Lost in Transition?:
A Historical Perspective of Contemporary Japan’s Search for “Normal” Relations with China

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Abstract

In this paper I trace the trans-war relations between China and Japan, with a focus on Japanese construction and reconstruction of the “special” bilateral relation from the 1930s to the 1980s. First, I will introduce the pre-World War II Japanese notion of “special” relations with China within the context of rising tensions between Japan and Anglo-American powers. Second, I will examine the Japanese effort to reconstruct postwar “special relations” with China in order to overcome the limits prescribed by the Cold War politics in East Asia. Finally, I will explore the legacy of that “special relation” upon the contemporary Japanese search for “normal” relations, with the intent to envision a post-Cold War partnership in the Asian region and the world.

Keywords: Special Relations, Normalization, Guilty Conscience, Yoshida Doctrine, History Textbook Controversies

I. Introduction

Since the 1990s, it has often been pointed out that a main characteristic of Japanese foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century is “a passive, or reactive, posture, in which Japan attempts to achieve security and prosperity, mainly through adapting itself to the existing international environment, based on the recognition that the international environment is basically a given framework that Japan is not capable of changing.” Regarding its relations with Asian neighbors, especially China, Japanese foreign policy has displayed “a posture of minimalism” derived from the notion of “special relations” between China and Japan rooted in the modern period (Kamiya, 2000: 227).

The assessment, however, is correct only in a limited sense. First, the Japanese general tendency to be “passive or reactive” to the international order is not limited to
the post-WWII period, but can be traced to the late nineteenth century. As a latecomer to empire and industrialization, Japanese leaders in the prewar period paid keen interest and attention to the obstacles and opportunities provided by the international setting, prefigured by early developers of Euro-American societies and designed to promote their privileges and interests. Second, within the parameters set by western powers, the Japanese leaders demonstrated activism and creativeness in their approaches to Asian neighbors and constructed “special” relations to carve out their own interests, which were not necessarily compatible with those of western powers. This regional maneuvering within the international system in the name of “special” Sino-Japanese relations has also been a trans-war phenomenon.

By introducing postwar Japan’s construction of “special relations” with China as a trans-war pattern, I argue that Japan’s foreign policy toward the Asian mainland has been dynamic in promoting its own interest and security, despite constraints set by western powers. For this purpose, I will explore the pre-WWII Japanese notion of “special” relations with China within the context of rising tensions between Japan and Anglo-American powers on the issue of “territorial integrity of China.” Eventually, Japan attempted to resolve the China issue by military force, which then led Imperial Japan to challenge Anglo-American powers and ultimately to its total defeat in 1945. The idea and pattern of “special” Sino-Japanese relations, however, once again emerged during the Cold-War period, albeit in a different tone.

II. Modern Japan’s forging of “Special” Relations with China

It is quite well-documented that modern Japan, toward the end of the nineteenth century, aggressively engaged in changing the traditional intra-regional order, the tributary system, into a modern imperialist system. The tributary system, in which China was perceived as the center of the universe, functioned based upon the putative moral superiority of Chinese civilization, rather than from any kind of legal obligations. In this worldview there was no concept of the equal sovereignty of individual states, only the modality of those who possessed morality (civilization) and those who did not (barbarians).1 What Japan introduced to the world of tributary relations was the novel idea of a sovereign, independent state as the actor of intra-regional relations. By making Korea, a loyal tributary state to the Chinese Empire, into an “independent” nation at the end of the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Japan interpolated the “standards” and practices of modern imperialism into the East Asian region (Gong, 1984).

If the idea of the sovereign nation-state as the basic player of international relations was the political norm transferred to the region, the economic principle was the idea of open-door and free-trade in inter-regional relations. A free-trade regime was devised, first by Britain and soon followed by other powers, to regulate their access to the trade of China on advantageous terms, which soon came to be known as the “unequal treaty system.”2 Japan, as a later-comer to industrialization and modern imperialism,

1 For the tributary system in the 19th century East Asian regions, see Kim (1980).
2 On the notion of free-trade imperialism, see Gallagher and Robinson (1953); Beasley (1985).
immediately perceived disadvantageous aspects of a free-trade regime in protecting its national interests. Japan was reluctant to follow the rules and norms of free-trade, especially concerning its relations with the Asian mainland, and attempted to adapt the given system for its own benefit whenever opportunities arose.

