

Does Unexpected Online Anti-Japanese Sentiment Hinder China's Japan Policy in the Xi Administration?: The Selective Responsiveness Strategy in the APA Hotel Case

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習近平政権期における予期せぬオンライン反日感情と中国の対日政策
— アパホテル事件に対する中国の選択的戦略 —

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Abstract

This article aims at finding how does the Chinese government handle unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment to prevent it from hindering China's Japan policy when the government attempts to improve bilateral relations in the Internet era. It focuses on what changes the Xi administration has brought to the interaction between the state and the society in China. This article indicates that although the control over online public opinion in the Xi administration seems to be further reinforced, unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment appears from time to time even though it may not in accord with the government's intention when it attempts to improve Sino-Japanese relations. However, public opinion is still impotent in hindering China's foreign policy. To provide evidence, this research focuses on the APA hotel incident in 2017 to show how the government dealt with the online anti-Japanese sentiment. On the one hand, the government prevented it from developing into a hindrance for Sino-Japanese relations. On the other hand, it still successfully exhibited a responsive attitude. This article highlights that, with the benefit of the Internet, the government becomes more sophisticated in its selective responsiveness toward public opinion, enabling opinions to be heeded while limiting the impact of public opinion within an acceptable range. It expands the understanding of the contradictory coexistence of rising public opinion in China and the growing ability of the government's control.

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1. Introduction

One may assume that public opinion in an authoritarian state is always on the same page with the government's attitude. However, facts in China reveal conflicts between public opinion toward Japan and China's Japan policy from time to time. In 1992, China invited the Japanese emperor to visit China in order to enhance Sino-Japanese relations and break its international isolation, but it faced domestic pressure from anti-Japanese sentiment among the public. Chinese activist Bao Ge and his fellows publicly requested the Japanese emperor to make an official apology and applied to conduct a street protest in Shanghai (Spring of Beijing 1998). In 2005 and 2010, anti-Japanese protests also exerted pressure on China's intention to negotiate the cooperation about natural gas deposits in the East China Sea with Japan (Reilly 2012, p.47; RFI 2010). On one side, as "unmovable neighbors" and important trade partners, China and Japan are essential for both sides. Although there are ups and downs in Sino-Japanese relations, improving the relations and pursuing further cooperation is, at least one of, the goals of China's Japan policy. On the other side, China's public impression of Japan remains relatively negative, and the waves of mobilization generated by anti-Japanese sentiment are persistent (Reilly 2012). This conflict may lead to problems for the Japan policy of the government.

In the Xi administration, observers believe that via institutional, regulatory, and technological measures, the government has been taking stronger control of the society (Creemers 2017). However, with new changes in the Internet age, especially with the launch of local social media platforms, there are new challenges for the government to catch up with the widely spread information and take absolute control. The so-called "embryonic public sphere" mentioned by some previous research hasn't seemed to die out (Xiao Qiang 2011; Hong Junhao 2005). It is still meaningful to ask whether the government has less or more room to choose to suppress or to tolerate waves of online mobilization in the Internet age.

This article focuses on public opinion and foreign policy toward Japan to provide evidence to this discussion, exhibiting how does the government deal with unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment when the government attempts to enhance Sino-Japanese relations in the Xi administration via the APA hotel case in 2017. It was a bottom-up anti-Japanese mobilization among Chinese netizen originally aroused by Toshio Motoya, the CEO of APA hotel, who denied the existence of Nanjing Massacre. This research uses this incident as a case to show why despite that the Internet enables negative opinions toward Japan to form waves of mobilization more easily, the anti-Japanese sentiment is unlikely to become a decisive obstacle in China's Japan policy when the government does not want to ruin relations with Japan. The government's control becomes increasingly "sophisticated" as many scholars have pointed out (Creemers 2017; Chen et al. 2017), because the government is not merely using censorship to suppress public opinion, but rather it is selectively responding to public opinion to make opinions to be heeded while limiting the impact of public opinion within an acceptable range.

2. Previous Discussion

Whether public opinion in China can be an “independent variable” in foreign policy has long been debated by scholars (Liu 1996, p.3; Reilly 2012, p.24; Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, p.155; Hong and Su 2007, p.26). With the development of the Internet, researchers focus on the influence of the Internet and online public opinion on political outcomes, emphasizing the new roles of public opinion in the Internet age (Xiao 2011, p.202-223; Yang 2016). Although the increasing influence of public factors has been discussed by researchers, many researchers note the limitation of public opinion in China even in the Internet era because the development of the Internet also enables the government to use benefits brought by it to create stronger propaganda and censorship system (Hong 2005; Tang 2005; Chubb 2018; Wang 2010).

