Exploring China’s “Maritime Consciousness”

Public Opinion on the South and East China Sea Disputes

Andrew Chubb
Acknowledgments

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Foreword

L. GORDON Flake
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There are few security issues in Asia today as sensitive or as dangerous as the ongoing maritime boundary and territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.

In addition to being influenced by competition over resources, differing views on the extent of international waters, and concerns over maintaining critical sea lines of communication, these disputes are increasingly about perceptions of national sovereignty, historical legacies, and national identity. Since such factors allow little room for compromise, the policy options available to the claimant countries are increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations and by public opinion.

The Perth USAsia Centre is proud to present this timely report based on Chinese-language survey data collected in March 2013. Based on a sample size of 1,400 interviews with residents of five major Chinese cities, this survey offers a unique picture of public opinion within China related to maritime disputes. It is our hope that this survey will be the first in a series.

In cooperation with the author and an excellent team of designers, we have attempted to interpret and visualise the survey data using lucid infographics for easy comprehension. We believe this report provides new and important insights into political attitudes in China and we hope it will better inform policymakers, academics, journalists, business strategists, and the general public as they seek to understand China’s complex foreign relations.

We would like to thank the researcher and author, Andrew Chubb for his initiative in undertaking this project and writing a detailed report based on survey data. His work has yielded valuable information on a key contemporary issue in Asia-Pacific international relations. As the survey research is repeated in future iterations, we look forward seeing what more insight there is to gain into Chinese attitudes on maritime disputes.

Executive Summary

As early as the 1980s, Chinese leaders were proclaiming the need to strengthen what they termed “maritime consciousness” (海洋意识) among the country’s traditionally land-oriented population. Since then, the task of elevating public attention on the maritime domain has been personally mandated by top leaders and written into state development plans.

Today, in academic and media circles outside China, speculation persists regarding the relationship between Chinese public opinion and the PRC’s actions in the disputed areas in recent years. Are assertive policies driven by hardline policy preferences among the public? Are the country’s leaders constrained from necessary compromises by nationalistic sentiment? How will public opinion shape China’s future relations with its neighbours and the world? Although online surveys are common, and state-owned media occasionally organize telephone polls on current events, there is a pressing need for more reliable indicators of the evolving nature of Chinese public opinion on these maritime territorial issues, in order to help move this vital discussion beyond the realm of speculation.

The China Maritime Disputes Public Opinion Survey aims to measure and track the attitudes of urban Chinese residents on the South China Sea and Diaoyu Island issues. The first wave of the survey, upon which this report is based, was carried out in March 2013 via face-to-face interviews with 1,413 adult residents of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Changsha and Chengdu. Respondents were asked first about the importance of the island disputes among China’s problems, the degree of attention they paid to each dispute, and their sources of information about the issues. They were then asked to rate the government’s performance in handling the disputes, and the appropriateness of a range of policy options. Finally, respondents were asked about their confidence in China’s military capabilities, certainty about China’s claims, and the degree of connection between these contemporary events and prominent historical narratives of shame and humiliation in Chinese national identity. Analysis of the relationships between these different attitudes, information sources and demographic factors such as age, gender, education, income and residency status, has produced the findings outlined below.

As with all survey data, the questionnaire design, sampling strategy and implementation methods need to be borne in mind when interpreting the results. Besides the usual limitations of a single poll as a snapshot of public opinion, several further caveats apply, as discussed in the introductory chapter on the survey methods. With these in mind, the results of the first China Maritime Disputes Public Opinion Survey offer a preliminary baseline of data on Mainland Chinese public opinion on these important issues.

FINDING 1: ATTENTION ON THE DIAOYU ISLANDS IS HIGHER THAN SOUTH CHINA SEA, BUT THE DIFFERENCE IS SMALL

60% of respondents reported paying a high degree of attention to the Diaoyu Islands issue, while the figure was 53% for the South China Sea issue. Higher income and education levels were both strongly associated with increased attention on both South China Sea and Diaoyu issues,
Executive Summary

suggested the Chinese public’s interest in these disputes would continue to rise with the country’s economic development. Respondents tended to see the maritime disputes as a bigger problem at present than cross-strait relations and economic growth, but much less of a problem than corruption, inequality and food and drug safety.

FINDING 2: SIGNIFICANTLY MORE SUPPORT FOR COMPROMISE, AND UN ARBITRATION, THAN MILITARY FORCE

Of the ten policy options presented to respondents, only two received less than 30% approval: the shelf disputes/joint development formulation officially espoused by the PRC government (30-31%), and directly sending in the troops (41-46%). By contrast, compromise through negotiation attracted around 57% approval, and UN arbitration more than 60%. This suggests that despite the routine appearance of belligerent commentary online, most urban Chinese residents are cautious about the prospect of military action over the islands and, in principle at least, open to the idea of a compromise.

FINDING 3: HIGHER-INCOME RESPONDENTS HOLD STRONGER OPINIONS ON THE GOVERNMENT’S PERFORMANCE

Most respondents expressed basic satisfaction with the government’s performance on the disputes, but 6.0% of respondents gave the government a “fail” for its performance on the East and South China Sea issues.

FINDING 4: ONLINE DISCOURSE DOES NOT REPRESENT PUBLIC OPINION, BUT IT MAY INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION

Coverage of the maritime disputes in China’s online media tends to be sensationalistic, and online discussion is often inflammatory and critical of the government’s alleged weakness. This appears to have some influence on public opinion, with those who get information about the issue from online sources being more likely to mark the government’s performance harshly. However, the effects are uneven. Those who hear about the disputes through the Internet sometimes are significantly more likely to be critical of the government’s performance than those who do so often. This suggests the online discourse is more influential among readers who follow the issues less closely.

FINDING 5: TELEVISION REMAINS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MEDIUM

Television is still the dominant medium for news on China’s maritime disputes, supplying 50% of the survey’s respondents with information on the topic. TV was also the strongest factor associated with positive appraisal of government performance. Given that TV continues to be one of the most tightly-controlled mass media in China, this suggests the party-state retains significant means to shape trends in public opinion on foreign affairs issues, even in the Internet era. Moreover, respondents who obtained information on the disputes from mass media TV and newspapers were more likely to support compromise and less likely to advocate the use of military force in the disputes. This appears consistent with the ruling party’s efforts to foster “rational patriotism” that is strongly supportive of China’s claims, but also of the current policy of advancing these claims through non-military means.

FINDING 6: CHINESE YOUTH MAY BE MORE NATIONALISTIC THAN THEIR PREDECESSORS, BUT THEY ARE ALSO LESS WARLIKE

Young people belonging to the “post-1990” generation were more likely to see the maritime disputes as matters of national dignity and humiliation, but they were also less likely to support compromise. This calls into question the commonly expressed concern that, under the influence of the party-state’s “patriotic education” campaign that emphasizes China’s history of humiliation and victimization, China’s young people are a dangerously nationalistic generation. Their worldview may be profoundly shaped by “patriotic education”, but this does not, at this point, lead them to disproportionately favour militaristic foreign policies.