Out of this reluctance and suspicion grew the idea that the Sino-Japanese relation was “special,” different from other international relations and, therefore, a new system or order was needed to govern the relations between China and Japan. This kind of idea gradually came into vogue in the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution of 1911, marked by continuous political confusion on the mainland. China in the 1910s underwent a chain of events that led to the fall of the Qing dynasty and the creation of the first republic in Asia. Following the uprising in Wuchang on October 1911, the radical young Chinese elected their leader, Sun Yat-sen, as provisional president with the Provisional Constitution in Nanjing on January 1912. The republicans, however, had to negotiate with Yuán Shikāi, who led the Beiyang army in ‘Tianjin,’ to abdicate the Manchu emperor. Yuán soon developed monarchical ambitions and began a short, 83-day reign as emperor in January 1916. Precipitated by the unexpected death of Yuán in June 1916, the contest for supreme power escalated into a contest between the Guomindang-controlled assembly and the bureaucratic/military-clique-controlled central government. The political confusion deepened until Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek partially unified the mainland in the 1920s.

In an attempt to carve out its own sphere of influence and interest in the Chinese turmoil, Imperial Japan began to devise its “special” relation with China. In concrete terms, the Japanese began to perceive that it deserved a “special” position in Manchuria in order to secure its position as a world power. It was believed that Manchuria’s economic resources were “vital” to Japan, a late-comer to industrialization and a “have-not” country, and also that Manchuria should be separated from China in order for Japan to secure a stable access to the region.3

By 1917, the Japanese leaders managed to formalize Japanese “special” interests in China when Ishii Kikujiro, special envoy to the U.S. and Robert Lansing, Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of State, produced a joint statement that affirmed “territorial propinquity creates special interests between countries” and that acknowledged Japan had such interest “particularly in the part to which her possessions are contiguous” (Lansing-Ishii Agreement, 1917).4 The issue of Japan’s “special” interests became a major source of confusion at the Washington Conference, held between 1921 and 1922. Although the conference achieved agreements on armament limitation and on protecting the territorial integrity of China through a series of multilateral treaties, the conference “failed to reconcile the basic clash between the Open Door and Japan’s claim to special interests in China” (Asada, 1961: 62). Both the U.S. and Japan interpreted the Nine-Power Treaty for the preservation of China’s territory on different terms, for Japan believed that its “special interests” would continue to exist within the framework of the Washington Treaty System.

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3 Such idea became particularly influential among reform-minded officers and officials in the military and civil bureaucracy in the post-WWI period. See Barnhart (2011).
4 See Katsumi (1972) and Beasley (1985: 164).
As for the Japanese, the intellectual groundwork in claiming the need for “special” relations between the two arose from the idea that “China-is-not-yet-a-modern-nation.” For that reason, the argument was, the modern international norm of respecting territorial integrity could not be applied to China. Reacting to the continuous political instability in China, China specialists in Japan came to the conclusion that the modern state or “true political unity” did not yet exist in China (Han, 2005). For example, Jin’ichi Yano (1872-1979), a professor of East Asian history at Kyoto Imperial University, writing in major newspapers like the Ōsaka Asahi and nationwide journals such as Gaikō jihō and Taiyō, expanded the premise to highlight the “special” character of Manchuria.

Yano acknowledged that once, when Sinocentrism had buttressed the East Asian order, Mongolia, Tibet, and Manchuria might have belonged to the Chinese cultural world. In reality, he argued, these regions had never been under China’s formal control. Now that the coming of the Western powers had made the Sinocentric world order obsolete, and there being no centralized authority in China to replace the bygone monarchy, it became even more implausible to regard these areas as Chinese territory. Since China was not yet a modern civilization, the argument goes, international society’s affirmation of China’s territorial integrity was at best based on an illusion. Subjected to “extremely fluid” conditions, Manchuria came to be known as a “special region” (tokushū chiiki) and should therefore be treated “specially” (Yano, 1922: 49).

By the time of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, such thoughts of forging a “special” relation between China and Japan encroached on the Japanese discourse about China and paved the way toward building a Japan-centered new regional order in the late 1930s. This kind of thinking led many Japanese to grossly misjudge the intensity of Chinese commitment to national independence and functioned as a catalyst for the demise of the Japanese empire by dragging Japan into an all-out war against China, and then the Allied powers.

III. Postwar Japan’s Remaking of “Special” Relations with China

Japan pursued a new order in East Asia, based on the “special” Sino-Japanese relations, which posed a challenge to Anglo-American imperialisms in the 1930s and during World War II. In the immediate postwar period and the ensuing Cold-War period, Japan turned the term “special” on its head to restore the bilateral relations that were compatible with the U.S.-led regional relations.

Private channels and networks cultivated both in China and Japan played a critical role in restoring postwar “special” bilateral relations. In Japan, “old China hands,” who were often influential in domestic politics and also had influential friends in China, actively involved themselves in “private” diplomacy and contributed to raising the bilateral contacts from private to semi-official, and eventually, to official levels. The activities of “pro-China” conservatives in the ruling party, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), for example, played a constructive role in bringing out the normalization process (Ogata, 1965: 394-96; Johnson, 1986: 405-07; Wan, 2006: 99-105).