Because of the conspicuous position of Sino-Japanese relations in China’s foreign affairs, Chinese public opinion toward Japan is also an important topic being discussed by scholars. By studying the 2012 Diaoyu Islands Protest, Peter Hays Gries, Derek Steiger, and Tao Wang argue that “the Chinese public increasingly plays an autonomous role in shaping China’s Japan policy (Gries et al. 2016, p.265)” Reilly concludes that the Chinese government never lost control even when public opinion was loud (Reilly 2012). Weiss focuses on nationalist protests and concludes that popular nationalism is an advantage as a way to signal intention in Chinese diplomacy (Weiss 2014).

Although researchers are paying increasing attention to public opinion in China in the Internet era, few of them provide an explanation about the contradictory coexistence of rising public opinion empowered by the Internet and the growing ability of the government’s control. One exception is the “fragmentation thesis” brought by Han Rongbin (Han 2018, p.23). He emphasizes the fragmentation of not only the state but also netizen in China. According to him, “pluralized online expression may ironically help sustain authoritarian rule by activating and empowering regime defenders,” because there are both critics and pro-state opinions online (Han 2018, p. 20). However, although his idea may be a convincing explanation for the failure of mobilizations which directly aim to the regime, it loses efficacy when it comes to anti-foreign mobilizations especially when the attitude of netizens is relatively unanimous.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1 Definition: Public Opinion

Most of the definitions in the existing literature draw a strict outline for public opinion: the form should be free and based on public expression (Speier 1952, p.323). China is apparently excluded from this discussion due to the strong censorship. However, in many scholars’ eyes, public opinion may also be defined broadly (Liu 1996, p.3; Key 1961, p.14). In this research, public opinion is defined as *attitudes, demands, and viewpoints openly expressed in public by a group of people who do not belong to governmental institutions or are directly instructed by the government*. In addition, public opinion in China can be detected basically in three ways: online content, opinion poll surveys, and in a more extreme form, street demonstrations. Opinions expressed in these forms are relatively

less strictly controlled than opinions shown on television or newspapers that belong to official institutions under the control of the government or the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), which are excluded from this definition. However, due to the strict limits for street demonstrations and the lack of poll surveys about political issues or foreign affairs in China, online content may be the main way remained. These online contents are online public opinion, usually in the forms of online comments, online discussion, and self-media content.

3.2 Selective Responsiveness in Authoritarian States

3.2.1 What is selective responsiveness?

Responsiveness refers to “the extent to which policy choices follow public preferences (Roberts and Kim 2011; Su and Meng 2016, p.52).” Although it may be considered as a symbol of democracy, some authoritarian states also reveal responsive features. However, as Qianan and Teets state, these are not a process of democratization or state weakness (Qianan and Teets 2020, p.141). Selective responsiveness is a governance strategy in authoritarian states, which means that the government adopts a responsive gesture and does selectively respond to some issues to some extent but still take safe control of decision making and the society. This is an established framework which is more frequently mentioned in academic discussion about domestic issues and local government, but it could also be applied to foreign affair issue.

3.2.2 Why response and why select?

Democratic leaders respond to public opinion to gain votes in the next elections to stay in their seats. Although authoritarian leaders usually do not have such concerns, they respond to request from the public for stability and legitimacy because there is a possibility for the public to conduct revolts and threaten their ruling. Besides stability and legitimacy, authoritarian leaders may also respond or tolerate public requests to gain a bargaining advantage in international negotiations by showing tying hands (Weiss 2014). Chen and Xu provide other reasons, including “detecting the danger and improve policies accordingly” and “that public communication disorganizes citizens if they find themselves split over policies. (Chen and Xu 2017, p.792)” However, responsiveness in authoritarian states has to be selective in order to maintain its authoritarian essence, to take stable control over the general direction of policies, and to ensure its dominance.

3.2.3 How to select?

The most challenging question for authoritarian leaders is how to maintain that balance. This research suggests that responsive authoritarian states not only selectively choose to respond to public opinion, but also conduct selectively in implementation. Previous studies mention that issues in stake, subject, and scale affect authorities’ selection on whether to respond or to suppress opinions (Lian 2012; Lorentzen 2014, p.402; King et al. 2013, p.326). However, even for the opinion that the government chooses to respond, the actual implementation sophisticatedly varies. Delaying,

emphasizing particular subjects, and weak supervision are common strategies to limit the effect of public opinion in an acceptable range.