FINDING 7: MIDDLE-CLASS RESPONDENTS WERE MOST INCLINED TO ADVOCATE THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE

Middle-class respondents were more likely to agree with the use of military force, and to oppose compromise. Consistent with some theories of middle-class politics, respondents’ views appear to change significantly once their income reaches a certain threshold of material wellbeing. As the middle class in China continues to grow, this is a trend in public opinion that, if confirmed in subsequent research, would warrant some concern from both Chinese and foreign governments.

FINDING 8: THERE WAS BROAD IDENTIFICATION WITH CHINA’S TERRITORIAL CLAIMS, BUT THIS DID NOT PRECLUDE SUPPORT FOR COMPROMISE

A majority of respondents expressed 10/10 agreement that the disputed maritime territorial features belong to China. However, those who were more certain of China’s claims were, on average, no less willing to see compromise through negotiation. This implies that while many respondents do believe China is in the right, such views do not automatically eliminate the possibility of their accepting a compromise.

FINDING 9: URBAN RESIDENCY STATUS WAS ASSOCIATED WITH GREATER CERTAINTY ABOUT CHINA’S POSITIONS.

Those with rural residency status (hukou) were significantly less likely to express complete 10/10 certainty regarding China’s territorial claims. However, this was not simply a reflection of rural hukou holders’ economic circumstances, since low-income respondents were among the most likely to express full certainty. Instead, it may reflect a sense of exclusion that many urban residents with rural hukou feel due to the denial of access to local services such as schools. If so, then reforms to the residency permit system could generate additional public support for China’s maritime claims.

FINDING 10: BOTH TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE MEDIA USERS TENDED TO VIEW THE DISPUTES THROUGH THE LENSES OF NATIONAL AND PERSONAL HUMILIATION

The Chinese public appears to be inclined to frame the country’s maritime disputes in terms of national and personal humiliation, independently of official media cues. For the party-state this may be a “double-edged sword”. On one hand, the campaign to raise awareness of China’s history of humiliation does appear to be showing real results. At the same time, however, it also suggests the Mainland public’s interpretation of future events will probably be framed in this way, whether the official media emphasize the connection or not. Still, the perception of state, national and personal dignity being at stake in the disputes was not strongly related to support for the use of military force, and had little effect on respondents’ willingness to countenance compromise.

**Executive Summary**

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Method

CHAPTER 1

The results discussed here were taken from the Beijing HorizonKey Research Consultancy’s self-sponsored survey. The survey was conducted in March 2013 via 1,413 interviews with residents of five cities:

- Beijing (286 responses)
- Shanghai (286)
- Guangzhou (290)
- Chengdu (281)
- Changsha (270)

The questions on maritime disputes were part of an omnibus survey that also included questions on wildlife protection, health reform, aged care and confidence in government. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes in total.
Method

Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage cluster sampling strategy was deployed, with a maximum of 10 interviews taken in each cluster. The number of responses required from each metropolitan municipal district was decided based on its population as a proportion of the total city population (for example, Chaoyang District, with 30% of Beijing’s urban population, accounted for 30% of the Beijing sample). A map of each district was then divided into grids containing a number of blocks equal to six times the number of sample clusters required (for example, the target of 82 interviews in Chaoyang District required 9 sample clusters, so the grid had 54 blocks). The blocks were then numbered, a starting number chosen at random, and every sixth block thereafter selected to be sampled.

Interviewers commenced from the intersection of two diagonal lines drawn across the sample block. If this point lay within a residential community then interviewers would start with that community (see Diagram 1). Otherwise, they followed a “walk right” rule, taking the first available right-hand turn into a residential community. Once inside a residential community, interviewers again followed the “walk right” rule, knocking on the door of every fifth household. Where there was no answer at a target household, interviewers would make two further attempts, including at least two attempts on one day with an intervening time not less than two hours. After contact was made with a household, the next sixth door was knocked.

Where residents of target households answered the door and agreed to cooperate (55.9%), that household’s qualified respondent was decided using a Kish Grid. In 14.8% of target households the qualified respondent either refused to be interviewed (11.7%) or terminated the interview before it was completed (3.1%). A further 10.3% of target households’ qualified respondents were filtered out due to being outside the 18-60 age range (2.4%), having lived in the area for less than one year (3.1%), taking part in a survey in the previous six months (2.5%), or having a family member or close friend working in a related industry (2.4%). Quality control checks removed 1.4% of questionnaires from the sample.

Several caveats in particular should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. First, being carried out in only five Chinese cities, the sample cannot be regarded as nationally representative. Second, it was also limited to adults who had lived in the city of their residence for at least one year. The results therefore offer no indication of the opinions of rural residents, although 30.1% of respondents were holders of rural residency status (户口). Additionally, since high-end residential communities tend to be more difficult for interviewers to access, the sample is likely to have been biased towards lower-income demographics.

Political correctness was likely an influence on some questions, especially those concerning confidence in the Chinese military’s abilities, and the correctness of China’s claims. Still, on some questions related to government policy, clear majorities expressed dissatisfaction or disagreement, indicating most respondents were willing to criticize the government.4

Successful responses were collected from a total of 29.1% of target households. All three attempts to make contact were unsuccessful for one in ten (10.0%) of the target households. One in four (26.0%) refused the interviewer’s request, and a further 8.1% of attempts at contact with target households were unsuccessful due to other reasons.1

1. Rural and outer suburban districts, such as Beijing’s Miyun County and Huairou District, were not sampled.

2. These included mistaken addresses (0.6%), properties not being residential (2.5%), objections from security and other blockages (3.5%).

3. Related industries include marketing, public opinion research, media and public relations.

4. The omnibus questionnaire format is relatively well suited to surveys on contentious issues. In this regard, interviews carried out by representatives of a commercial research firm as part of a larger survey addressing other, non-political topics may have a slight advantage compared with interviews carried out solely for academic or policy research projects.

Example - Chaoyang District

5. Sample Household

Once inside a residential community, interviewers again followed the “walk right” rule, knocking on the door of every fifth household.

4. “Walk Right” Rule

Interviewers took the first available right-hand turn into a residential community.

3. Sample Block

Intersection of two diagonal lines drawn across the sample block. If this point lay within a residential community then interviewers would start with that community.

2. District - Chaoyang

Chaoyang district target of 82 interviews required 9 sample clusters, so a grid containing 36 blocks was drawn over a map of the district. Blocks were numbered, a starting number generated at random, and every sixth block was then chosen to be sampled.