Steadily growing economic ties between China and Japan would be a decisive
factor that characterized postwar “special” relations. Although the East Asian region was radicalized by the bipolar Cold War system throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, China and Japan managed to avoid militarily engagement. Instead, as early as 1946, trade between China and Japan revived and, after 1949, trade between the two gained “momentum and soon came to surpass that between Japan and the Indian subcontinent” (Iriye, 1990: 631). Even during the Korean War, the bilateral trade between China and Japan continued and, by 1965, Japanese exports to China exceeded its imports, as well as its exports to Taiwan (Iriye, 1990: 630-32).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the militarization of Cold-War Asia in the 1950s and the 1960s, both governments recognized their mutual interests in maintaining commercial ties and continued economic interactions, so as to avoid military engagements. Known as the policy of “separation of politics and economics (seikei bunri)” in Japan, the emphasis on the economic interaction became the underlining approach to “special” relations. Set by the mainstream conservatives (hoshu honryū), centered on Yoshida Shigeru, who was the prime minister from 1946 to 1947 and again from 1948 to 1954, the policy of “separation of politics and economics” was an integrating part of Yoshida Doctrine, which promoted postwar Japan’s economic development, while maintaining a low profile in international politics.5

The Japanese decision to normalize diplomatic relations with China in 1972 facilitated the institutionalization of the policy of “separation of politics and economics.” In part responding to the China-U.S. rapprochement and in part utilizing China questions to gain premiership, Tanaka Kakuei, with his associate Ōhira Masayoshi, Foreign Minister, made a swift decision to visit China and normalize bilateral relations (Hattori, 2010). Compounded by the “guilty conscience” shared by the Japanese public, pro-China and mainstream conservatives set the general tone of postwar “special” bilateral relations.6 Particularly strong among “progressive” intellectuals in Japan, but not limited to them, was the existence of the popular attitude that Japan mistreated China in the past and that Japan should now atone for its guilt by extending a helping hand (Ogata, 1965: 392). Such Japanese attitudes grew stronger when China voluntarily gave up war reparations in its move for diplomatic normalization.7 In return, a series of Japan’s low-interest “yen-loans” and official development assistance followed, intending to facilitate and strengthen Sino-Japanese normalization. From 1979 to 1998, the Japanese government provided four packages of long-term yen loans to China, amounting to a total of more than 2,000 billion yen.8 As a result, “Japan became China’s first aid donor and has been its largest source of economic bilateral assistance ever since” (Wan, 2006: 263). All these interactions were soon to be generally understood by the Japanese as compensation for past aggression against China.

5 On Yoshida Doctrine, see Pyle (1992).
6 The term was also used by Hashimoto Hiroshi, who was at the time behind the normalization as a head of the China section in Asia department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Hattori, 2010: 45-46).
7 There is little evidence that China gave up war reparations to use this to extract other concessions from Japan. Rather, Taiwan’s decision to give up reparation influenced China’s decision. Also the Chinese government wanted to improve its relations with Japan to deter the Soviet threat. See Wan (2006: 86-88).
8 On the issue of Japan’s ODA to China, see Chapter 10 of Wan (2006).
The sentimental attitude in Japan, however, came to be a burden for the Japanese in making necessary adjustments when reworking Sino-Japanese relations. When the historical grievance erupted in China in 1982, triggered by the Japanese history textbook controversies, many Japanese felt a sense of betrayal. Increasingly, many Japanese argue that China is “manipulating” history issues against Japan and taking advantage of the Japanese sense of guilt in order to advance China’s objectives. Japan, the argument goes, habitually adopts a “low posture” and remains conciliatory toward disputes triggered by the Chinese.9

To some extent, such Japanese claims are not without an element of truth. There has been a growing tendency in the Chinese government to reprise the history issues at the center of Sino-Japanese relations since the early 1980s. In part, the revised tendency was motivated by the domestic power struggle between reformers and conservatives in China. The Chinese government found “the history card” convenient and effective in mobilizing patriotism in the wake of the weakening legitimacy of communism in unifying the nation that was undergoing rapid modernization and industrialization (Whiting, 1989; Ijiri, 1990: 644-647; Tanaka, 1983; Yang, 2003).

Immersed in their own hurt feelings, however, some Japanese critiques fail to appreciate the dynamics of popular nationalism in China, which has deeper roots than recent governmental manipulation. It has been pointed out that even in the early 1970s, the Chinese public maintained strong negative sentiments toward Japan despite the Chinese government’s efforts to promote “friendship” with Japan (Wan, 2006: 106). Popular anti-Japanese memories and feelings have been repressed rather than resolved in the Cold-War framework, and the past is now emerging as a potent force in China (Rana, 2007; Hevia, 2007).

