

# Mutual Understanding & Historical Reconciliation Between Japan & China



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## The Japanese Image of China: the “Changing” & “Unchanging”

From the “rise” of China to its “emergence as a major power” and then to its “rise to superpower status”, the conceptual framework for China has undergone a dramatic shift in the 21st century. China itself set its national goal as becoming a “great modern socialist country”. But the world has cast a suspicious eye on a China that aims to become a “great country”. Japan’s image of China, whose reform and opening it supported from its earliest days in the 1980s as a neighbor, has also changed drastically.

There is no doubt that China, given its territory and population, has always been a major power. But as it has become the world’s second-largest economy, its global impact has grown accordingly. China has also emerged as a serious “problem” for the United States and other democratic countries, particularly its neighbor Japan, as it has retained a one-party, socialist dictatorship as its political system even after the Soviet Union and its East European allies abandoned socialism. Moreover, it has been promoting its “One Belt, One Road” initiative in an attempt to incorporate the countries surrounding it into what amounts to an enormous vision for the future of China.

Although the Communist Party of China (CPC) emphasizes that there is a “historical inevitability” to its current political system, there are increasing views within China in favor of democracy. At the same time, the expectation of the Chinese people toward a future image of a “strong country” is also rising. President Xi Jinping expressed this expectation as the “Chinese Dream” and called on the Chinese people to unite behind it. However, the dream of a strong country was also shared by Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and other Chinese leaders, although its substance has changed with the times. The specifics of the “Chinese Dream” that Xi professes are not clear; what is clear is that China must come to an understanding with the rest of the world about what it means, as its trade war with the US amply demonstrates.

According to the Japan-China Joint Opinion Survey 2018 conducted by the Japanese think-tank Genron NPO and the China International Publishing Group, the ratio of Chinese people who had a “favorable” impression of Japan, at 42.25% of the respondents, increased from the previous year. Meanwhile, the proportion of Japanese people with an “unfavorable” impression of China was still high, and only 13.1% replied that they had a “favorable” impression of China. While the greatest factor contributing to the unfavorable

Japanese impression of China was the bilateral dispute over the Senkaku Islands and Japanese waters and airspace, this was followed by “actions that go against international rules”. And the proportion of Japanese respondents who gave “aggressive acts by the Chinese as a world power in international society” as a response reached 33.5%.

This understanding of China by the Japanese people is reminiscent of their historical understanding of China. Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan made joining the ranks of the Western powers its goal in order to maintain its independence as a sovereign state. It promoted modernization according to rules set by the West in order to be recognized by them as such. As a result, a huge gap in the values held by Japan and China had been created by the time of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Hirobumi Ito, who conducted diplomatic negotiations with China, once said the following about his understanding of China:

“Qing has completely diverged from other states. Although it has at times enjoyed the benefits arising from joining the society of nations, it has failed to observe from time to time the compliance with the responsibilities that accompany this fraternization. Qing always adopts as its policy isolation and suspicion. Therefore, it lacks the fairness and good faith that are necessary to be a good neighbor in diplomatic relations.”

In other words, he claimed that China was ignoring the responsibilities and obligations that it had to uphold as a member of the modern international community and was lacking in “fairness and good faith”. The same understanding of China existed at the time of the Manchurian Incident (1931) and the subsequent Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). For example, the Oct. 21, 1931 edition of the *Asahi Shimbun*, just after the Manchurian Incident occurred, carried the following lines:

“Leaving aside whether or not China currently belongs among the ‘organised peoples’ in the preamble of the Covenant of the League of Nations, it is too obvious that it is not a state that has ‘respect for all treaty obligations.’ As for ‘its sincere intention to observe its international obligations,’ not only can it not be detected at all but there is not even an effective government that is sufficient to honor treaties and fulfill obligations.”

Japan at the time was attempting to protect its concessions in mainland China that had been confirmed by treaties by appealing to the international community that China was not observing the relevant treaties. Meanwhile, China, aiming to recover its sovereign

powers, was undertaking a national movement to roll back foreign concession in its territory under the banner of “revolutionary diplomacy”. Although the *Asahi* report claimed the righteousness of concessions in China, it cannot be denied that the understanding of China reflected in the article was broadly held in Japanese society at the time.

Although the historical background and the context of the arguments are different, it is intriguing that the Japanese image of a China that acts in ways that are different from “international rules” has remained unchanged over the ages.

### The Shift in China’s “Future Image”

When Deng embarked on reform and opening up, China’s goal was to use the next half-century to become a modern country on an equal footing with the developed countries of the world. Needless to say, this goal covered the modernization not only of the economy and the military but also politics and society. In the China-UK negotiations over the return of Hong Kong, Deng put forth a one-country, two-systems solution and promised the world that the political and economic systems of Hong Kong would not be changed for 50 years. Deng looked to the changes in the China of 50 years in the future and expected that it would have adopted a democratic political system similar to that of Hong Kong. In other words, the “transformation of China into Hong Kong” was the future vision of China at the time. The other major powers also foresaw China taking that path. The financial and fiscal support, economic cooperation, and engagement policy of Japan and other developed countries were based on the expectations of China’s democratizing and sharing values with the international community after achieving economic growth.