3.2.4 Selective responsiveness in the Internet age

With the development of the Internet, scholars argue that the Internet nurtures the public sphere and increases the responsiveness of authoritarian government because “online expressions magnify the pressures from below for the governments to respond (Su and Meng 2016, p.53)” However, although the Internet allows public opinion to have more channels to be expressed with relatively fewer limitations, it also enables the government to have more ways to guide public opinion via more sophisticated propaganda and censoring techniques. Moreover, the Internet provides the government with a better stage to exhibit its responsiveness, which makes it more possible for the government to emphasize its responsive image while downplaying its actual response in implementation.

4. Online Governance Under the Xi administration, Online Public Opinion, and Anti-Japanese Sentiment

4.1 Online Governance Policies under Xi and its Characteristic

The control of online public opinion is important to Xi, because they may be an increasingly potential challenge for the resilience of authoritarian rule. Before Xi took office, Arab Spring, which contains a series of anti-government movements, started since the end of 2010. Social media was regarded to play an important role in many protests in this process (Howard et al. 2011). In February 2011, the Chinese Jasmine Revolution started, although it had “little visible or lasting impact,” the initial call of which was also made online (Han 2018). The power of the Internet in pro-democratic movements has been witnessed by the world, and it is threatening authoritarian leaders. Compared with traditional media, such as journals, newspapers, radio, and television, which have already been absolutely controlled in China, online media has a relatively lower threshold for individuals and social groups to express opinions on. Thus, the Internet may be the only battlefield that has been left for facilitating “citizen activism by enabling both domestic and overseas Chinese to mobilize against the regime (Han 2018, p.21).”

After Xi took office, a series of institutional and regulatory measures have been taken to strengthen the control of the party-state over the Internet. On the third plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013, Xi mentioned the issue of “improving the Internet governance system” for the first time (Hong and Si 2016, p.18). On Feb. 27th, 2014, the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs was founded. The director of it is Xi, the General Secretary of the CCP, rather than Li, the Premier of the State Council. This measure enables the Internet governance framework to be better coordinated under Xi’s leadership, compared with the previous situation when it was regarded as “fragmented” because “different sections of the bureaucracy each pursued diverging agendas (Creemers 2017, p.89).” On Jun. 1st, 2017, China

implemented the Cybersecurity Law. Its initial objective is to protect network security, but it also “allows the government more space to request and control information (Maranto 2020).”

Besides this, as Hong and Si summarize, the party-state strengthens its control in six aspects to exhibit the “rule the Internet by law” principle (Hong and Si 2016, p.21-28). These include tighter control over opinion leaders and “Big Vs”¹ on social media by “suppression” and “assimilation”; control over the online content of the mass public especially on Sina Weibo and WeChat by the Interpretation No. 21 about defamation in 2013 and the Interim Provisions on the administration of instant messaging tools in 2014; control over accounts on social media platforms by Provisions on the Administration of Account Names of Internet Users in 2015; control over online news entities by Provisions on the Interview of Entities Providing Internet News Information Services in 2015; and control over using oversea websites and VPN service.

Due to the above measures, along with the development of online censorship and the upgrading propaganda system, Xi turned the Internet governance framework, which was regarded as “fragmented,” to a centralized and integrated one by institutional and policy measures (Creemers 2017, p.85). This is one of the major characteristics of the Xi administration. Compared with the previous situation, the state has further absolute control over online public opinion, which makes the latter more impotent. However, it does not mean the government became less responsive. As Qiaoan and Teets argue, “although initial signs of a less responsive government do exist (in the Xi administration), there are also counter forces both inside and outside of the political system (Qiaoan and Teets 2019, p.139).” The proficiency in controlling the Internet battlefield provides the government with a better stage to exhibit its responsiveness.

