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China Taps News Media, Restricts Internet as P.D. Tools during Dispute with Japan [1]

Two recent developments in China point to the tools of media and public opinion control available to the Chinese government and how they are used.

Most recently, Japan-China relations have deteriorated on the heels of an old dilemma: How Japan handles history.

In 1937-38 during the war between China and Japan, Nanjing was the scene of a genocidal slaughter of about 300,000 Chinese. It was hardly a secret. Many nations condemned the event. The Japanese, hardly beloved after their invasion of Manchuria in 1931, were reviled. What has come to be known as the Rape of Nanjing has never been acknowledged, much less repudiated, by the Japanese. It remains "an incident" in Japanese history.

A new textbook written for school use in Japan where, as in China, the Ministry of Education gets to pass on all textbooks, continues the Japanese version of history. And that is what set off the most recent furor in China.

The textbook isn't expected to sell well, but that has not made any difference. Other than permission to publish, the book does not have an official imprimatur from the Japanese government. But that hasn't made any difference either. In China, the history of more than a quarter of a million mutilated, beheaded and raped citizens raises this issue to a high level. So the Japanese textbook became a pretext for anti-Japanese demonstrations in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou - and those are the ones that we know took place.

Demonstrations are generally considered anathema in China, unless they have been officially organized by or with the permission of the government. At first, there seemed to be no official sanction to these events. There was no coverage in any mainland newspaper or on the government-operated television or radio.

There are no private media on the mainland. However, Hong Kong newspapers reported the demonstrations, and Phoenix TV, with official links, put an item about the demonstrations on its Web site. That only lasted a couple of hours, before it disappeared. The official word seemed to have come down: cool it on coverage.

On the other hand, the demonstrations were not denounced. That was the first clear indication that there might be some official sanction. But in the oh so subtle world of symbols that is Asia, no one was certain - that is, until the first pictures appeared in Hong Kong showing police standing aside while the demonstrators marched on the Japanese embassy in Beijing and broke windows at the Japanese Consulate in Shanghai.

But still no official word from the leadership.

That was Sunday the 17th in China. Monday the 18th, nothing. Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, was on a visit and trade mission to India. No word from him or from President Hu Jintao. Nothing at the daily foreign office briefing. What demonstrations? What tension with Japan? Officially, it didn't exist.

But it was real in Tokyo, and there was reaction from the Japanese government. Japan wanted an apology for the demonstrations in China and reparations for broken windows. The Japanese foreign minister scheduled a trip to Beijing for the following weekend to make the point live and in person.

Tuesday, April 18th, Beijing used Chinese journalism as a means of diplomacy: Page one of that day's China Daily, "The National English Language Newspaper," the voice of government policy, featured a story just below the fold, under a two-column headline:

SCHROEDER EXPRESSES REMORSE

A one-column picture of the German Chancellor showed him with bowed head and a wreath of flowers he placed at Buchenwald concentration camp. Like his predecessors, the German Chancellor was acknowledging the horror of the Holocaust and giving his version of the Jewish mantra "Never Again."

"We cannot change history, but this country can learn a lot from the deepest shame of our history," the Chancellor was quoted.

Media as message, front-page story selection and layout to send the message. The meaning was unmistakable and direct. "We expect the same from the Japanese."

Meanwhile the official Chinese rhetoric made it clear the country had nothing for which to apologize. In fact, it was the Japanese who must apologize. And yet there were still no stories of demonstrations or the building tension between Beijing and Tokyo in Chinese media.

That changed the next day, Wednesday, April 19th, when the velvet gloves were off. Premier Wen Jiabao, still in India, got three columns and the front page editorial lead in the China Daily with the headline

JAPAN TOLD TO FACE UP PAST

By the following weekend there were more demonstrations. Shanghai had the biggest turnout, with reports of 20,000 marchers. Whatever the turnout, what was clear was that the police once again were watching and not interfering. And there was media coverage, but this time the coverage emphasized the government's plea for calm and an end to the demonstrations. The order went out: no more. And there have been no more demonstrations.

Students on campuses nationwide were called to meetings where the word was underlined. No demonstrations. Cool it. The public tap had been turned off.

The Japanese foreign minister met his Chinese counterpart in Beijing and made the requisite demand for an apology. In return he got a stern lecture on history and the need for the

Japanese to "Face up to the past." He left empty-handed.
The rest of the story has unfolded in public with an apology from Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi at a meeting of Asian leaders, a meeting that included the Chinese President.

The problem remains. The apology took the same general form that Japanese Prime Ministers have used in the past couching events from 1931 to 1945 under a single umbrella of "we regret the excesses." The Chinese, along with other Asian nations want their specific pain acknowledged and repudiated. This one won't go away. But it was the handling of a story that really caught the eye.

The other story you may not have read about, and certainly didn't see on TV, was a puzzler.

Chinese Universities have an Intranet called BBS. It's what many of you may remember as an Internet bulletin board. BBS is a combination bulletin board, jungle tom tom, Matt Drudge and Liberty Radio forum. Everything is on BBS, information, misinformation, the latest gossip as well as "who was the pretty/handsome man/woman I saw you with last night?"

This open forum has been around for years. Alumni and outsiders participate. BBS also operates between Universities. It is part of the modern communications infrastructure for young Chinese men and women. BBS in the two years I have been around has hardly been a source of revolutionary foment. There have been discussions, some criticism of government but mostly university policies, the usual complaints that students have everywhere about inept administrators and unfair treatment. Hopping on this free flow of chatter used to be easy. Log-on, usually with a pseudonym, and let your fingers fly on the keyboard. Students, alumni, and anyone interested could join the dialogue.

Until now: the rules of access to BBS were changed - drastically. The door was closed. The only people with access to BBS were to be students and faculty who now must go through their university servers and long-on using their real names. No more outsiders, no more anonymity.

It's not difficult to see the motivation for the restrictions, but it is difficult to see the rationale. BBS certainly had the means to foment trouble, but it had not been used to make trouble. No one likes criticism, and the anonymity of BBS provided cover for people who had some strong opinions, but usually on minor and parochial issues. The fact is BBS was a useful gauge of everything from the lovesickness of spring to who were the good and bad teachers on campus. There were occasional political flash points, but here to, the escape valve of BBS provided a forum to let the venom out and dispel anger and frustration.

There was no public reporting of the new restrictions to access. Internal communications went out from university administrations to their students. A few correspondents from Western publications noted the change, but there was hardly a ripple.

Fewer than a half dozen national universities had small demonstrations. Students expressed their anger, but also realized this was not a fight they could win - or that they needed to win. E-mail and short messages via mobile phone are alive and well. They are not anonymous, but in a nation of millions of university students and even more millions of alumni, the odds on being "overheard" or monitored are long. Some students started alternative bulletin boards, and there are likely to be other imaginative means of trading information and opinions. These will

be more difficult to monitor than BBS.

The curious part of the tale is: why? Why the change when a forum that wasn't a threat was actually a contained and easily monitored survey of the student pulse?