It must also be pointed out that Japanese economic assistance was not divorced from its own pragmatist pursuit of national interests. Settling the China issue through diplomatic normalization and ensuing business relations was expected to play the function of stabilizing domestic politics, as seen in the words of Tanaka Kakuei, “two thirds of our domestic troubles or disputes (kokumai no gotagota).”10 It also may well be that the strong yen was finding an easy outlet in China through ODA (Iriye, 1990: 633). Furthermore, at a time when Japan was having trade frictions with the U.S. and Europe in the late 1970s and onwards, Japan benefitted from the expanded trade with China. Additionally, the Long-Term Trade Protocol, signed in 1978, stipulated that Japan would export complete industrial plants to China in exchange for Chinese crude oil and coal. Japan, therefore, would secure long-term supplies of energy while also reaping benefits in its plant engineering industry for business in developing countries (Wan, 2006: 60, 98). In this sense, despite the asymmetrical relationship, both China and Japan mutually benefitted from the bilateral interaction. In fact, “Japan’s postwar China policy has been subtle, sophisticated, and largely successful” (Johnson, 1986: 403).

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9 For example, Ijiri (1990); Kojima (1994).
10 Quoted in Kawashima and Hattori (2007: 300).
IV. Epilogue: Lost in Transition from “Special” Relations to “Normal” Relations

Postwar Japan has displayed a shrewd reconstruction of “special” Sino-Japanese relations in order to promote mutual interests within the parameter set by Cold-War power politics. Japan, who learned the hard way in WWII that a unilateral, militarist challenge to the international system brought only total defeat, showed restraint, so as to promote “special” interests in China on economic terms only. Emotionally facilitated by its sense of guilt, postwar Japan institutionalized “special” relations with China, initially by diplomatic normalization, and soon after by the deepening commercial and business interdependence.

The ending of the Cold-War in East Asia, which overlapped with China’s emergence as a competitive actor in the world economy, led many Japanese to question the validity of the “special” Sino-Japanese relations. More and more Japanese are concerned with Japan’s position in Asia and are calling for a redefinition of the Sino-Japanese relationship. That is, they wish to transform the “special” bilateral relations into “an integral part of normal multilateral relations in the world and the Asia-Pacific (Kojima, 1994: 215).”

Despite the growing need for the transition from “special” to “normal” Sino-Japanese relations, it seems that Japan is lost in its search for “normal” relations and that Japan will remain lost for some time to come. The reasons are twofold, one is bilateral and the other is domestic. First, both modern and contemporary Japan lacks the historical experience of having symmetrical relations with China. In modern times, Imperial Japan had asymmetrical relations with Imperial China, and that continued as a de-centralized China struggled to become an independent, modern nation-state.

Postwar Japan’s reconstruction of a “special” relation with China continued to be asymmetrical in the sense that Japan had been “a developed, capitalist, and pacifist economic power,” China had been “a developing, socialist political power” (Wan, 2006: 94, 107). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the structure of Sino-Japanese relations has transformed itself into a more symmetrical one in which both China and Japan have come to seek similar goals and strategic objectives toward becoming full-fledged powers. This is a new situation for Japan, and for China as well, and Japan will need more time to envision a “normal” Sino-Japanese relationship in a symmetrical context.

Second, lack of political leadership in contemporary Japan is clouding its search for “normal” relations. Since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1972, the nature of Sino-Japanese relations has evolved into the stage in which both societies are involved far more actively and on a larger scale. Increasing transnational social involvements and movements through business interactions, cultural and educational exchanges, and both online and offline media activities have emerged as powerful forces in shaping bilateral relations. It has been observed that the increase in and broadening of bilateral involvement is not always engendering mutual understanding and friendship, and is at times fostering mutual misperceptions and distortions in both

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11 Such postwar asymmetry, ironically, set the ground for “special” Sino-Japanese relations to function since different identities and objectives turned out to be compatible.
societies, which in turn necessitate political leadership that can balance domestic and international politics.

Yet, contemporary Japanese politics is in disarray and is unable to produce a leadership that can envision new Sino-Japanese relations. Generational change contributed to the current situation in which “old China hands,” who in the past have played critical roles in forming and managing the bilateral relations, pass from the scene. Within the LDP, the party that shaped postwar Sino-Japanese relations, “pro-China factions” have become increasingly marginalized. Outside the party, the left-oriented parties have become significantly weakened (Calder and Ye, 2010: 146). Although there has been an emergence of a new generation of “professionals” on bilateral relations who have come to replace “old pipelines” and have committed themselves to construct stable relations, their influence upon domestic politics which seeks to reshape bilateral relations remain less effective than earlier “old China hands” (Wan, 2006: 146). This, in turn, clouds Japan’s transition to “normal” Sino-Japanese relations in which political dynamics are expected to carry greater weight.

References


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