4.2 Public Opinion and Changes in the Internet Age

Although the censorship system grows stronger, there are also “countering techniques” commonly used by netizens to prevent their content from being deleted. For example, they use “political slang,” pictures (and up-side-down pictures), and even emoji to replace sensitive keywords on SNS platforms. China Digital Times, a bilingual China news website founded by Xiao Qiang published *Decoding the Chinese Internet: A Glossary of Political Slang* which introduces “classic memes” used by Chinese netizens (CDC 2015). Besides this, the platform China Digital Space, which calls itself “a museum exhibits how Chinese people fight for censorship,” preserves important articles that were censored.² Another similar website, “Terminus Project,” also do the same thing as China Digital Space.³

Then, does public opinion in China become more important? In terms of its power for democratization, admittedly, online public opinion is facing more limits set in the Xi administration as listed in the previous section, thus it is unlikely to form anti-government momentum, in spite of the using of “countering techniques” mentioned above. However, it does not mean public opinion becomes more impotence absolutely. In terms of expressing the public complaints on issues which “align with government rhetoric” and which “show relevance to government interest,” the government is more responsive than before, such as in environmental issue (Qiaoan et al. 2019, p.147).

4.3 Persistent Anti-Japanese sentiment and Unexpected Online Waves of Mobilization

Admittedly, not all anti-Japanese sentiment are “unexpected” for the government. As James Reilly states, the Chinese government alternates between two contradicting policy approaches toward Japan: it emphasizes the atrocities to gain greater diplomatic leverage and secure regime legitimacy, but it also downplays wartime memories to forge better bilateral relations for economic and strategic benefits sometimes (Reilly 2012, p.56). However, when the government attempts to improve Sino-Japanese relations, it might not be possible to eliminate the already persistent anti-Japanese sentiment. The anti-Japanese sentiment, appears when the government attempts to downplay historical memory and improve its relations with Japan, is regarded as “unexpected.” The survey result from Genron NPO indicates that the favorable impression of Japan has increased from 21.7% in 2016 to 42.2% in 2018.⁴ Although survey results reflect the improving impression of Japan, they also reflect that there are still more people who hold negative impressions than people who do not. The development of the Internet further amplifies the “side effect” of propaganda for nationalism. In the Internet age, the spread of information in China is increasingly market-oriented (Gang and Bandurski 2011, p.56). Attention-grabbing incidents containing negative emotions easily develop into a heated discussion online and stimulate anti-Japanese sentiment.

From 2017 to 2019, when Sino-Japanese relations have been improved, there still have been negative episodes arousing anti-Japanese sentiment. The news that the APA Group in Japan put books which deny facts about the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women in their hotel rooms irritated Chinese netizens. After a movie about comfort women, *Twenty-two*, was shown in theaters in August 2017, there was a fiery discussion about the issue of reparation for comfort women, which further reminded people about the war and induced anti-Japanese sentiment.⁵ In March 2019, when the news of a security guard of Wuhan University prohibiting a visitor wearing a Japanese kimono from entering the campus based on rules of the Wuhan University appeared, many people online praised the rule and criticized those who forget history online. When a Chinese actor, Zhao Lixin, posted on Weibo questioning why the Japanese army did not destroy the Forbidden City if they were invaders, he faced online criticisms that forced him to apologize for his words.⁶ All these incidents show that waves of unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment appear from time to time.

4.4 Case Study : APA Hotel Incident in 2017

This research focuses on the APA hotel case to exhibit the selective responsiveness of China in the Xi administration for two reasons. First, this bottom-up anti-Japanese mobilization happened at an important time when China attempted to improve relations with Japan. There are many signs showing that the Chinese government has been making a great effort since 2015 to remedy its relations with Japan which was severely damaged in Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Purchasing incident and its aftermath in 2012. These including the recovery of high-level visits since the end of 2014 and the development of defense exchanges in 2015 and 2016. In White Paper of China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation published in January 2017, right before the APA incident

happened, China also expressed its worries that historical and maritime territory issues may create “obstacles to the improvement of bilateral relations.”⁷ Meanwhile, there was a decline in the number of reports and articles about war memory with Japan in official media from 2015 to 2017. For example, according to a research concerning reports about the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day (December 13th) on People’s Daily, the number of the reports in 2014 was 62, but it declined to 32 in 2015 and 15 in 2016 (Lei 2017, p.17). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the anti-Japanese mobilization in APA hotel incident is not manipulated or induced by the Chinese government but rather “unexpected” mobilization that the government has to use the “selectively respond” strategy. Second, among all online episodes which aroused anti-Japanese sentiment in this period mentioned above, the APA incident attracted the most attention and induced the largest social influence. The public sentiment in this incident was originally toward a Japanese private company and the owner of it, but it extended toward Japan in general because of the response from the company and some Japanese people, and it formed anti-Japanese mobilization. As a result, it is one of the very few incidents that happened in this period that obtained an official response from the Chinese government via press conference and countering regulations. This makes the APA case not only a representative one but also the most valuable one to observe. Although this research only focuses on one case, it is sufficient to exhibit the effect of the government’s response strategy because if this case could be safely dealt with, then the other episodes that aroused less attention are unlikely to be out of control. Due to these two reasons, the APA hotel incident provides a good showcase for observing how does the Chinese government deal with online anti-Japanese sentiment that is not expected when it attempts to improve Sino-Japanese relations.

