

ISPP Virtual Seminar Series – Asia-Pacific Region February 2022

Organizers: Ying-yi Hong, Diwa Malaya Quinones, Peter Beattie, Idhamsyah Eka Putra

25 February (Friday) 2022, at 11:30am-1:30pm (New Delhi Time) or 2-4pm (Hong Kong time)

Speaker: **Prof. Seanon Wong**, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Host/Moderator: **Peter Beattie**

Title: **“Ah Q Spirit” at Work? How Governments Manage Citizens’ Sense of Loss in International Conflicts**

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Abstract

It is generally assumed in International Relations that when a country suffers a loss (broadly defined) in an international conflict, its meaning is straightforward to its citizens. However, I argue how citizens “feel” about a loss can be subject to manipulation. Their sense of loss can be mitigated, and in some cases even reversed, through propaganda. Governments utilize what social psychologists call “social creativity strategies” to bolster their national in-group’s collective self-esteem. They “spin” a loss into something that feels less like a loss, even a win. I elaborate on ten such strategies: reversing the value associated with the loss; redirecting attention to another dimension of comparison with the adversary; to another out-group for more positive “downward” comparison; “blasting” at the adversary; portraying a loss as compliance with some desirable norms; re-categorizing the in-group “upward”; engaging the in-group in undue optimism; redirecting attention to past successes against the adversary; contextualizing a loss over a longer time-horizon; and blurring the identity boundary with the adversary. Metaphorically, I label these strategies altogether the “Ah Q” theory of loss management, after the title character in Lu Xun’s novella, *The True Story of Ah Q*. Empirically, I demonstrate how these strategies work with a number of anecdotes and a case study on the Chinese press’ response to Japan’s “nationalization” of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2012.

Speaker Bio

Seanon Wong is Assistant Professor at the Department of Government and Public Administration, and Director of the International Affairs Research Centre, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include international relations theory, security studies, diplomacy, political psychology, and identity and intergroup conflicts. His work has appeared in *Security Studies*, *International Theory*, *Journal of Global Security*

Studies, European Journal of International Relations, International Studies Review, among others. He is on the editorial board of *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* and the Oxford Bibliographies (International Relations), and the international advisory board of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. He is a recipient of the Anthony Deos Young Scholar Award (2022) and the Article Award (2016) from the Diplomatic Studies Section of the International Studies Association.