A resurgent China nowadays looms ever larger in the public consciousness of its East Asian neighbours, with implications not just for their external relationships, but also for their domestic political dynamics. However, Japan still supplies, as it has for over a century, the benchmark of successful "catch-up" modernisation for states, including China, that see themselves as still "catching up." For authoritarian governments keen to minimise "spiritual pollution," Japan has also long provided a model for the selective preservation of native "essence" alongside imported modern "technology," even while attracting condemnation for the nationalistic excesses associated with this enterprise: colonialism, invasion, and associated brutality. And at the popular level, the impact of Japanese culture—high-brow, low-brow, literate, or visual—on the societies of the region has been manifold and profound.

With the exception of Korea, no country’s modern history has been more intimately intertwined with Japan than China’s. Even at the height of the Cold War, Japan re-emerged under American tutelage as the key regional trading partner for Hong Kong and for “Free China” on Taiwan. And when bilateral ties with the mainland were restored in the 1970s, exhortations to look eastwards for lessons in modernisation came from Deng Xiaoping, the child of an era when Chinese intellectual life was still dominated by Japan—trading partner for Hong Kong and for “Free China” on Taiwan. And when Japanese sentiment cannot be explained without some consideration of Japan’s role in Chinese politics. See “Japan in the politics of Chinese leadership legitimacy: Recent developments in historical perspective,” Japan Forum, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2008, pp. 245-266. Although the Party leadership may largely have toed a pragmatic line, the same was not true of university students, who from the mid-1980s mounted protests against visits by leading politicians to Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine (honouring war dead including convicted war criminals), official censorship of history textbook accounts of the war, and other perceived Japanese transgressions (see article by Yinan He). In the 1990s, as Party leaders cast about for a new ideological anchor, anti-foreign, and especially anti-Japan, nationalism therefore presented itself as a ready alternative to moribund state socialism. Patriotic education has tapped, manipulated, and doubtless accentuated attitudes already salient among the population at large—but it has not manufactured an anti-Japan consciousness out of thin air.

The role of grass-roots activism in sustaining anti-Japan sentiment is especially obvious in the case of Hong Kong. It was the former British colony (along with Taiwan), not the propaganda-drenched but politically-repressed mainland, that in the early 1970s spawned a popular movement to “protect” the Diaoyu Islands, at around the time these disputed rocks were being transferred (along with Okinawa) from American back to Japanese control—and as the People’s Republic was engaged in “normalising” its diplomatic ties with Tokyo. Indeed, some of the most ardent proponents of anti-Japan patriotism have been among the fiercest critics of the local and Beijing authorities. There is a connection here between popular and official discourse: a regime that stakes its legitimacy on anti-foreign nationalism, as to some extent China’s Communists have always done (even if economic growth nowadays takes priority), is vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy when striking deals with the old enemy. But the outrage of anti-Japan agitators has often appeared visceral, not just tactical.

As Yinan He notes in the current special feature, the strength of this anti-Japanese sentiment cannot be explained without some consideration of Japanese agency. Japanese complaints about the Chinese state’s deliberate fanning of hostile sentiment are nothing new. In the 1920s, against a backdrop of escalating Japanese invasions into China, diplomats (including post-war Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru) lamented the impact of xenophobic...
propaganda on impressionable Chinese youth. Just as such protestations were breathtakingly disingenuous then, so they are today, when the political heirs of early-Showa imperialists honour their forebears in pseudo-religious ceremonies (at Yasukuni), while denying past atrocities and preaching their nation’s quintessential victimhood. Japan now is very different from the militarist power of 80 years ago, not least in its profound commitment to peace; but collective failure frankly to confront the wartime past supplies plentiful grist to the Chinese nationalist mill.

Nonetheless, Chinese are by no means universally or uniformly in the grip of anti-Japan resentment. Chinese demand for Japanese goods and services appears relatively resilient, despite the negative wider repercussions of recent bilateral tensions (see Stephen Robert Nagy’s article in the current issue). Meanwhile, beyond the sphere of commerce, the allure of Japanese modernity remains strong, as witnessed by the recent success of a glossy new magazine, *It is Japan* (日本), catering specifically to youthful aficionados of Japanese culture, art, creativity, and tourism. This suggests class as well as generational dimensions: opportunities to enjoy these things are available primarily to wealthy, highly educated elites. For well-heeled cosmopolitan urbanites in Shanghai or Beijing, the dreary catechism of anti-Japanese nationalism must seem banal and embarrassing (history and politics are notably absent from the *It is Japan* prospectus). At the same time, the virulence of anti-Japan protest may derive from resentment not just of Japan or its governing elites, but of privileged Chinese for whom Japanese luxury is within reach.

In examining contemporary Chinese perspectives on Japan, it is thus hard to know where to start. We begin by defining “Chinese” in geographically broad terms, encompassing societies beyond the mainland People’s Republic (PRC), namely Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as (for comparative purposes) the ethnically and culturally “Chinese” city-state of Singapore. In addition to sharing distinctively “Chinese” cultural attributes, all these societies experienced Japanese occupation during the first half of the twentieth century, albeit to differing extents and in significantly different ways: 50 years of developmentalist colonialism in Taiwan, short-lived but brutal occupation in Hong Kong and Singapore, and steady encroachment followed by the prolonged agony of war on the Chinese mainland. In addition, during the post-war period all have developed intimate commercial and cultural ties with Japan. As we shall see, however, the past casts pronounced if varied shadows over each, and the old enemy has come to occupy quite different positions in their national narratives.