In 2017, an incident involving the APA Group induced a wave of mobilization online with a strong anti-Japanese sentiment. The APA Group is a large hospitality firm that operates 598 hotels in Japan so far.⁸ On Jan. 15th, KatAndSid, a popular Sina Weibo account run by a couple, uploaded a video on Bilibili.com, which shows how they bought a book titled “Theoretical Modern History: The Real History of Japan” from an APA hotel and some sentences in this book.⁹ In this book, the writer Toshio Motoya, who is also the CEO of the APA Group, asserts that “neither the Nanking Massacre nor the forceful displacement of comfort women took place. Yet both China and Korea turn their backs to their own actions and repeatedly accuse Japan of their untruths (Seiji 2015, p.37).”

The content soon attracted great attention on the Internet. This video was played over 100 million times in one week (The Initium.com 2017). The content was also forwarded to SNS platforms such as Sina Weibo, Zhihu, and WeChat. Toshio Motoya’s words were criticized by Chinese netizens, who were angry about his denial of the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women. There were floods of negative opinions online about the APA Group. Many netizens repeated these words on SNS platforms, “every Chinese person should boycott the APA Group.”

The response from the APA Group was tough. On the next day, the APA Group posted a statement on its official website, in which it emphasized its stance by stating that they have no intention of withdrawing this book, no matter how many denunciations may be made from

others. Furthermore, the APA Group claims that it aims to “let readers learn the fact-based true interpretation of modern history” (APA Group 2017). Toshio Motoya asserted in a monthly meeting of Shoheijyuku, an institute belongs to the APA Group, that the video created by KatAndSid was premeditated. He said with pride that the APA Group received more than ten thousand letters and calls from supporters all over Japan, including some Japanese national diet members. Moreover, he believed that people would forget what happened after a few months, but the name of the APA Hotel will be remembered, which will actually benefit the APA Group (Shoheijuku 2017).

The response from the APA Group further infuriated Chinese netizens. The anger toward the APA Group also developed into a wave of anger toward Japan and the Japanese people in general. Although the producer of the video emphasized, “please keep in mind that this only applies to this hotel and has nothing to do with the country and its people,” in the beginning and the end of the video, live audience comments (*danmaku*) still contained strong negative sentiment toward Japan and the Japanese people. According to these online comments, many Chinese netizens believe that most Japanese people have similar views as Toshio Motoya, because such views were reflected on some Japanese SNS platforms and self-media reports. In addition, even those Chinese people who love Japan, especially those who like Japanese *anime*, were also criticized by netizens. On Feb. 5th, an anti-APA protest happened in Tokyo. Around 100 Chinese people gathered in Shinjuku with banners and facemasks, urging a boycott of the APA Group (BBC News, Feb. 5th, 2017).

With the escalation of the APA Hotel incident, the Chinese government responded to it. On Jan. 24th, the China National Tourism Administration held a press conference, at which spokesman Zhang Lizhong stated that the China National Tourism Administration firmly opposed the acts of the APA Group (CCTV, 2017). He also stated that all travel agent companies and online reservation platforms were required to end cooperation with the APA Group. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying also stated China’s stance at regular press conferences (MFA Regular Press Conference 2017). She answered questions relating to the incident five times from Jan. 17th to Jan. 26th, reiterating that history cannot be forgotten. After the response from the Chinese government, the heat of online discussion about APA and the online anti-Japanese sentiment declined, according to Baidu Index, the searching index for the keyword “APA jiudian (APA Hotel)” reached the climax of 24341 on January 24, but it soon dropped below 2000 after January 26.¹⁰

Although the APA incident triggered heated discussion online and even escalated with the development of the incident, it did not have a visible negative effect on the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations. After this incident, high-level visits, trade, and economic cooperation, and even cultural communication between China and Japan continued. After the APA Hotel incident, China started a national holiday from Jan. 27th. Japan was still one of the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization, the number of Chinese visitors during January 2017 was 545,424, which was an increase of 37.5% compared to the same period last year (JNTO 2017). The result of Japan-China Public Opinion Survey 2018 conducted by Genron NPO also shows that the percentage of the Chinese public who has a positive impression of

Japan increased from 21.7% to 31.5% from 2016 to 2017.¹¹ Positive public opinion on Sino-Japanese relations also increased from 14.0% to 22.8%. These facts indicate that even though the APA incident aroused negative opinions toward Japan on the Internet, it did not hinder China's Japan policy or hamper the development of Sino-Japanese relations.

