

The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands:

How media narratives shape public opinion and challenge the global order

Ed. by Thomas A. Hollihan. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. vii, 316 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-44335-9.

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The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands explores the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands controversy from the perspective of media diplomacy. In the introductory chapter, Hollihan specifies that the compendium seeks to explore how the governments of China, Japan, and the United States have “used the media to communicate simultaneously with their domestic and overseas audiences” (p. 3).

The compendium consists of ten chapters, including an introduction and conclusion by Hollihan. Except for one chapter about the theoretical aspects of media diplomacy, the remaining chapters compare the content of the narratives of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as presented by legacy media, social and digital media, as well as by history textbooks. All of the authors have a background in media studies and journalism.

One of the main arguments is that when each country produces their own respective media narratives, they are, in the words of Joseph Nye, participating in “a contest of competitive credibility” (p. 235), the goal of which, in this case, is to reach a diplomatic solution to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands issue. In support of this argument, Takeshi Suzuki

and Shusuke Murai describe how Japanese mainstream media speaks of an irrational China counterfeiting arbitrary territorial claims, while Zhan Zhang describes how Chinese state media speaks of an unrepentant Japan and a victimized China. Zhang’s comparison of how the August 2012 anti-Japanese protests were covered differently in Chinese, and English language editions of Chinese state media is particularly informative.

The authors, notably Patricia Riley, further contend that territorial disputes in a process of entrenchment often become more and more intertwined with other issues over time, making a diplomatic solution gradually harder to achieve. The argument is substantiated by Shubo Li and Hiroko Okuda’s accounts of how history textbooks have contributed to “issue-linkage” and the institutionalization of the conflict in China and Japan (p. 238). It is also supported by the chapters by Zhan Zhang, Miao Feng, Elaine J. Yuan, Takeshi Suzuki and Shusuke Murai, on how the conflict was covered in legacy, social and digital media.

One concern pertains to the bias shown in some of the articles. For example, in her chapter on Chinese state media, Zhan Zhang make statements

such as, “An *analytical* report by Xinhua News on December 2 blamed the United States for the unfolding crisis [...]. Despite these efforts to urge the United States to *keep its nose out of the dispute*, however, on January 18 [...] Clinton again acknowledged that the Diaoyu islands were under the administrative authority of Japan” (p. 101; emphasis added). These kinds of biases are perhaps related to the Chinese narratives in the compendium being provided by Chinese scholars, and the Japanese narratives being provided by Japanese scholars. Still, it may be argued that Hollihan compensates for this pitfall by providing an equal number of articles from Japanese and Chinese perspectives.

Another concern is the title of the compendium. According to the title, the main topics are “how media narratives shape public opinion” and how they “challenge the global order.” The first problem is that the authors describe social and digital media discourse as an indicator of “public opinion” (p. 14) while, at the same time, analysing social and digital media discourse as a narrative in its own respect. To some extent, this equates the question of “how media narratives shape public opinion” with “how public opinion shapes public opinion” or “how social and digital media narratives shape social and digital media narratives”. This indicates, at best, a sloppy use of terms. Secondly, although “global order” appears to be an important term in the compendium, Hollihan’s introduction does not clarify how the concept is to be understood. He does mention that controversies such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute “can be deeply disruptive to the interconnected global order and economy” (p. 3), but what this order refers to, be it multilateral international institutions, political and social stability in East Asian countries, or the hegemonic dominance of the United States, remains a mystery.

Critical marks aside, *The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* is the most elaborate, up-to-date work that applies media diplomacy theory to the specific case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands conflict. It provides elucidating empirical examples

of how government representatives of China, Japan, and the United States attempt to use media to attain domestic and foreign political goals. While many of these examples should already be familiar to the keen observer of East Asian politics, the compendium’s meticulous account of the events leading up to the riots of August 2012 provides some novel insights.

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