1. City - Beijing

Six urban districts sampled. Chaoyang District, with 30% of Beijing’s population, accounted for 30% of the Beijing sample.

Target Households

29.1% of target households produced successful responses.

10% of target households were not successfully contacted after three attempts.

1 in 4 target households refused the interviewers request.

8.1% of requests were unsuccessful due to other reasons.
Although the interviews were conducted with residents of large cities, around 30% of respondents reported holding a country resident’s permit—reflecting the known phenomenon of significant “floating populations” of China’s cities.

University graduates made up 15.9% of respondents and they considered their own income to be “very low”, while only 3.8% considered themselves to be upper-middle income or above.

15.9% of respondents said they considered their own income to be “very low”, while only 3.8% considered themselves to be upper-middle income or above.

7.6% of respondents reported a total monthly household income of ¥5,000 or less. For roughly the same percentage, that figure was ¥10,000 or more.

8.9% of the sample. The overwhelming majority of respondents, or 97.3%, had received at least a junior high school education.

8.6% of respondents were aged 23 years old or less, making them part of the post-1990 generation; 52.8% were 24-34 years old, meaning they were born in 1978 or after. Thus, a total of 41.4% were born in China’s reform era.
Respondents were asked whether, and how often, they obtained information on maritime territorial disputes through seven different traditional and online media sources: print publications, television, radio, online news portals, discussion forums, Weibo (microblog) and Weixin (WeChat). For each medium, respondents chose from:

- Never (从不)
- Sometimes (偶尔)
- Often (经常)

Note that respondents were not asked how often they used each of these media, but how often they obtained information on the South China Sea and Diaoyu disputes that way. Where respondents answered "sometimes" or "often", interviewers asked them to name a specific example.

1 Wording: "Now I would like to understand which media you use to get information about maritime territorial issues (such as the Diaoyu Islands or South China Sea issue). First, may I ask how often do you get information on maritime territorial issues from [ ] if you want to learn more about these maritime territorial issues?"
Overall, 63.7% named an example of a specific print publication in which they read about the disputes. When asked to give an example, only 11 respondents (0.8%) named the Global Times, a nationalistic state-run tabloid whose editorials and commentary on China’s foreign relations often attract overseas attention. This is broadly consistent with the paper’s estimated circulation of around 2 million.

More than 92% or 1271 out of 1413 respondents said they get information about China’s maritime disputes from TV. Radio was the least popular of the traditional media, with 7.1% or 100 out of 1413 respondents getting relevant information this way.

In total, 61.2% of respondents said they hear about the disputes through television ‘often’ (865 out of 1413).

More than 1/3 of all respondents (604 out of 1413) said they accessed information about these issues through television ‘often’ (865 out of 1413). More than half of those (23.3%) reported hearing about the disputes through online media ‘often’.

The Internet is already a significant source of information on maritime disputes in China. Just under half, or 46.3% of respondents said they get information on the South China Sea or Diaoyu Islands issues from online news portals ‘often’. Overall, more than 42% of respondents said they heard about the disputes from news portals.

Residents of GUANGZHOU & BEIJING were more likely to use the Internet to learn about maritime territorial disputes.
Respondents were presented with a list of nine issues, and asked to nominate the five they believed to be the most important issues facing China:1

- Rich-poor disparity (贫富分化)
- Corruption (贪污腐败)
- Legal reforms (法制建设与司法改革)
- Social practices and moral issues (社会风气和道德问题)
- Continued economic development (经济的持续发展)
- Island sovereignty disputes with neighbouring countries (与周边国家的岛屿主权问题)
- Cross-straits unification (海峡两岸统一)
- Food and drug safety (食品药品安全)
- Environmental pollution (环境污染)

The results offer an indication of which issues Chinese urban residents perceive as the major problems facing the country at present.

1 Wording: "Please tell me which of the following you believe to be the most important problems facing China.

(翻译：请告诉我，您认为下列哪些问题是中国面临的主要问题。

(1) 富贫差距
(2) 贪污腐败
(3) 法制建设与司法改革
(4) 社会风气和道德问题
(5) 经济的持续发展
(6) 与周边国家的岛屿主权问题
(7) 海峡两岸统一
(8) 食品药品安全
(9) 环境污染)
China’s problems - Island disputes in context

On the other hand, corruption (84.3%), rich-poor disparity (79.7%), and food & drug safety (71.9%) easily outranked the issue of sovereignty over disputed islands in the South and East China Sea. Social practices and moral issues (53.1%), and environmental pollution (52.9%) were also chosen more often by respondents, though the difference was within the approximately 2.5% margin of error.

The results indicate what Chinese urban residents see as the major problems currently facing their country. Thus, the result of “Continued economic development” (50.3%) and “Cross-strait unification” (22.9%) as the two least-selected options should not be interpreted to mean respondents consider these issues unimportant. Rather, it reflects respondents’ belief that current trends in these areas are generally positive.

DISCUSSION

It is not surprising that lower-income people indicate less concern for distant international issues like maritime disputes. This is arguably a positive sign for public opinion’s role in the disputes, since it suggests that those who express the most concern about the issue are also those who would have the most to lose from conflict – namely, middle-class and wealthy people.

Higher-income people also tend to be better educated and may therefore be inclined to react to crisis situations more rationally. Anecdotal evidence1 suggests many participants in the 2012 anti-Japanese riots were migrant workers, at least some of whom were usually disengaged from the Diaoyu issue itself.

As such, these results appear to support the hypothesis that the violence was less a result of out-of-control nationalist fervour among the Chinese population than the venting of disillusionment and opportunistic criminal behaviour.2


Attention

CHAPTER 4

This question asked respondents to indicate the degree of attention they pay to the South China Sea dispute, and the Diaoyu Islands dispute, respectively, on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (no attention, 从不关注) to 5 (extremely close attention 非常关注).1

1 Wording: "Please tell me what degree of attention you pay to the Sino-Japanese Diaoyu Islands issue. 请问您对中日钓鱼岛问题的关注程度如何？" In recent years, the South China Sea disputes between China and countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam including over Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands have also become more intense. Please tell me the degree of attention you pay to the South China Sea dispute 最近一年来，我国与菲律宾、越南等国家的南海争端问题频发，尤其是黄岩岛和南沙群岛问题比以往更加激烈。请问，您对南海争端的关注程度如何？"
Respondents reported paying almost as much attention to the South China Sea issue as to Diaoyu Islands. This result contrasts with the expectations of some analysts, who have claimed that the South China Sea is not an issue many Chinese people pay attention to.

**EDUCATION**

Increased education levels were associated with higher attention on the two disputes. There was a strong positive relationship between income and attention on both issues.

