

## **Social Media: Building Mutual Trust Between China and Japan** by Yang Yi

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Social media offers a powerful platform for building mutual trust and understanding; used effectively, it could help change, for the better, Japan's image among the Chinese.

Social-networking sites have taken off in China since 2009. More than 200 million Chinese now use Weibo (Chinese equivalent to Twitter) to discuss politics and news. They spend hours each day discussing issues, asking questions and responding to suggestions from other users over Weibo. This dizzying expansion has challenged China's political and propaganda establishment.

Embedded as they are in China's diversified media environment, the use of alternative media sources beyond the CCP's control can't fully determine Chinese views of Japan. They can, however, help the people of China to get to know more about Japan and acquire a more complete picture. In the past, Chinese people could only receive filtered information, ranging from anti-Japanese dramas based on WWII and textbooks emphasizing the Nanjing massacre and Japanese invasions, to hawkish news reports on territorial disputes. Nowadays, internet technologies permit more diversified voices to be heard, spread, and circulated instantly via social networks.

During the East Japan Great Earthquake, social media platforms such as Weibo demonstrably contributed to shifting views in China. There were two important and distinctive elements.

First, social media acted as a news aggregator and distributor. Microblog authors aggregated pictures, synthesized news and analysis from traditional news channels, and proposed discussions based on them. Some professional journalists updated their microblogs more frequently than their traditional media columns, due to fast circulation speed and relative freedom of speech. At the same time, social media pushed stories to a larger audience.

Second, social media provided a platform from which ordinary people could express opinions – something that had not been possible in China. For example, one Weibo post reported an initial feeling of happiness that Japan had suffered the earthquake, but later revised this opinion. After seeing the disastrous pictures and news reports, the writer commented that he now felt sorry for Japan because he could see that the Japanese are also human beings.

In one online poll, 23,029 people expressed condolences, sympathy, and support for Japan. Only 2391 people chose to respond to a provocative online poll that asked whether

respondents were happy about the earthquake in Japan. Of these 2391, only 10% (260) said "yes."

In addition, a number of micro bloggers were impressed by how the Japanese coped with disaster. They were not only amazed by the Japanese ability to withstand the disaster with their wits largely in check, but also that the infrastructure stood up relatively well to the earthquake and tsunami. The author of another post commented that he had always been curious how Japan developed such an orderly society, and he hoped China would one day develop into such a place.

Overseas Chinese, especially those based in Japan, also joined the conversation, using the platform to describe their personal experiences during the earthquake. These first-hand accounts, by fellow Chinese, provided counterparts in China with a picture that proved to be more vivid and convincing than reports provided through the CCP. One blogger described the change of heart he had experienced upon his arrival in Japan: while he had been *fenqing* [angry] in the past, he soon realized how one-sided his views had been, and that Japan had many admirable attributes that China could learn from.

Criticisms of China – made by Chinese citizens, from the safety of their computer screens – went deeper, with some netizens arguing that an equivalent 9.0 earthquake in China would result in many more casualties, due to the poor infrastructure in the country, compared to that of Japan. Such criticism makes the Chinese government nervous. While such posts soon disappear at the hands of censors, they have already had an impact. Posts questioning the infrastructure quality in China were deleted, but not before being circulated by millions of people and generating thousands of comments.

It is too early to conclude that the Chinese public has changed its attitude toward Japan and is prepared to embrace its former enemy. Tensions and historic animosities run deep among the Chinese public and will continue to spark online debates and emotional sentiment. Just last month, for example, a heated discussion took place among Chinese netizens about a stone monument erected for Japanese settlers who died during World War II in Northeast China's Heilongjiang province. The monument's erection provoked anger and disdain among Chinese netizens via online protest and petition, forcing local authorities to remove it.

Two important lessons can be learned from the above cases.

First, Chinese attitudes toward Japan are multidimensional, not monolithic. In this sense, social media intensifies existing sentiments. Japan is perceived as a society with abundant wealth and advanced technology. Chinese people have a very strong attitude and are very sensitive to actions initiated by either Chinese or Japanese counterparts. Could people who love Japanese culture, especially animation

and pop music, are also be *anti*-Japan regarding historical issues? It is necessary to differentiate people's evaluations of historic issues involving Japan from other issues. Thus the Japanese government should be cautious about actions that might boost anti-Japan sentiments (e.g. Yasukuni shrine visits).

Second, a more diversified media environment means CCP propaganda campaigns will become less effective. In the past, the CCP used nationalism to whip up popular sentiment and direct it at foreign targets. That is much more difficult with the proliferation of social media since the Chinese people are more inclined to be critical of the CCP for its failure to address domestic issues.

The acquisition of a more holistic understanding about Japan – courtesy of social media – is the first step toward a better understanding of Japan. Japanese netizens should contribute to this development by sharing information and insights about themselves and their country. This would be the first step toward to enduring improvement the bilateral relationship in the long run.

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