse during this period was highly in line with the government's response and put paramount emphases on various government countermeasures: the legitimacy of China's claim over the islands and the invalidity of Japan's, a rising China envied by Japan but supported by the world, and patriotic Chinese people united under the guidance of the CPC to contribute to the continuous development of a powerful China. This correlation between China's prompt official announcement and subsequent media reports indicated a propaganda strategy that had probably been orchestrated even before Japan's announcement on the 10th.

For the Chinese government, the propaganda discourse in September and October was of the utmost importance for a number of reasons. Firstly, the already widespread anti-Japanese emotions among people were further exacerbated by Japan's announcement and the 81st anniversary of the Mukden Incident on September 18th 1931, which marked the beginning of the Japanese War

of Aggression against China. It was imperative to transform the antagonism in a way that favoured government legitimacy, suppressing any criticism of the Chinese government and curbing the severe social unrest during the nationwide protests in both August and September. Secondly, since the first trial of the former high-ranking police official Wang LiJun (who triggered a major political scandal and brought down his supervisor Bo Xilai) was arranged on September 18th, nationwide anti-Japanese protests and intensive media coverage of the Diaoyu Island dispute could effectively divert the attention of both the Chinese people and the foreign media. Thirdly, and most importantly, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was due to be held in early November, and the CPC's new central committee led by Xi Jinping would be elected during the congress. A positive media and social environment was of vital importance both prior to and during the congress. Lastly, for China's new leaders, having strained relations with Japan and its powerful ally America would be an undesirable situation when taking office. Aimed at 'correcting' the widespread antagonism, media coverage of the dispute in this period revealed a clear focus on mitigating and guiding the anti-Japanese emotions in a way that favoured 'insidious patriotism' and the government's various aims.

In contrast to the previous stage, when nearly half of the media coverage paid close attention to Japan's various 'offences', only 20 articles (8.5% of the total coverage) in this period concerned 'offensive' activities and remarks from Japan. Among them, eight articles were published between September 11th to 13th covering Japan's 'islands purchasing' announcement on the 10th. Seven reports concerned Japan's claim over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands in United Nations conferences and its government officials' canvassing activities in Europe. In these articles, Japanese politicians were depicted as either 'schemers' who violated international regulations and were demolished by their Chinese counterparts or 'insignificant' figures whose opinions were left out in the cold. Reporting on Japan's claim over the islands in the General Assembly of the United Nations, the *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* reported in detail how those who

presented Japan's arguments were refuted by 'righteous' Chinese representatives and became 'faltering and speechless' (Gu, 2012). When covering Japan's Foreign Secretary Koichiro Genba's visit to Europe, the *Guangming Daily* described how British, German and French officials either ignored Japan's arguments on the disputed islands or gave irrelevant answers when addressing them (Cai, 2012). The *Xinhua News Telegraph* covered the same story and concluded that "Germany, Britain and France just don't buy it. They neither support nor sympathize with Japan on its most concerned issue... which made the Japanese 'guests' who came with high expectations feel so embarrassed" (Liu, et al., 2012). Apart from the announcement on the 10th, only two articles focused on Japan's newest announcement or activities that were 'directly against China'. The *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* reported the landing of three Japanese right wingers on the Diaoyu Islands and criticized their provocative activities and the 'tacit permission' of Japan's central government. The newspaper also covered Hideo Yamashita's humiliating remarks about China and his proposal to build lighthouses on the disputed islands as well as how his opinions and behaviours were widely criticized in Japan. Other 'aggressive' actions and announcements during this period — such as the Japanese Prime Minister's threat to "arrest any foreigners who dared to land on the Diaoyu Islands", criticism of the Chinese people's morals during the protests (Guo, 2014b), Japanese politicians' accusations that China deliberately distorted history and used the dispute to expand its military power (Phoenix Television, 2012a), and America's affirmation that the Diaoyu Islands were covered by America's security treaty with Japan (Phoenix Television, 2012b) — were ignored by the three party organs during this period.

Eight articles also quoted remarks made by the Japanese Prime Minister and other politicians expressing the Japanese government's will to restore Sino-Japanese relations. However, instead of conceding to these "intentions", newspaper commentaries firmly rebutted the "hypocrisy" of the Japanese government offending China's territorial integrity on one hand and trying to rebuild the bilateral relations on the other. Japan

was depicted as a less powerful nation that was both threatened by and increasingly dependent on a rising China while the Chinese government was assertive in protecting its national sovereignty. As the party newspapers argued, "Nothing is too strange in the world. After capriciously doing a number of things that offended China's territorial integrity and hurt the Chinese people's feelings, Japan managed to put on a pitiful face and talk about how to cherish the Sino-Japanese relations, seemingly in earnest" (Zhong, 2012d). "After making the decision to 'purchase the islands', Japan is not at all at ease. It pays close attention to and analyses China's reaction. If China takes an assertive stance, it will halt temporarily. If China is lukewarm about it, it will press forward according to plan... However, Japan's wishful thinking is completely wrong because China will never tolerate its disgraceful behaviours." (Zhong, 2012e).

