

***Nationalism and Power Politics in Japan's Relations with China: A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation.* By Lai Yew Meng. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. Hardcover: 243pp.**

The relationship between East Asia's two Great Powers — China and Japan — is mired in dangerous nationalism. This book joins a growing literature that explores how nationalism, identity politics and “history problems” are shaping the politics and security of East Asia. In this volume, Lai Yew Meng seeks to understand whether nationalism is the main driver of Japan's China policy, and the precise conditions under which nationalism matters in shaping that policy. To do so, the book focuses on two significant issues in the China-Japan relationship: the Yasukuni Shrine and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands territorial dispute. Although Lai's empirical research is drawn from the period of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administration (2001–06), both issues continue to plague the China-Japan relationship and his research will therefore be of interest to many readers.

The book uses a Neoclassical Realist framework that treats nationalism as an intervening variable that mediates between external, systemic pressures and foreign policy outcomes. In adopting this framework, Lai states that his goal is to bridge two major divides in International Relations (IR) scholarship: the first between *Aussenpolitik* (emphasizing systemic factors) and *Innenpolitik* (emphasizing domestic factors) approaches, and the second between “mainstream IR” and area studies approaches. While these are laudable goals, Lai tends to overstate these divides, and overlooks more recent IR scholarship that sits at the intersection of these divides (one surprising omission, for instance, was Yinan He's *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish relations since World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The most important chapter in this book is Chapter Three, in which Lai explores the concept of nationalism and its evolution in Japan. Drawing on the work of Peter Hays Gries and others, Lai moves beyond unhelpful conceptions of nationalism as a primarily state-led phenomenon. Instead, he acknowledges that nationalism includes both top-down state-led nationalism and bottom-up popular nationalism, and that the two may be correlated and mutually reinforcing. From there, Chapter Three provides a helpful discussion of the driving forces and different strands of nationalism in pre-war and post-war Japan, and the resurgence of this nationalism in

the 1990s. While Lai provides quite a compelling discussion of the reasons for this resurgence, the chapter would have benefited from more detailed evidence of how this rise in nationalism has manifested. For instance, has there been an increase in the membership of Japanese ultra-nationalist organizations? Have right-wing political candidates received greater electoral support from the Japanese public? Do newspapers now devote more column space to nationalist causes than they did prior to the 1990s? While not everything can or should be quantified, some quantification of these trends would give the reader a stronger basis from which to judge the apparent resurgence in Japanese nationalism since the 1990s. In Chapter Four, Lai hones in on the actors and processes involved in making China policy in Japan, emphasizing in particular the influential “tripartite” of bureaucratic actors, Liberal Democratic Party politicians, and the business community (*zaikai*) in shaping China policy. This chapter provides a useful basis upon which to examine two particular case studies from the Koizumi era: Japanese policy on Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine (Chapter Five), and Japanese policy regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute (Chapter Six).

In these case studies, Lai uses his Neoclassical Realist framework to examine how nationalism interacted with both external and domestic factors to shape Japan’s China policy. A particular strength of this framework is that it allows the author to provide rich empirical detail about the domestic and external context in which these policies were formulated. Drawing on secondary literature, interviews with officials and academics, and public opinion surveys, these chapters remind us how the day-to-day challenges of domestic postal reform, the North Korean nuclear crisis, or developments in the US-Japan alliance shaped the choices of Japan’s policy-making community. The central conclusion that Lai draws from these case studies is that, although salient, nationalism was not the primary determinant of Japan’s China policy. Contrary to the general consensus, Lai finds that the Koizumi administration refrained from taking a harder line on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in ways that may have led to a maritime confrontation with the Chinese Navy, and on all but one occasion, shrewdly calculated the timing of the Prime Minister’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine to avoid unduly provoking Beijing.

The book wrestles somewhat awkwardly with its main finding that external factors — in particular the health of the US-Japan alliance — and domestic national interests were more important

than nationalism in shaping Koizumi's China policy. Even if it is true that Koizumi stopped short of taking the most nationalistic position on Yasukuni visits or the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, Lai's empirical material demonstrates that the Koizumi administration often found it politically expedient to use nationalistic policies to assuage conservative interests and build support for his domestic reform agenda. Here, this reviewer was frustrated by the book's attempts to get inside Koizumi's head to determine whether these policies were motivated more by the Prime Minister's personal nationalistic beliefs or were a calculated response to domestic nationalist pressures. As Constructivist scholars have long acknowledged, trying to get inside an actor's head to separate ideational and instrumental motivations is an unhelpful exercise, particularly when both outcomes look the same. More problematically though, in taking this approach the book fails to answer a deeper and arguably more important question: why does nationalism play such an important role within Japanese politics and society? Nationalistic politics have continued to dominate the Japan-China relationship even after Koizumi's departure, which suggests that this question remains an important one.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a useful volume about the Japan-China relationship and two of the most salient issues in that relationship. Those with an interest in nationalism and the international relations of East Asia will learn a great deal from this book.