**INCOME**

People with higher incomes pay more attention to both disputes. The chart above illustrates how attention on the disputes rises with age until middle age, and then starts to fall back. The same pattern is visible for both Diaoyu and South China Sea issues. In other words, younger and older people appear to pay the least attention.

**GENDER**

Men reported paying more attention to the maritime territorial issues than women. More than 18% of women said they paid little or no attention to the Diaoyu issue, and more than 23% said the same for the South China Sea. For men, in contrast, those percentages were just 5.6% and 8.1% respectively.

**HOMETOWN**

The self-reported attention level of those respondents raised in villages was, on average, almost equal with their city-born counterparts, as illustrated above.

Those who obtain information about the disputes through Internet sources pay much more attention than those who don’t.
Many foreign observers and regional governments consider China’s policy on the South and East China Sea disputes to have shifted in an assertive direction in recent years. Yet within China’s borders, over the same time period, the Chinese government has been routinely criticized for its alleged “weakness” on these maritime issues. Media and online comment are not reliable indicators of public opinion, and previous published surveys have not included questions on the government’s handling of these maritime disputes. To get a basic sense of where the urban general public stands on this question, respondents were asked to rate the Chinese government’s performance on each of the maritime disputes on a six-point Likert Scale.1

The scales were labelled to resemble the marking system in Chinese schools:

- 0–29/100 meaning “terrible 非常差” (1 on the scale)
- 30–59/100 “fail 不及格” (2)
- 60–69 “pass 及格” (3)
- 70–79/100 “average 中” (4)
- 80–89 “good 良” (5)
- 90–100 “outstanding 优” (6)

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Many respondents said they were satisfied, though not impressed, with the government's performance on the two issues.

The general appraisal of government performance as satisfactory contrasts with much of the sentiment commonly found on Internet comment platforms.

Most respondents were less impressed with the government's performance than women. On the Diaoyu issue, male and female respondents gave the government 3.67 and 3.74 on the six-point scale respectively. The gap was slightly narrower on the South China Sea issue.

More educated respondents tended to be slightly more critical of the government's performance on average, as shown in the red sections of the chart on the right.

6.5% of respondents with household incomes above ¥10,000 per month were unable to decide on a score, compared to almost 25% of those on less than ¥3,000.

Guangzhou and Changsha respondents were the least satisfied, on average. Beijing and Shanghai were the only cities where the government's performance in handling the Diaoyu issue was rated higher than on the South China Sea.

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As the strong upward trend shown in the chart above shows, the more attention people reported paying to the maritime issues, the more positive their assessment of the government’s performance was likely to be, for both the South China Sea and Diaoyu Islands disputes, as the chart above shows. In multiple regressions, TV was consistently the strongest predictor of the government’s performance score.

Since TV news remains an almost exclusively state-run industry in China, this is one indication of the ongoing strength of the PRC authorities’ ability to shape domestic discourse on sensitive foreign policy questions, even in the Internet era.

The government performance on these maritime issues was most closely correlated with the attention people reported paying to the disputes via online information sources. As the downward slope of the left-hand chart shows that those who heard about the issues through the Internet sometimes

Government performance - Attention & media sources

ATTENTION

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Government performance - Dissatisfaction

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In contrast with much visible online commentary, only a small minority of interviewees expressed strong dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of China’s maritime disputes. However, one element that appears common to both online and offline opinion is the rationale for such complaints. When asked why they rated the government’s performance so poorly, almost every dissatisfied interviewee responded that its policy had been insufficiently tough. Not one expressed the view that China’s recent actions in the disputed areas had been overly hardline or counterproductive. On the other hand, among satisfied respondents who rated the government’s performance highly, some cited the leadership’s determination to uphold and defend China’s claims, but many others praised its efforts to avoid conflict and maintain regional peace and stability.

The more people get their information from television, the more positive their assessment of the government’s performance was likely to be, for both the South China Sea and Diaoyu Islands disputes, as

This puzzling pattern mirrors one noted in 1960s research on mass media effects, which found political cues delivered by television had little effect on citizens with either very low or very high levels of engagement with the issues, and much more influence on moderately-engaged groups in between.

This may explain why those who read about the disputes online sometimes have the lowest dissatisfaction rates, while those who heard about the issues through the Internet sometimes have the lowest satisfaction rates, as shown in the chart above.
Respondents were presented with a “menu” of policy options, and asked whether they believe each is, or is not, a suitable method for handling the South China Sea and Diaoyu Islands disputes respectively. No conditions were attached specifying the circumstances in which each policy would be applicable, so the responses should be interpreted as indications of public support for each policy as a matter of general principle.¹

¹ Wording: "Regarding the following approaches, do you believe they are suitable for the Chinese government to use in handling the Diaoyu Islands issue?" "Now I would like you to consider again, do you believe these approaches are suitable for the Chinese government to use in handling the South China Sea disputes with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam including over Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly islands?"
Policy

OVERVIEW

As the stacks opposite indicate, most of the policy options received majority support: the only two exceptions were “shelve disputes and pursue joint development,” and “send in the troops.”

01. INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY
02. MAKE USE OF POPULAR ACTIVISM
03. ECONOMIC SANCTIONS
04. MASS DISPLAYS OF DISSATISFACTION
05. DIPLOMATIC MEASURES
06. UN ARBITRATION
07. COMPROMISE THROUGH NEGOTIATION
08. BE CAUTIOUS, BIDE TIME
09. SEND IN THE TROOPS
10. SHELVE DISPUTES AND PURSUE JOINT DEVELOPMENT

WORDING

“Strengthening externally-directed propaganda”
“加强对外宣传”

“Strongly supporting the Bandiao (Defend Diaoyu) activities, and making full use of popular forces such as fisherfolk”
“大力支持保钓运动，充分利用民间力量（如渔民）”

“Enacting economic sanctions against relevant countries”
“对相关国家进行经济制裁”

“Guiding domestic public opinion, encouraging the masses to display their dissatisfaction towards the disputant countries”
“引导国内舆论，鼓励国内民众对争端国表示不满”

“Diplomatic measures such as canceling official visits, and reducing cooperative projects”
“取消官方访问、减少合作项目等外交手段”

“Submitting [the dispute] to United Nations arbitration”
“提请联合国仲裁”

“Negotiating to reach a compromise”
“通过谈判，达成妥协”

“Speaking and acting cautiously, keeping a low profile and waiting until the time is right”
“谨言慎行，韬光养晦，耐心等待合适的时机”

“Shelving disputes and jointly developing resources”
“搁置争议，共同开发资源”
five key points emerge from the direct comparison of support levels for the ten different policy approaches shown on the previous page.

First, respondents were willing to express disapproval of the policy status quo. The large majorities who indicated that shelf disputes dispute disputes of Chinese opinion. In principle, solid public opinion is uncompromising (or "nationalist"), media, as well as PRC officials, often remark that Mainland UN arbitration.

