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Why China Loves to Hate Japan

By Matthew Forney/Beijing

You don't have to look far to see why Chinese grow up learning to hate Japan. Take the forthcoming children's movie, "Little Soldier Zhang," which Beijing-based director Sun Lijun says he made having "learned a lot from Disney." The film chronicles the adventures in the 1930s of Little Zhang, a cute 12-year-old boy feeling his way through an unfriendly world. But the resemblance to Pinocchio ends there. After Japanese invaders shoot Little Zhang's grandmother in the back, the boy seeks revenge by joining an underground Red Army detachment. He moves among heroic Chinese patriots, sniveling collaborators and sadistic Japanese. The finale comes with Little Zhang helping blow up a trainload of Japanese soldiers and receiving a cherished reward: a pistol with which to kill more Japanese. "I thought about including one sympathetic Japanese character, but this is an anti-Japan war movie and I don't want to confuse anyone," says Sun, who will premier his film on International Children's Day.

Chinese kids can be forgiven for thinking Japan is a nation of "devils," a slur used without embarrassment in polite Chinese society. They were raised to feel that way, and not just through cartoons. Starting in elementary school children learn reading, writing and the "Education in National Humiliation." This last curriculum teaches that Japanese "bandits" brutalized China throughout the 1930s and would do so today given half a chance. Although European colonial powers receive their share of censure, the main goal is keeping memories of Japanese conquest fresh. Thousands of students each day, for instance, take class trips to the Anti-Japanese War Museum in Beijing to view grainy photos of war atrocities—women raped and disemboweled, corpses of children stacked like cordwood. As one 15-year-old girl in a blue and yellow school uniform, Ji Jilan, emerged from a recent visit to the gallery, she told a TIME correspondent: "After seeing this, I hate Japanese more than ever."

So it is not surprising that this nationalist animosity reaches the highest levels of government. The Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, recently created shockwaves by saying he would refuse to meet with Japan's prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, at a ground-breaking summit of East Asian nations that begins Monday. Reasons include rising Japanese nationalism and a recent visit by the Japanese Premier to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which commemorates Japan's war dead, including some war criminals from the time of Japan's invasion of China in the 1930s. But underneath that diplomatic spat over history is a struggle for

power and influence in East Asia that is increasingly straining Beijing-Tokyo relations. "The China-Japan relationship in the near term is more tense and worrisome than the potential for conflict elsewhere in the region," says Thomas Christiansen, an expert in Asian security at Princeton University.

Of course, nobody expects China to forget the past. The war launched by Japan's militarist leaders killed an estimated 20 million Chinese. During the Rape of Nanjing in 1937-38, soldiers butchered 300,000 civilians, according to Chinese figures. Most Japanese are aware of what happened but their society has never engaged in the type of introspection common in Germany after the Holocaust. Carefully worded official apologies have landed far short of the five-star kowtow demanded by Beijing, senior Tokyo officials occasionally deny atrocities and just last April a new government-approved textbook written by right-wing groups downplayed the wartime brutality visited on civilians.

The problem is that just as Japanese soldiers once dehumanized Chinese, Beijing's propaganda often paints Japanese as pure monsters. Grade school textbooks recount the callous brutality of Japanese soldiers in graphic detail, and credit the Communist Party with defeating Japan. (Another reason for Japan's surrender, it says, was the atomic bombs dropped by the U.S.) More moderate voices are silenced. A 2000 film by one of China's leading directors, Jiang Wen, remains banned because it depicted friendliness between a captured Japanese soldier and Chinese villagers. Although the film showed plenty of brutality, censors ruled that "Devils at the Doorstep" gave viewers "the impression that Chinese civilians neither hated nor resisted Japanese invaders."

Why keep up the propaganda onslaught 60 years after Japan's surrender? Many suspect China's unelected leaders hope to use anti-Japan sentiment to buttress their own legitimacy. Ever since the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, support for the Communist Party has rested on the shaky foundation of economic growth. Nationalism, by contrast, could prove more enduring. "Reviving war memories keeps the nation united against Japan, and behind the party," says Beijing-based writer Liu Xiaobo. It's a risky strategy. Anti-Japan sentiment grew into rowdy street protests in Beijing and Shanghai in April, which the quickly government suppressed for fear they could spin out of control. But until China's leaders have some new pillar of legitimacy, Liu predicts, "the Japanese will stay devils in China."



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