The selective responsiveness strategy of the Chinese government prevents episodes like the APA incident from exerting negative influence on Sino-Japanese relations when China attempts to improve the relations.

First, the responsive attitude of the Chinese government prevented the further intensification of anti-Japanese sentiment in this incident. Although the main target of animosity was first the APA hotel and later exhibited the trend to extend to Japan in general, there were also online critiques toward Chinese people who have a favorable attitude toward Japan. Among live audience comments in the video uploaded by KatAndSid, many netizens call Chinese people who love Japanese culture, especially those who like Japanese *anime*, as *jing ri*, which means spiritual Japanese. An extreme example is that when a Chinese protester, who joined the demonstration against APA hotel in Tokyo, expressed her appreciation to Japanese policemen and some Japanese people who protected them in that demonstration, she received hundreds of critical comments saying that she is "ambiguous in choosing a side."¹² Facing the extreme anti-Japanese animosity, the Chinese government had to stand out and show its stance by expressing official response and making related policy to prevent the extreme animosity from extending to the Chinese government itself. It can be a threat to the Chinese government because, as Jessica Weiss pointed out, "the last two Chinese regime—the Kuomintang government in 1949 and the Qing dynasty in 1912—fell to popular movements that accused the government of failing to defend the nation from foreign predations (Weiss 2014, p.3) " There were many Chinese people who send calcium tablet to Ministry of Foreign Affairs office to exhibit their anger when they believe diplomats are acting too weak in foreign affairs.¹³ Reiteration about unforgettable history in a press conference and the banning of further cooperation with the APA hotel are both important acts of the government to signal its responsive attitude domestically.

Second, emphasizing the subject is another important act that prohibited the anger toward the APA hotel extends to the hatred toward Japan in general. When the video was first launched, netizens' target was only the APA Group, especially its CEO, Toshio Motoya. However, the APA incident aroused negative sentiment toward Japan as a whole on the Internet. For one thing, it was because discussions on Japanese online platforms, especially words from Japanese people who support Toshio Motoya, made some netizens believe that all Japanese people have the same opinion as Toshio Motoya. For the other thing, the APA incident opened a vent for online mobs who detest anything they could criticize to release their anger. To prevent the anger in this incident from extending to Japan in general, which may further ruin Sino-Japanese relations, the Chinese government tried to limit the anger by emphasizing the subject, the APA hotel, and "the very few extreme Right." Although Hua Chuangyin, a spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mentioned that "We urge Japan side to face up to history and reflect on their mistakes, educating Japanese people

with a correct view of history” on a regular press conference(MFA Regular Press Conference Jan. 17th, 2017), the following response from the Chinese government and reports in the official media all targeted on the APA hotel only. This strategy is commonly used in dealing with the anti-Japanese sentiment. In the early postwar period, the Chinese government also encouraged its people to separate ordinary Japanese people and Japanese militarists, emphasizing that “both the Chinese and Japanese people suffered from the actions of Japanese militarists (Rose and S kora 2019, p.109).”