Third, solid majorities support compromise, and were taken at times of high tension. only two policies failed to receive majority approval, one was the official shelf disputes policy, the other was send in the troops. As noted above, no conditions were attached to the prospective implementation of each policy, so the relatively low approval of send in the troops suggests most urban Chinese residents do not see this as a suitable policy approach as a matter of general principle. Although this finding may be surprising given the frequent advocacy of similar approaches in online discussions, it is in fact consistent with the findings of previous Chinese surveys on the Diaoyu disputes, which were taken at times of high tension.

Second, the Chinese public appears to be less war-hungry on these disputes than commonly assumed. Only two policies failed to receive majority approval, one was the official shelf disputes policy, the other was send in the troops. As noted above, no conditions were attached to the prospective implementation of each policy, so the relatively low approval of send in the troops suggests most urban Chinese residents do not see this as a suitable policy approach as a matter of general principle. Although this finding may be surprising given the frequent advocacy of similar approaches in online discussions, it is in fact consistent with the findings of previous Chinese surveys on the Diaoyu disputes, which were taken at times of high tension.

Third, solid majorities support compromise, and UN arbitration. Although the Chinese and international media, as well as PRC officials, often remark that Mainland public opinion is uncompromising (or "nationalist"), these results suggest this conclusion is based on a partial understanding of Chinese opinion. In principle, solid public majorities support the idea of reaching a compromise through negotiation, and submitting the disputes to UN arbitration. The survey was taken in April 2013, around three months after the Philippines initiated UN arbitration proceedings, which the Chinese government has strongly rejected. At that time the Philippines’ arbitration case had not been widely publicized, so the results of the next wave of the survey will offer an indication of the extent to which the Chinese government’s position on this matter has influenced domestic public opinion.

Fourth, popular participation is . . . popular. The very high levels of support for make use of popular action and mass displays of dissatisfaction suggest that many among the Chinese public may be keen to play a role in these disputes. The latter may suggest a kind of tacit understanding between the government and population regarding the utility of displays of popular nationalism in boosting China’s bargaining position by demonstrating resolve in international disputes.

Fifth, even “nationalist” public opinion may be surprisingly rational. The only policy where the rate of approval differed between the Diaoyu and South China Sea issues was send in the troops. Although Japan is the subject of much deeper historical resentment than either Vietnam or the Philippines, a significantly lower percentage of respondents indicated approval of the use military force in the Diaoyu dispute compared to the South China Sea. If public attitudes on the Mainland were dominated by irrational sentiments such as the desire to avenge Japan’s invasion of China during World War II, the opposite result could be expected: responses should have been more favourable to military action risking war with Japan. This suggests rational, interest-based and calculative tendencies may exist, even among citizens who advocate military action on maritime disputes.

Education showed mixed results in relation to advocacy of military action and compromise.

Those with post-secondary diploma education were the most likely to advocate military action on both disputes, with 50–54% expressing approval of send in the troops.

University graduates were less likely to support such a policy, and, on the South China Sea issue, significantly more likely to oppose it,
The more attention respondents paid, the more likely they were to approve of the use of military force, as the generally lengthening blue bars of the chart at the top show. Not surprisingly, those who paid the least attention tended to be unsure whether sending in the troops would be a good idea. It is worth noting, however, that opposition to the military approach was more or less constant across different attention levels, as the pink-coloured bars indicate.

Regarding the option of compromise through negotiation, those who reported paying very close attention were also the most likely to oppose compromise.

Use of Internet sources was weakly associated with both less support for, and more disapproval of, the use of military force risking war in the South China Sea. On the Diaoyu issue, however, the most support for sending in the troops came from more occasional users of online sources, though the difference was not statistically significant.

State-run media sources appear to remain a more powerful influence on public opinion on these issues than the Internet. The charts above consistently indicate that the more respondents obtained information on the disputes from either television or newspapers, the more likely they were to favour compromise and the less likely they were to approve of sending in the troops. The result suggests that, at least in their routine coverage (as opposed to during major crises), PRC state media tend to present these issues to domestic audiences in such a way that does not preclude the possibility of compromise, and either directly or indirectly affirms the undesirability of military conflict.

This is understandable both in terms of the longstanding official policy of seeking joint resource development in at least some disputed areas, and the “rational patriotism” the Party-state’s propaganda organs have attempted to cultivate among the public in recent years.
As noted above, calls for the use of military force in the East and South China Sea maritime disputes are extremely common on the Mainland Chinese Internet. In order to further investigate the public’s views on the possible use of military force in the maritime disputes, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements designed to gauge:¹

- Confidence in the PLA’s ability to take the disputed islands;
- Perceptions of the impact of US intervention if military force was used;
- Belief that the use of military force would be contrary to China’s interests; and
- Support for measured responses to provocations by rival claimant states.

¹ Wording: “I will now read some viewpoints regarding the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea issues; you may freely express whether or not you agree with these viewpoints.”
Confidence

OVERVIEW

CONFIDENCE IN PLA ABILITY
Respondents overwhelmingly expressed confidence in the PLA's ability to successfully “re-take” the disputed islands. Just over 87% agreed the Chinese military already had the capability to take the Diaoyu Islands, while more than 65% stated their agreement with that proposition in relation to the South China Sea, where the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia occupy all but one of the genuine islands of the Spratly archipelago.

When the prospect of US military involvement was raised, around 13% of respondents changed their views of China’s chances for success. For the Diaoyu Islands, 74% agreed that China would prevail despite any US intervention, while more than 85% stated their agreement with that proposition in relation to the South China Sea. Almost all the changes were from “agree” to “disagree”, suggesting these respondents did feel they had a sufficient confidence in China's ability to succeed.

A majority of respondents also affirmed that China should prioritize the maintenance of its external relations despite provocations from rivals. More than half (53.6%) agreed that the Chinese government should “prioritize safeguarding China’s international relations” even if Japan adopted a provocative stance on the Diaoyu issue, and 50.7% said this principle should apply even if countries like the Philippines and Vietnam behaved provocatively in the South China Sea.

“RATIONAL NATIONALISM”?
These results may contain a further sign of broad-based “rational nationalism” in Chinese public opinion on these issues. Not only did a majority agree that using military force would not be in China’s interests, very few respondents changed their mind when the prospect of provocations by rival claimants was added to the proposition. On the South China Sea, compared to the original 54% who agreed that war wouldn’t be in China’s interests, only 3.3% indicated that provocations by the Philippines or Vietnam would change their view of the situation; on the Diaoyu issue the difference was only 1.9%.