Deng passed away before the 1997 return of Hong Kong. However, the modernization policy and diplomatic policy that he had put forth continued to impact the path that China would take under the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao regimes. The money, goods, and culture of not only Hong Kong but also the developed market economies flowed into China and had a massive impact on Chinese society. China understood the importance of cooperating with the rest of the world and maintained its diplomatic posture of “concealing one’s strengths and biding one’s time”.

However, since the turn of the century, while China has grown rapidly into a major economic power, the political reform process has remained stalled. The change in China’s political system that the

world had expected, the future image of “democratization”, has yet to emerge. Rather, the political influence of the Chinese government has been extended in Hong Kong, which in turn has become more “China”. In other words, instead of the “transformation of China into Hong Kong”, what has been occurring is the pursuit of the “transformation of Hong Kong into China”, the universal application of the “China model” and “Chinese standards”.

The Japanese understanding of China under socialism has also changed dramatically over the last 40 years. One reason that Japan made peace not with the People’s Republic of China on the mainland but with the Republic of China in Taiwan after the war was its wariness and distaste of a socialist political regime. However, when Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited China in 1972, he stated that socialism was not a unified monolith and that socialism in China was different from socialism in the Soviet Union, and embarked on the normalization of relations with the People’s Republic of China. To the Japanese people at that time, China was less a “socialist state” than a neighbor that was deeply connected to Japan through historical and cultural ties. The presence of the Soviet Union as a powerful communist state also downplayed the image of China as a communist state. Most importantly, China and the Soviet Union were clashing dramatically at the time. Japan, having the Northern Territories and other issues with the Soviet Union, was in the same camp as China with the Soviet Union as the common enemy.

Japan and China went through a honeymoon period in the 1970s and 1980s. In the Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy by the Prime Minister’s Office published on March 15, 1987, asked whether the respondents “feel friendly” towards the US, the Soviet Union, China, and South Korea, China scored highest at 68.6%, followed by the US at 67.5%, South Korea at 39.7%, and the Soviet Union at 8.9%. Many of the Japanese who felt friendly towards China hoped that the distance between the two nations would narrow regarding the values they held as well. Such hopes have all but dissipated since then.

### China During the Xi Era

The “transformation of Hong Kong into China” has been accelerating under the Xi regime. This orientation has been extended to Taiwan, and Taiwan’s “transformation into China” has also come to be observed. The wariness towards Chinese influence seen in last year’s unified local elections is a manifestation of this.

The Xi regime aims at the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese

nation” under the mantra of the “Chinese Dream”, but the Hu regime had already been promoting the “Chinese model” (Beijing Consensus) to the rest of the world.

In addition, China’s political leaders, since Sun Yat-sen, have consistently upheld the vision of a “strong country” and maintained the goal of escaping from its humiliating modern history, both in terms of economic power and mindset. This “escape from humiliation” was generally perceived as having been achieved around 2010, when China became the second-largest economy in the world. A turnaround in China’s domestic and external policies also occurred around this time. It was at this time of transition, in November 2010, that Xi assumed the position of general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party.

Xi had multiple policy options at his disposal. He could have held firm to the course of “concealing one’s strengths and biding one’s time” and a “peaceful rise”. However, the “spirit of the times” in China craves release from the history of humiliation and no longer wants a cautious leader. Xi, who had been strongly affected by the Mao era, was a leader who matched the dramatically altered social trends. It was the spirit of the times that propelled Xi to the top.

### Historical Perspective that Generates the Spirit of the Times

The spirit of the times in China is closely connected to the “historical perspective”. The Chinese state’s view of history has been redrawn many times since the 1980s. When China switched to a modernization path, the “revolutionary view of history” that had dominated till then was put into a diminished perspective. The historical evaluation of Westernization and the Westernization Movement in modern history changed dramatically, as they were reevaluated as phenomena that contributed to the modernization of China.

However, there were limits to the changes in the state’s view of history. The diminishment of the revolutionary view of history would come up against the understanding of the legitimacy of the regime, so there was no decisive change in the historical view of the state. Meanwhile, in the “realm of the intellect”, the “civilizational view of history” and the “Republic’s view of history” emerged, in which the Yihetuan (righteous and harmonious group) movement, which had been considered an anti-imperialist revolutionary movement, was reinterpreted as an anti-civilizational, anti-humanist act of violence,

and the Republic of China era from 1912 to 1949 was separated from the history of the revolution and portrayed as the core of China’s modern history.

