

Japan : Anti-China xenophobia stretches from the street to the dinner table

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The territorial disputes between Japan and its nearest neighbors over the islands of Takeshima (Dokdo in Korean) and the Senkakus (Diaoyu in Chinese) have gradually faded from the front pages ; but this does not necessarily mean there have been no repercussions.

Accumulated resentment on both sides serve as a constant irritant, making it easier for conflicts to spill over into other areas. The recent uproar on the issue of wartime sex slaves (« comfort women ») did not occur in a vacuum, but needs to be taken in the context of these kinds of sporadic flareups of nationalistic sentiments.

The phenomenon of increasingly noisy demonstrations against Koreans residing in Japan by members of right-wing groups — after festering for several years mostly on alternative news sites on the Internet — is finally attracting the notice of the mainstream print media, and Diet members have even begun to discuss the possibility of drafting a new law banning inflammatory « hate speech. »

Controversy has also spilled onto the dinner table. Indeed, for the past several months, one of the most consistent topics in the vernacular tabloids has been food safety. While coverage has been balanced in the more responsible reports to also include mention of imports from the United States for example — where past concerns over « mad cow » disease from beef products have given way to genetically altered grains — an overwhelming amount of coverage has singled out the dangers of food imports from China.

Yukan Fuji, an evening tabloid published by the Fuji-Sankei media group, leads the nationally circulated newspapers in terms of both frequency and animosity toward China, with roughly one out of four of its front-page stories attacking some aspect of that country, food included.

In a page-one story on May 18, *Yukan Fuji* went after Chinese vegetables being used in *gyu-don* (beef over rice), a cheap salaryman favorite. On May 21, most of its front page was dominated by a story recommending processes for « driving out » highly toxic Chinese produce. » (« The outer layer of onions should be peeled, and it is effective to pass them through boiling oil. »)

Not to be outdone, *Yukan Fuji*'s rival, *Nikkan Gendai*, last Thursday ran a front-page story with the headline « Extremely toxic rice from China has landed in Japan. »

Since April, *Shukan Bunshun* has been running an ongoing series on food safety, usually involving China. Its May 2-9 issue covered the sources of chicken and beef served at major fast-food franchises.

Aera (May 23) identified the biggest violators of food-safety regulations from China (with number of violations indicated in parentheses) as fresh or frozen leafy green vegetables (222) ; peanuts (112) ; other types of vegetables (77) ; *hatomugi* (*adlay*, aka Job's tears) ; products containing peanuts (74) ; bulb vegetables such as garlic and onions (62) ; frozen prepared foods (166) ; shellfish (61) ; precooked meat products (97) ; and semiprocessed seafood, such as shelled shrimp (35).

More recently, the media has begun to turn its scrutiny to private brand processed foods sold by supermarket and convenience store chains, which also source ingredients from China.

Veteran market researcher William Hall, managing director of Ipsos in Japan, noted that the Chinese media has also been reporting about increasing concerns in regard to its domestic food safety.

« Because of long-term deflation in Japan, in the processed-foods category – such as you might find in a bento- (boxed meal) at a convenience store or on a menu in an *izakaya* (Japanese-style pub) – in the past few years there has been a definite swing to production in China because of lower labor costs, » Hall told The Japan Times. « It is probably physically impossible for Japanese Customs and Quarantine to check on every shipment coming in from China. So overall, I think we are seeing that Japanese concern over food safety is genuine, and not just China-bashing per se. This, combined with changing competitive cost structures, is likely to lead to an increasing shift away from Chinese food products. »

Indeed, *Nikkei Business* (May 13) ran a 20-page special report on how Japanese firms are already in the process of *datsu-Chugoku* (getting out of China), predicting that free-trade agreements will pave the way for a major shift to the south, where ASEAN nations are gearing up to become the next « world's factory » by 2020.

But for now at least, little seems to be restraining the tabloids from occasionally extreme coverage of this topic. *Weekly Playboy* (June 3) ran an expose of China's meat industry, with unappetizing photos of rats and foxes, the falsely labeled meat from which recently led to mass arrests in China. The article did not shy away from noting that communist party leaders and top officials are able to avoid consumption of such products thanks to the availability of their own exclusive inspection facilities.

While food safety should not be downplayed, from the sheer frequency of such coverage and the overwhelmingly negative slant toward China, the current reportage needs to be taken in a context that extends beyond straight news. Perhaps it can be explained as the media's way of providing Japanese readers with an emotional catharsis for their uneasiness over China's growing economic and military clout.

Mark Schreiber, *Japan Times*, May 26, 2013

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/26/national/xenophobia-stretches-from-the-street-to-the-dinner-table/#.UaQS4Niz640>