Mainstream Chinese public opinion on these issues therefore appears to be significantly interest-based rather than emotional. A frequent refrain of online commenters, and some struggling low-income workers, is that they would happily become “cannon-fodder” in a war in the South or East China Sea. However, these results suggest the public in general may be willing to consider the circumstances and likely consequences of any major action on these issues. Although it may be difficult to predict the public mood in a crisis situation, it does suggest that many Chinese citizens would be amenable to national-interest based arguments against war, should the CCP decide to de-escalate tensions.

It should be noted that the nature of this question means the results are likely to contain a degree of political correctness. On the one hand, because they explicitly addressed military-related issues, some respondents may have felt an obligation to express confidence in the Chinese military’s capabilities, so the numbers are likely to be overstated. On the other hand, the significant number of respondents who were willing to change their answer when the prospect of US intervention was raised is likely to be understated, for the same reasons.

MILITARY FORCE AND NATIONAL INTEREST

Most respondents also agreed that it was not in China’s interests for military force to be used in the maritime disputes. Despite their presumed belief in China’s ability to retake the islands occupied by rival countries, a majority of respondents agreed that using military force would not be in accordance with China’s national interest. In the case of the South China Sea dispute the figure was 54%, and on the Diaoyu Islands, 55.5%.

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Since these questions concern hypothetical scenarios, some respondents may have not previously felt an opinion on such an issue, meaning their “opinions” were produced through the process of being interviewed. These effects were mitigated to the extent possible by presenting “I don’t know” and “no answer” response options, each of which attracted significant majorities of responses, on average around 10%.


Interviewers read the following statements and asked respondents, “do you agree?”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DIAOYU ISLANDS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CONFIDENCE IN PLA ABILITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The Chinese military already possesses the ability to successfully take back the Diaoyu Islands”</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>MILITARY FORCE AND NATIONAL INTEREST</td>
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<td>“Using military force on the Diaoyu Islands issue would not be in China’s national interest”</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOUTH CHINA SEA</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONFIDENCE IN PLA ABILITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The Chinese military already possesses the ability to successfully take back the South China Sea Islands occupied by the Philippines, Vietnam, etc.”</td>
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4 See for example, “War is good, it reshuffles the cards”, Qiu Zhenhai’s taxi ride’, South Sea Conversations, April 20, 2014. http://southseaconversations.wordpress.com/2014/04/20/war-is-good-it-reshuffles-the-cards-qiu-zhenhai-taxi-ride/
China’s expansive maritime claims are frequently challenged in international public discourse, but how certain is the Mainland public that they are correct? In order to explore this question, respondents were read a series of five statements regarding the maritime disputes, designed in general to closely resemble the official positions of the Chinese government.

They were asked to indicate their level of identification with each statement, on a scale of 1 to 10. The five statements were:

1. “The Diaoyu Islands belong to China”
2. “All of the Nansha (Spratly) Islands belong to China”
3. “Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) belongs to China”
4. “The Paracel (Xisha) Islands belong to China”
5. “The entire maritime area within the nine dash line on our maps is China’s territorial waters”

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1. Wording “To what degree do you agree with the following statements?” 下面一 些说法，您在多大程度上认同？
Predictably, there was broad agreement with China’s claims.

A majority of respondents expressed 10/10 agreement with the propositions that the disputed maritime territorial features – Diaoyu, Spratly and Paracel Islands, and Scarborough Shoal – belong to China. These responses mirror the party-state’s official positions.

On the other hand, only a minority, 44.2%, expressed full certainty that all of the four disputed maritime territories belong to China.1

1 The fifth statement, regarding the nine-dash line as a claim to territorial waters, was excluded because it does not correspond to an official government claim.

“The Nansha (Spratly) Islands belong to China…”

“The Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) belongs to China…”

“The Paracel (Xisha) Islands belong to China…”

“The entire maritime area with the nine-dash line on our maps is China’s territorial waters…”

9.2

9.2

9.2

9.1
INTERPRETING THE NINE-DASH LINE

As noted, most respondents indicated a firm belief that all the waters inside the controversial nine-dash line belong to China. This supports anecdotal evidence of a perception among the Mainland public that the nine-dash line represents China’s territorial waters.1

The PRC government has not specified the precise meaning of the line, which was included in an official diplomatic document for the first time in 2009, but it is highly unlikely to reflect China’s claimed territorial waters. It more likely represents China’s claim to sovereignty over all the territorial features enclosed by the line, as well as economic rights in the area. Many regional countries, including those with relatively conciliatory policies towards China in these disputes, such as Indonesia, have called on the PRC to clarify the meaning of the line. This result suggests that the party-state would need to mount a strong domestic propaganda campaign before issuing any such clarification, or else be widely perceived as backing down.

CERTAINTY AND MILITARY FORCE

Much less surprisingly, respondents who attach the most importance to maritime disputes among China’s problems, as well as those with pro-war policy preferences, were the most convinced about China’s claims. Around 69% of those who expressed absolutely certainty about China’s claims also considered island sovereignty issues with neighboring countries to be one of China’s most pressing issues (see Chapter 3), compared to 51% of all respondents.

Those who agreed entirely with all of China’s maritime territorial claims were nearly twice as likely to agree with deploying military force as a policy option. Just over 47% agreed with sending in the troops as a suitable policy approach on both maritime disputes, compared to only 26.3% of those who expressed less than 10/10 certainty regarding at least one of China’s claims.

CERTAINTY AND COMPROMISE

Significantly, respondents who were more certain of China’s claims were no less willing, on average, to see the government pursue compromise through negotiation. There was no negative relationship between certainty and approval of the compromise through negotiation policy approach discussed in Chapter 6. Indeed, on the South China Sea issue there was a mild positive association between 10/10 certainty and support for the idea of compromise. Thus, while most respondents strongly believe that China is in the right, this does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of the public accepting some form of compromise, should the government choose to pursue it.

4 in 10 respondents in Chengdu indicated full identification with the official claim. This could be a result of the islands’ geographical remoteness from the coast, and the relative unimportance of the maritime economy there. It could also perhaps be connected with the lower levels of economic development in China’s western regions.

Alternatively, it could also possibly reflect a reduced concern with political correctness due to the relatively high distance between Chengdu and the central authorities in Beijing.

Respondents holding rural hukou were significantly less likely to express complete certainty regarding China’s maritime claims. This difference cannot be accounted for by economic factors: low-income respondents were actually among the most likely to express complete certainty.

Bearing in mind that all respondents were long-term residents of major cities, the most likely explanation may be related to the sense of exclusion that urban residents with rural hukou often feel due to the denial of access to local services such as schools. If so, then reforms to the hukou system may help generate additional public support for China’s maritime claims.

We saw in Chapter 5 that rural hukou holders were much less likely to be critical of the government’s performance than their officially urban counterparts. This evidence suggests that, rather than suggesting they are more satisfied with the government’s handling of the disputes, they may simply be more indifferent to China’s maritime issues.