Apart from reducing information on Japan's "offences" and depicting a less "threatening" Japan by covering its "friendly" remarks and how it was given a cold shoulder by Western countries, newspaper commentaries and coverage of government officials' responses also portrayed Japan in a way that was less likely to arouse Chinese people's antagonism. Among the 36 articles expressing authors' opinions on Japan and 11 reports covering China's official foreign responses, a predominant discourse can be identified, which criticized Japan for violating international treaties and challenging the achievement of the World Anti-Fascist War. Postwar statements such as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration are prevalently invoked to demonstrate that Japan's purchase was a violation of the postwar order and was therefore not only an offense against China but also against the international order. In the media coverage, Japan was no longer a dangerous nation that intended to readopt militarism and was likely to launch wars against its neighbouring nations, but a country that was unwilling to examine its past war crimes and aimed to extricate itself from the postwar constraints and become a 'normal country' with corresponding political and military powers. For decades, Japan's unwillingness to acknowledge and repent for its actions during

wars, as well as its 'ambition' to expand and exert its military power, have been repeatedly covered by Chinese media during events such as Japanese officials' visits to the Yasukuni War Shrine, history textbook revisions, politicians' open denials of various war crimes and Japan's involvement in international military actions. Media discourse during this period seemed to subsume the 'island purchase' under the same category as Japan's "prolonged mistakes" to transform the overheated antagonism among Chinese people into an insidious nationalism to perpetuate its 'positive effect' and prevent the negative ramifications.

A main task of the media propaganda in September and October was to transform the burst of antagonistic nationalism into an enduring patriotism that is advantageous to the ruling regime. A similar argument – that 'China has become a powerful nation free from humiliation and bullies and therefore has the strength and confidence to safeguard its national sovereignty, and if China can maintain its political stability, national unity and economic development it will frustrate any international challenging attempts' – was made by 86 articles published during this time, which clearly indicated that the argument was a focal point required by the Central Propaganda Department. As the *Guangming Daily* argued: "China's humiliated history and the constant change in the international situation give us a profound understanding that only a prosperous nation can bring about national dignity, only the rise of a nation can bring about the well-being of all people. Only by adhering to the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics and accelerating our economic and social development... can we forever break the fetters of international disputes". Although past Sino-Japanese wars were reiterated to demonstrate Japan's violation of postwar regulations and its unwillingness to repent for the war crimes, the reason behind Japan's purchase of the islands was not depicted as an attempt to give the impression of a weak and disunited China being invaded, but rather of a powerful China envied and disliked by Japan, which is being surpassed by China (Zhong, 2012f; Chen, Xu & Mao, 2012).

Although the international media widely covered the large-scale anti-Japanese protests that were held in nearly every major Chinese city from September 16th to 20th and the much criticized angry crowds attacking Japanese embassies, factories, restaurants and cars (Zhang, 2014, p. 91; Lu & Hong, 2013, p. 150), the coverage of protests was never a focus of the major party organs: only seven articles either briefly mentioned or alluded to the incidents, and violent behaviours were barely reported or critically commented on. As the only exception, the *Guangming Daily* decried the violence as 'damaging the nation' rather than acts of patriotism and criticized the rioters for "resorting to violence and venting their resentment upon Chinese citizens and their properties" and argued "this kind of ignorant and stupid behaviour will not help to solve the Diaoyu Islands dispute but bring about harmful results" (Guangming Daily, 2012a). During the protests, most reports chose either to cover the "positive patriotic behaviours", such as various peaceful commemorative activities of the Mukden Incident, or to ignore completely the riotous actions by defining the protests as an expression of people's "just stand and patriotic spirits" and argued that "this kind of pure patriotism is so precious, this kind of grassroots expression of justice should be respected and taken extra care of. We should let the masses express patriotism and show the world the power of justice from the Chinese nation". (People's Daily, 2012; Guangming Daily, 2012b; Lin & Liu, 2012; Guangming Daily, 2012c). Apart from the acclaim, however, all of the six articles appealed for "rational patriotism" and highlighted the importance of maintaining national unity, social stability and the guidance of the CPC in safeguarding China's long-term sovereign integrity. To ensure the 'rationalisation' of antagonism among Chinese people, after the protests in September 18th, the government stringently censored information on protests on the Internet and forbade any grassroots requests for demonstrations in China (Ross, 2014).