Third, although the Chinese government did exhibit its responsive attitude, the actual implementation is not as “hard” as its statement. Despite there was a requirement from the China National Tourism Administration to end all cooperation between travel agents and the APA Group as well as statements made by a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was no further action from the government to signal resolve. A demonstration happened in Japan, but there was no similar protest against Japan or the APA hotel happened in China, at least none is reported or mentioned online, which might indicate that the government did not tolerate anti-Japanese protests against this incident. Besides, the Japanese organizing committee of the eighth Asian Winter Games had chosen an APA hotel in Sapporo as an official designated hotel for the athletes. Even though the China National Tourism Administration required travel agents and hotel reservation platforms to end all cooperation with the APA Group, the Chinese Olympic Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only urged the Japanese organizing committee to make the APA Group remove all relevant books from the designated hotel in Sapporo instead of refusing to let Chinese athletes living in the APA hotel (MFA Regular Press Conference Jan. 26th, 2017). Finally, the Japanese side stated that Chinese athletes would not be accommodated in the APA Hotel during the games, which reveals that both Japan and China compromised to prevent the incident from hindering the development of Sino-Japanese relations. Besides this, although China stated that all travel agent companies and online reservation platforms were required to end cooperation with the APA Group, many platforms such as Qunar. Com secretly restarted booking for some APA hotels, which reveals that there was no strict supervision on this request (CCTV 2017). In addition, although discussions online about the APA hotel were fierce, there were not many articles provoking hatred toward Japan in official media. The People’s Daily published only eight articles about the APA incident in total from Jan. 25th to Feb. 6th, and most of those articles were descriptive reports about the incident and did not attempt to lead public opinion or induce anti-Japanese sentiment.

By exhibiting responsive attitude that in accord with public opinion on the one hand but emphasizing the subject as well as applying relatively “weak” implementation on the other hand, the government prevented anti-Japanese sentiment in this incident from developing into a large wave of mobilization that obstructs Sino-Japanese relations.

5. Conclusion

In the Xi administration, there seems to be a contradictory coexistence of online public opinion in China and the growing ability of the government’s control. However, despite that digital

development in the Internet age may amplify unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment among the public when triggering incidents appear, the sentiment is unlikely to develop into a hindrance to China's Japan policy when the government attempts to enhance Sino-Japanese relations. It is not because the public opinion is not loud enough or that the government chooses to ignore the opinions, but, on the contrary, that the government is sophisticated in utilizing the selective responsive strategy. The selective responsiveness is more frequently mentioned in academic discussions about domestic issues and local government, but it could also be applied to foreign affair issue. When the government attempts to adopt cooperative policy but meets domestic pressure caused by public sentiment, the development of the Internet provides the government with an effective platform to exhibit its responsive attitude and guide emotional public sentiment.

(Received 29th October, 2020)

(Accepted 8th, February, 2021)

Endnotes

- ¹ "Big Vs" refer to influencers on Sina Weibo.
- ² China Digital Space (CDC), https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Landing_Page, assessed on December 10th, 2020.
- ³ Terminus Project. <https://wxdeletedarticle.github.io/Terminus/>, assessed on December 19th, 2020.
- ⁴ The data of Genron NPO survey can be found on <https://www.genron-npo.net/en/archives/181011.pdf>, accessed on December 19th, 2020.
- ⁵ According to Baidu Index, the media index of the key word "Comfort women (wei an fu)" researched 65388 on August 2017 after the movie launched, which is over 2000 times larger than the average number on that year before the movie was shown, <http://index.baidu.com/v2/main/index.html#/trend/慰安妇?words=慰安妇>, accessed on December 10th, 2020.
- ⁶ The weibo account of Zhao was also forced to be deleted. Screenshot can be found on Sina News on April 3, 2019, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2019-04-03/doc-ihsxncvh7809286.shtml>, accessed on December 10th, 2020.
- ⁷ The State Council PRC, China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-01/11/content_5158864.htm, accessed on December 26th, 2020.
- ⁸ According to the official website of the APA Group, <https://www.apa.co.jp>, accessed on December 19th, 2020.
- ⁹ The Video can be found on Bilibili.com, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1as411h7Te>, accessed on December 19th, 2020.
- ¹⁰ The author surveyed the Internet response using Baidu Index, a platform created by the biggest Chinese search engine Baidu. It provides data about searching frequency of specific key words. The index reflects the degree of attention on different topics. The data is collected with the keyword "apa judian (APA hotel in Chinese)", <http://index.baidu.com/v2/main/index.html#/trend/apa酒店?words=apa酒店>, accessed on December 28th, 2020.

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- ¹¹ The data of Genron NPO survey can be found on <https://www.genron-npo.net/en/archives/181011.pdf>, accessed on December 19th, 2020.
- ¹² The Sino Weibo account of the protestor is “@污妖王彤彤彤”. The original weibo which was posted on Feb. 5th, 2017 but was deleted. Screenshot can be found on <https://knews.cc/world/y8nvkbb.html>, accessed on December 11st, 2020.
- ¹³ The story about “sending calcium tablet to MFA office” can be found in Guanchazhe, https://www.guancha.cn/ZuoNong/2014_12_12_303128.shtml, accessed on December 28th, 2020.

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