A potentially significant finding was that urban residency status was closely related to certainty about China’s positions.

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CERTAINTY - Demographic & geographic factors

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Respondents holding rural hukou were significantly less likely to express complete certainty regarding China’s maritime claims. This difference cannot be accounted for by economic factors: low-income respondents were actually among the most likely to express complete certainty.

Bearing in mind that all respondents were long-term residents of major cities, the most likely explanation may be related to the sense of exclusion that urban residents with rural hukou often feel due to the denial of access to local services such as schools. If so, then reforms to the hukou system may help generate additional public support for China’s maritime claims.

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CERTAINTY - Overview

CERTAINTY - Demographic & geographic factors

URBAN VS. RURAL

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On average, the more attention respondents reported paying to the disputes, the more certainty they expressed regarding China’s claims.

However, this relationship between attention and certainty was multifaceted. On the one hand, as attention increased, 10/10 certainty tended to decrease; those who said they paid minimal attention were the most likely express total agreement with each of China’s territorial claims (see the dark blue sections of the charts below). On the other hand, as attention increased, uncertainty also generally decreased (pink sections). The Diaoyu dispute saw one important exception to this trend: highly attentive respondents also expressed strong identification with China’s claims.
Certainty - Media sources

For all five questions, those who reported hearing about the disputes via Internet sources sometimes were the most likely to be certain of China’s claims (10/10), and the least likely to be uncertain (8/10 or less).

The effect was broadly consistent not only across the various maritime disputes, as the charts above show, but also across different online kinds of media, especially news portals and forums.

Classic models of the influence of media on political attitudes hold that the effects are concentrated on those with moderate levels of interest and engagement with the issue.1 If the same logic applies to the Chinese Internet, the pattern observed here suggests that online media tend to promote not only criticism of the government’s performance (see Chapter 5), but also support for China’s official positions.

This may help explain why the Chinese government is usually content to allow online discourse on foreign policy issues to proceed with relatively minimal interference from censors. Mainstream online news and commentary, it seems, can be trusted to uphold the correctness of China’s claims.

Compared to the other Internet sources discussed opposite, a subtly different trend can be glimpsed among those who get relevant information from Weibo (microblogs). As the dark blue segments of the charts above show, people who frequently obtain information on the maritime disputes via Weibo are less likely to express 10/10 agreement with China’s positions. This could reflect the relatively user-driven discourse, and the prominence of liberal intellectuals that Weibo has been known for.

Studies of Chinese nationalism have argued the Chinese public’s views of foreign policy issues in the present are significantly shaped by historical memories of the country’s victimization at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists.

Scholars have drawn attention to state-led campaigns from the 1990s onwards, aimed at building national unity and regime legitimacy by invoking narratives of national trauma during the “Century of Humiliation” of the Chinese state (百年国耻), before the Communist Party took power in 1949. Many have noted that the success of these campaigns has depended to a large extent on tapping into genuine historical memories. In order to test the extent to which these narratives frame the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas among the urban public in China today, respondents were read a series of statements and asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed, “somewhat” or “strongly”.

The statements were designed to gauge the extent to which members of the urban public view the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea disputes as matters of state, national, and personal dignity and humiliation.1

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1 Wording “Regarding the following statements, may I ask whether or not you agree?” 上面一些说法, 请问您是否同意?”
**Identity - Overall**

**DIAOYU ISLANDS**

Japan’s presence in and around the Diaoyu Islands…

a. ... affects the dignity of the Chinese government;

b. ... is a continuation of the “Century of Shame”;

c. ... affects the dignity of the Chinese nation [people];

d. ... is a continuation of the Chinese nation’s suffering of humiliation

e. ... affects my personal dignity;

f. ... makes me feel humiliation and a loss of face.

**SOUTH CHINA SEA**

The occupation of some islands in the South China Sea by countries such as the Philippines & Vietnam...

a. ... affects the dignity of the Chinese government;

b. ... is a continuation of the “Century of Shame”;

c. ... affects the dignity of the Chinese nation [people];

d. ... is a continuation of the Chinese nation’s suffering of humiliation

e. ... affects my personal dignity;

f. ... makes me feel humiliation and a loss of face.

**OVERVIEW**

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that both island disputes were matters of state and national dignity. More than 83% of respondents agreed that Japan’s presence in the Diaoyu Islands constituted a continuation of the “Century of Humiliation” during which the relative weakness of the Chinese state is seen to have resulted in invasions by Western and Japanese imperialists. Slightly lower percentages (80-85%) agreed that the dispute represented the continuation of the humiliation of the Chinese nation (as opposed to the state), but the strength of agreement was higher, as the relatively long green bars for a.c. and 1.d. in the graphs above show.

The South China Sea is also widely seen as a matter of national humiliation. More than 83% agreed, or strongly agreed, that Vietnam and the Philippines’ presence in the Spratly Islands constitutes a continuation of the “Century of Humiliation”. To outsiders, it may appear curious that the Philippines and Vietnam’s resistance to China’s claims would constitute a continuation of China’s victimization at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists. Yet these results suggest this is precisely how many members of the Chinese urban public view the South China Sea issue. Perceptions of the United States as inciting Southeast Asian countries to occupy these islands are may explain part of this result, though this requires further investigation.

A majority of respondents also said they felt personally humiliated by the status quo in the disputes. Around 60% agreed (around 12% strongly) that China’s rivals’ presence in the disputed areas made them feel a personal loss of face. However, this proposition was much more controversial, with between 32% and 35% of respondents disagreeing.

This finding supports the idea that these disputes are matters of personal and national face. These issues have been touted as important factors in Chinese foreign policy in recent years. The Diaoyu and South China Sea issues could therefore make excellent “most likely” case studies with which to test such theories.

Men tended to link the disputes more strongly to the ideas about the dignity of the state and nation. However, women and men were almost equally likely to view the maritime disputes as matters of personal dignity.

Both traditional and online media were associated with viewing the disputes through the lenses of both national and personal dignity. This is significant because it suggests that the Chinese public is inclined to frame the maritime disputes in the kinds of terms independently of official media cues. For the party-state this may be a “double-edged sword”. The party’s campaign to raise awareness of China’s history of humiliation does appear to be showing real results. At the same time, however, the Mainland public’s interpretation of future events will likely be framed in this way, whether the official media emphasis this or not.

On the other hand, the implications of this should not be overstated. The sense of state, national and personal dignity being at stake was not strongly related to advocacy of the use of military force, and had little effect on respondents’ willingness to countenance compromise on either dispute. These opinions appear to be influenced more strongly by television, the Internet, and low or high income.