Another main theme of the media propaganda at this stage was to pacify people's anger, consolidate government legitimacy and construct a united Chinese community by disseminating various government countermeasures taken

directly against Japan and international support for China, as well as the nationalism shared by Chinese all around the world. In sharp contrast to the previous stage, when no articles expressed concern about China's official actions, 57 reports focused on covering various concrete countermeasures taken by the government, including marine patrol vessels sailing near the disputed islands, official announcement of jurisdiction of waters and the publication of a white paper on the Diaoyu Islands claiming China's sovereignty over the territory. Among these articles, 20 appeared on the front pages, indicating a significant emphasis on the depiction of a government that is both responsive to grassroots requests and assertive in safeguarding national interests on behalf of the Chinese people. Although modern journalism requires objective reporting of facts such as government measures, these reports often adopted emotional appeals to boost readers' patriotism, especially when certain actions did not involve authoritative high-ranking officials. When covering marine ships patrolling the Diaoyu Islands, for example, the party newspapers reported: "In this kind of difficult situation, China's marine fleet braves the storm and advances courageously... The beautiful islands gradually appear in front of China's marine fleet, the seabirds flutter from the stern to the bow joyously as if they are welcoming the fleet. Facing the magnificent territorial seas of the motherland, the soldiers of the fleet could hardly contain their excitement and gazed with deep feelings at the islands. They are the guardians of China's blue territory. I look around, lights flicker on the sea. Diligent fishermen are harvesting hope. Being escorted by the marine ships, they must feel so safe and relieved" (Dong, 2012; Sun & Huang, 2012).

The coverage of overseas activities and opinions was also an important constituent part of the media discourse. Although domestic popular anti-Japanese activities rarely appeared in the party organs, demonstrations and protests that took place in Western countries were widely covered, and participants were depicted as patriotic and antagonistic towards Japan. Reporting on protests taking place in Washington D.C., the *Guangming Daily* narrated: "Hundreds of overseas Chinese

coming from the mainland and Taiwan took part in the protest that day. The protesters chanted slogans such as: "Diaoyu Islands belong to China." 'Taiwan and mainland should protect Diaoyu Islands because we are a family.' 'The wonderland of China never to yield an inch of ground.' and 'Japanese get out of Diaoyu Islands!', and read out the letter of protest." (Yu, 2012b). Protests in such cities as London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles and Berlin were also reported in detail and similar patriotic and anti-Japanese slogans were highlighted. Statements made by overseas Chinese communities expressing patriotism, support for the Chinese government and opposition to Japan were also widely quoted by the party newspapers (e.g., Zhao, Fu & Cai, 2012; Xu, 2012b; Xia, 2012).

Apart from portraying a cohesive and supportive overseas Chinese community to boost national pride and government legitimacy, 51 articles during this period also reported foreign media's coverage of overseas government officials' and scholars' opinions on the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute. Foreign opinions as presented in these articles could be generally subsumed under two categories – those that supported China and those that were against Japan. Opinions expressed by foreign media and individuals were highly in line with the domestic media discourse in China with paramount emphases on acclaiming Chinese government countermeasures, confirming China's legitimacy over the disputed islands and criticizing Japan for violating international regulations and being unwilling to acknowledge its war crimes in the past. Since world-renowned media outlets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian* in Britain and *The New York Times* and CNN in America are unlikely to express biased opinions in favour of China, reports made by these media organizations had been carefully selected and extracted to reiterate China's official announcements and present an impression that global media enterprises valued the dispute and sided with China. As the *Guangming Daily* reported: "Britain's *Daily Telegraph* published articles written by its Beijing and Tokyo correspondents on [September] 12th which covered Japan's 'Islands Purchase' and the strong reaction from China. According to the articles, Japan's decision