7. Published by China CITIC Press, Beijing. The quotation is from the short prospectus printed inside the front cover.
8. Although one entire special issue (No. 7) is actually devoted to the Meiji Restoration – reflecting the enduring Chinese fascination with this Japanese template for self-strengthening modernisation (see articles by Christine Han, and by Edward Vickers and Yang Biao).
9. Chang Ping alludes to this dimension of popular resentment in a reference to “the privileged, rich, and powerful who have an opportunity to expand their horizons” and who are “steadily streamlining overseas,” in “Resistance as National Education,” accessed on 7 November 2013 via the China Media Project (University of Hong Kong), http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/09/04/26585/ (original posted at Deutsche Welle, 6 August 2012). The complex and varied Chinese reaction to the Tohoku earthquake of 2011 – a mixture of schadenfreude and admiration – are also interestingly discussed by Yang Yi in “Weibo, China and Japan,” The Diplomat [online resource of the School of International Service, American University, Washington DC], http://thediplomat.com/new-leaders-forum/2011/10/19/weibo-china-and-japan/ (accessed 17 October 2013).
10. Indeed, in looking at the role of Japan as an “other” in the construction of Chinese identities, we might have cast our net wider still, to look at how folk memories of Japanese persecution have become a significant component of overseas Chinese identities, especially in North America. See the introductory chapter to Imagining Japan in Post-war East Asia, Paul Morris et al. (ed), [p. 6].
11. The role of the Internet in channelling criticism of official historical narratives, both within China and across East Asia, is not dealt with explicitly in the current issue, though it is definitely a phenomenon worth investigating. In their article on Shanghai’s textbooks, Edward Vickers and Yang Biao briefly refer to micro-blog commentary on these in the wake of the New York Times article, “Where is Mao?”
Nevertheless, the fact that textbooks are as (or perhaps more) likely to attract criticism for being insufficiently nationalistic as for being overly so brings us back to the issue of the extent to which today’s widespread anti-Japanese sentiment can be seen the outcome of an orchestrated programme of political socialisation. The term “brainwashing” has recently enjoyed popularity with Japanese right-wingers keen to dismiss anti-Japan protests as products of Communist thought control and Chinese political “immaturity.” (12) It has also been deployed, with apparently unconscious irony, by mainland officials lambasting Hong Kongers protesting against the introduction of “Moral and National Education”; (13) the latter, they claim, are the stooges of “Western imperialism,” “brainwashed” by decades of British colonial education. But even in so far as popular attitudes can be attributed to official programmes of political socialisation, the question remains: what makes people receptive to certain types of political socialisation, but not to others? (14)

Here it is salutary to recall that Taiwan was subjected for 40 years to a concerted Kuomintang (KMT) campaign of political re-socialisation, aimed at transforming the island’s inhabitants into ardent Chinese patriots infused, amongst other things, with a proper resentment of Japanese depredations. However, Taiwanese entered the post-Cold era arguably more ambivalent about their Chinese identity than in 1945, and in the grip of a popular “fever” for all things Japanese. Its remoteness from geopolitical reality and lived experience, as well as the KMT’s own record of oppression, rendered the official vision of nationhood, and Japan’s place within it, implausible or unpalatable to many. Viewed through the prism of four decades of Martial Law, the colonial period assumed a sepia-tinted aura, as an era of rational modernisation under largely benevolent Japanese trusteeship. This vision finds distinct echoes in the National Museum of Taiwan History (see Edward Vickers’ article on museums). Images of Japan have been implicated in an ongoing – and doubtless never-ending – struggle to redefine an orthodox vision of the national past, in the context of an increasingly diverse and complex popular discourse on matters of history and identity.

The portrayal of Japan in official discourse thus cannot be understood simply as the work of Svengalian apparatchiks. Even in an authoritarian context such as the mainland PRC, textbook and museum narratives reflect as well as help to direct popular perceptions and prejudices, as political elites manoeuvre to reinforce their legitimacy. Agency in shaping these perceptions is distributed amongst those elites, the media, activist groups, and the wider public of Chinese societies, as well as to actors within Japan itself. And as Yinan He observes, even when official bilateral ties are as fraught as at present, scope remains for people-to-people contacts to foster relationships drawing on sources besides the poisoned well of wartime memory. To be sure, social and political divisions within both Japan and China, as well as geopolitical factors, render this difficult; but these divisions also underline the diversity of these societies. Officially sanctioned linear national narratives notwithstanding, there is not one “China” or one “Japan,” or even one “Taiwan” or “Hong Kong,” but many, just as there are important dimensions of identity that transcend the nation-state. Even if school texts continue largely to ignore this, perhaps we can hope that greater civil society contacts across national boundaries will make it increasingly apparent to those in a position to influence public opinion, in Japan as well as in China.

12. See, for example, the article “Prepare for a Hundred Years War with China and Korea,” in the Japanese monthly magazine, Bungei Shunju, September 2013, pp. 94-112 (in Japanese). See also comments from Japanese informants interviewed by Stephen Robert Nagy.