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1. Wording - Diaoyu Islands
   a. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，影响到中国国家的荣誉"
   b. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，影响到中国国家的荣誉"
   c. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，影响到中国人民的尊严"
   d. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，影响到中国人民的尊严"
   e. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，使我个人感到很丢脸、没面子"
   f. "日本在钓鱼岛及其附近海域的存在，使我个人感到很丢脸、没面子"

2. Wording - South China Sea
   a. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到中华民族的尊严"
   b. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到中华民族的尊严"
   c. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到中华民族的尊严"
   d. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到中华民族的尊严"
   e. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到我个人的尊严"
   f. "菲律宾、越南等国对南海一些岛屿的占领，影响到我个人的尊严"
Identity - Demographic & geographic factors

AGE

Young people born after 1990 were clearly more inclined to frame the Diaoyu Islands dispute through the narratives of the state and nation’s humiliation. Results were mixed on the South China Sea question, with more young people agreeing strongly (the dark blue sections) but less agreeing overall. Young respondents were less inclined to indicate a strong sense of personal humiliation from the state of the maritime disputes, though they were not more likely to disagree with this proposition. These inconsistent results may be connected with, on the one hand, party-state success in elevating historical memories through the education system, while on the other hand, young people’s strong sense of individualism, having grown up in the context of an expanding market economy.

DIAOYU ISLANDS

Diaoyu situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face

SOUTH CHINA SEA

South China Sea situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face

INCOME

Middle class respondents were more likely to agree that the disputes are a matter of dignity. However, unlike the post-1990 generation, respondents from this higher-income group were more likely to agree strongly with the proposition that the status quo in the island disputes is an issue of personal face and humiliation, as well as that of the government and the nation.

DIAOYU ISLANDS

Diaoyu situation as . . .
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SOUTH CHINA SEA

South China Sea situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
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KEY:
- = AGREE STRONGLY
- = AGREE SOMEWHAT
- = DISAGREE SOMEWHAT
- = DISAGREE STRONGLY

1 BLOCK = 10%
Identity - Demographic & geographic factors

Unlike income, which showed no clear pattern below the middle-class level, a consistent pattern appears across all five education levels. Increased education was associated with both higher rates of overall agreement, and strong agreement, with the propositions that China’s maritime disputes are matters of state and national dignity.

DIAOYU ISLANDS

Diaoyu Islands situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face

The pattern was reproduced across both the Diaoyu and South China Sea disputes, as seen in the increasing length of the bars on the blue side of charts 1 and 2 (overall agreement), and the widening dark blue segments (strong agreement). However, there was no clear relationship between education and perception of the disputes as matters of personal dignity.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

South China Sea situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face
Identity – Attention

ATTENTION LEVELS

The more attention respondents reported paying, the more they tended to perceive the disputes as matters of state, national and personal dignity. This general pattern was strong for both the Diaoyu and South China Sea disputes, as indicated in the charts below and opposite.

For both disputes, the long red bars at the bottom of chart 3 indicate the especially strong disagreement among respondents who pay little or no attention, when asked whether the Diaoyu and South China Sea constitute matters of personal dignity.

Diaoyu Islands situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face

South China Sea situation as . . .
(1) an extension of the Chinese state’s “Century of Shame”
(2) a continuation of Chinese nation’s humiliation
(3) a matter of personal humiliation and face
The results of the first China Maritime Disputes Public Opinion Survey discussed in this report offer a preliminary baseline of data on Mainland Chinese public opinion on these important issues. As noted above, the results should be interpreted with caution, bearing in mind the limitations of a single poll as a snapshot of public opinion, and the questionnaire design and methodology. The survey’s most useful findings will emerge from comparisons of these results with data gathered in future iterations, which will allow the identification and tracking of trends in public opinion across time. The next wave of the survey is due to commence in early 2015, and several contemporary developments will be worth watching.1

One such question is whether the already-small difference between public attention levels on the Diaoyu and South China Sea issues may close further. The timing of the survey probably favoured higher public attention levels on the Diaoyu issue. In March 2013, only six months had passed since the September, 2012 Diaoyu crisis began, and a succession of follow-up incidents had ensured the issue remained in Chinese media headlines up to that point. In contrast, the South China Sea issue had been relatively quiet for nearly a year, since the end of the Scarborough Shoal standoff. When the second survey is taken, the situation will have been to some extent reversed, with the Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis having greatly elevated tensions in the South China Sea, while the Diaoyu Islands issue has been kept on a relatively low simmer for several months. It is possible the already-small gap in public attention levels on the two issues may narrow further.

It will also be intriguing to see whether the strong support for UN arbitration will be reproduced in the next iteration. The March 2013 survey was carried out three months after the Philippines initiated UN arbitration proceedings against the PRC. Up to that time the Philippines’ case had still not been widely publicized in the PRC media. Since then, however, the party-state has made repeated strong rejections of the Philippines’ action, refraining the legitimacy of the tribunal in the state media. The results of the next wave of the survey will offer an indication of the extent to which the Chinese government’s position on this matter has influenced domestic public opinion.

Some of these initial results may be of interest to future research on public opinion. The polarization of Chinese attitudes on several aspects of the maritime disputes is noteworthy, and many non-linear response patterns are apparent. Those who reported paying close attention to the South and East China Sea issues were the most likely to be strongly positive or negative in their appraisal of the government’s performance. Both the lowest- and highest-income groups were more likely to express absolute certainty about the correctness of China’s claims to the disputed maritime territories, while those in the middle expressed less certainty. Those who said they paid either very low or very high attention were also less certain of China’s claims, and those who expressed the most certainty about China’s claims also tended to hold strong opinions one way or another regarding the government’s handling of the disputes. And rather than a simple linear relationship existing between exposure to online discourse and its influence on public attitudes, the Internet’s effects appear to be concentrated on those who only occasionally hear about the disputes this way. These kinds of patterns have implications for theories of the relationship between demographics and attitude formation that could warrant further inquiry.

The signs of “rational nationalism” also raise questions for research on nationalism. Future iterations of the survey will develop and refine the design of these questions in order to further probe the connections between emotion and rational calculation in Chinese popular nationalism on these issues.

Finally, the very high levels of support for the policy approaches of make use of popular activism and mass displays of dissatisfaction as policy options suggests the urban Chinese public may perceive a role for itself in these disputes. Cutting-edge research on international bargaining has suggested how the PRC party-state has selectively given the “green light” to anti-foreign protests at times when their emergence can bolster the state’s position at the international negotiating table.2 This survey’s results seem to hint at a tacit understanding between the government and population that popular nationalist mobilization – such as those in 2012 over the Diaoyu Islands issue, in 2008 over interference with the Olympic Torch relay, and in 2005 over Japan’s bid for a UN Security Council Seat – can help bolster China’s position.

1 The next wave of the survey will also gather some new demographic information, including occupation, Party membership and overseas travel. Further comments, feedback and suggestions as to how to improve the project in the future are most welcome.

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