This resulted in generating “enthusiasm for the Republic” and the legitimacy of the history of the revolution came to be questioned. The diversification of the historical views had a decisive effect on the understanding of the current state of affairs by the Chinese. If there is a shift from a history centered on the Communist Party to one centered on the Republic of China, the depiction of the post-1949 history of the People’s Republic of China also changes. China’s leadership, which values stability above all, cannot look away from this state of affairs. The reemergence of a view of history centered on the history of revolution had become unavoidable. Given that a full-fledged reversion to the historical view of the Mao era would be an anachronism, the answer had to be found in the traditional Chinese views of the state, the world, and values.

Meanwhile, another spirit that emerged mainly in the “realm of the intellect” has been permeating Chinese society over the last 30 years as the influence of intellectuals has grown. That is the tendency to interpret each era according to the realities of the history. How this spirit of the times will influence Chinese society of the future deserves attention.

The view of history in China has changed and developed in this manner. Meanwhile, the view of history that many Japanese have can be called the “1945 view of history”. Essentially, this says that the Japanese people are engaged in a dialogue with 1945 in order to understand Japanese society today. In other words, if asked where Japan today came from, many Japanese will respond that their understanding is that daily life and the order of things in Japan today were created with the defeat in 1945. Many Japanese explain Japan today through a dialogue with the history since 1945.

Meanwhile, the people of China understand contemporary China through their dialogue with China’s humiliating modern history including the 1840 Opium War. Specifically, their view of history is that it was the invasion by Western powers and Japan that produced China’s “stagnation” and that as Japan and China use history as a mirror to see the present, it is inevitable that they fail to find common ground in their understanding of the past.

### Historical Perspective Required in “China Studies”

Then how should China in its current state be understood and how

should China's orientation be foreseen? The future of "China studies" is in play here. Since the modern age, Japan has constructed its unique version of China studies (sinology). Today, China studies that keep pace with the dramatic changes in their subject are called for.

According to Prof. Kazuko Mori, China studies in modern Japan draw on the tradition of "Oriental studies". This approach was founded by such Oriental history scholars as Michiyo Naka and Kurakichi Shiratori in Tokyo and Jitsuzo Kuwabara in Kyoto and was continued under Sokichi Tsuda and Ichisada Miyazaki among others.

Postwar China studies developed using methods for regional studies under US influence. Political development theory, development economics, and folkloristics were among the means used to conduct regional studies on China. Masataka Banno, Tadao Ishikawa, Shinkichi Eto and others took this approach and were followed by Mori, Mitsuyuki Kagami, Satoshi Amako, and others to create a new era of China studies using the methodology of the social sciences.

According to Kenichiro Hirano, the research during this period distinguished itself because "regional studies in postwar Japan took the lessons of the pre-war and wartime failure to heart, kept an eye on regional studies in the US, and used these as counterexamples, with the result that they did not commit the foolish mistake of contributing to strategic research." Future China studies must be conducted while remaining steadfast to this point of pride.

Now, Mori presents four models regarding the difficulties in contemporary China studies. First is the conventional modernization model, in which the orientation is towards democratization and market economics, albeit with many "Chinese" features. Second is the East Asia model, in which democratization was achieved through economic development. Third is the return-to-tradition model, in which the return to tradition and Confucian values are upheld as the model for the future. Fourth is the China-is-China model, in which the manifested features of contemporary China are considered to be decisively unique. Although the distinction between the third and fourth models is not quite clear, Mori emphasizes the second model.

I would like to propose an integrated model with traditional values at its core. As you can see from the road that modern China has traveled, Sun Yat-sen's thoughts on revolution, Chiang Kai-shek's idea of a modernized China, Mao's endless appetite for revolution, and Deng's pursuit of modernization each introduced new ideas from the world that China required at the time. However, the constitution of the state and the implementation of policies never departed from

the core of traditional Chinese values.

I believe that this method where ideas typical of the respective ages are added to the core is an important means to understanding China. What, then, are these traditional values? Here, I would like to express them through a set of concepts. First is the principle of virtuous governance (rule of men), which can also be expressed as "the highest authority as the standard for all" or authoritarianism. The other is the principle of centralized governance. There is a strong countercurrent of local governance, which highlights the need for research on how the "unity" of China is to be preserved.

### Seeking "Reconciliation" Between Japan & China

Overcoming the "negative assets" of war and achieving reconciliation is an issue yet to be resolved between Japan and China. The two nations achieved political reconciliation by the Japan–China Joint Communiqué (1972) and the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China (1978). However, the reconciliation process between the two peoples has gone off track. When conflict arises over territorial issues, trade, or cultural friction, the diplomatic issue is structurally connected to history issues, and the problem of the "understanding over history" balloons, making reconciliation between the two peoples even more difficult.

Joint historical studies have been conducted between the two countries in their quest for reconciliation, both independently by the private sector and under the initiative of their governments. What has become evident is the need to jointly establish a new study of history aimed at "reconciliation". In other words, efforts must be made to establish a "new history studies" between Japan and China as a "public space of the intellect".

Mutual recognition regarding the understanding of history is the most basic step in bridging the gap between Japan and China. **JS**