to spend 2050 million yen (approximately 16.4 million pounds) on the purchase of the Diaoyu Islands triggered a strong reaction from the Chinese government, which claimed to have sovereignty over the islands. China has sent two capital patrolling ships to the islands to claim its sovereignty. The articles quoted the China Foreign Ministry's announcement that "[T]he times when the Chinese nation was being bullied and humiliated have gone forever. China's government will never tolerate any foreign offences against its territorial integrity. Japan's 'island purchasing' is not only a violent offence to China's territory, but also a humiliation to the 1.3 billion Chinese people." (Dai, 2012b). The *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* also cited reports from global media on Japanese officials' visits to 'war shrines' during the islands disputes. 'America's *The New York Times* published an article on [October] 18th arguing that Japan's former opposition leader and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine makes people worry that he may walk the right-wing road if he is elected as the Prime Minister again, which will further exacerbate Japan's relations with its neighbouring nations and intensify the territorial disputes (Wang, 2012. The *Guangming Daily* reported, "According to *The Times*, Yasukuni Shrine honours the memorial tablets of over 2.5 million Japanese who died in battles since the second half of the 19th Century. Because there are 14 Class A war criminals from World War II, it is widely perceived by Japan's neighbouring countries as symbol of Japan's militarism. The Japanese politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine reveal that they have no intention to repent of Japan's crimes of aggression against its neighbouring countries" (Dai, 2012c).

Conclusion

The aims of this article were to introduce to the broader debates on cultural rights, the complexity of political communication and the public sphere (principally in China, but by implication in any country whose political discourse is not formed by Western assumptions on the political efficacy of 'free speech'). The complexity of 'information' underscores a central epistemic problem on the distinction between fact and value, and information itself and commentary (or the various

meanings that accumulate when subject to interpretation, appropriation and deployment within the context of an event of public interest or concern). Information rights is more than simple assertions of free speech, or upholding free speech as a symbolic model of a free society; rather, it concerns the constitution and status of information itself, which in turn involves an understanding of the formation and political management of public knowledge (generating values and the matrix of perceptions around the relation between one's country and the rest of the world).

Using historical-critical narrative, this article attempted to demonstrate the necessary historical dimension to any conceptualisation of China's political aims – and the emerging meta-narrative on national self-assertion. Historical narrative serves to identify the moral complexity of China's identity, emerging from centuries of foreign invasion and internal conflict. The original role of propaganda is important to this narrative, followed by what Deng Xiaoping called ideological and political 'work'. It was important to note how China's Press has been transformed from an organ of propaganda to one serving to shape and convey the moral content of broader political aspirations. The CCP has similarly been transformed from a revolutionary party to a force of development – representing the interests of China's economic, technological and social development on a grand scale. In 2012, Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' policy vision consolidated the notion of a national project of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation'. The content of public discourse and communication is no longer the repetitive dogma of revolution and class struggle but a tangible national unity, social stability and political trust, with a semi-commercialised media sector contributing to a more inclusive nationalist project. This project is articulated in terms of incontestable national aims, involving the good of the people and their increased prosperity, and the power to repel forced (internal and external) that would hinder or compromise that.

Where for other countries, nationalism asserted itself as part of a bellicose project of territorial expansion, military conflict and assertion of

colonial expansion, in China, it has emerged of late as a deeply cultural project of self-realisation and the assertion of moral will (in part through rectifying past injustice and the exploitation of other, mostly hostile, nations).

The paper has identified in this particular discursive strains of nationalism – affirmative, antagonistic and corrective – perhaps easily related to familiar historical and Western forms of propaganda. However, what is not easily identifiable is how these forms work together and with the otherwise free cooperation of public and private agencies of Press, media and communications. The political management of information entails a situation that has not required direct political control, but an orchestration of cooperation. Moreover, the political management of information was not an attempt to deceive or disseminate untruth, but to manage the truth and to promulgate a series of editorial values (ways of ‘editing’ the truth so as to make effective broader political aims). The political aims which public information thus served, was the promotion of an incontestible nationalism, where the agents of media and communication (who form the public sphere) achieve unity and a substantive contribution to an emerging meta-narrative. Through the examples of the return of Hong Kong and the conflict with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands, this article has provided an insight into the complexity of the role of information, to the extent to which the distinctions between information (fact, data and so on) and commentary (insight, perception, interpretation, argument) dissolve. This dissolution serves a broader purpose, and that purpose is where fact and (imagined) aspiration become one, and the factual basis of any given situation is one dimension of a political imaginary of national self-assertion.

End note: the Western rights discourse on information emerges from Resolution 59 of the UN General Assembly, 1946; the UNESCO 1945 Constitution, along with its annual World Press Freedom Day, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), are fundamental to our understanding to information rights as cultural rights. Of more recent significance is the framework of the World Summit of the Information Society (2001), the Brisbane Declaration on Freedom of Information: the Right to Know (2010), and the Maputo Declaration on Fostering Freedom of

Expression, Access to Information and Empowerment of People (2008) and the Dakar Declaration on Media and Good Governance (2005).

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