

## **Beyond the 40th Anniversary of Sino-Japan Relations: How do the Japanese perceive the rise of China?**

Yoshikazu KATO<sup>1</sup>

### ***1. Sino-Japan relations enter a new stage***

In the course of human history, East Asia has never faced a situation in which two strong, economically powerful nations have coexisted simultaneously.

In the ancient era, China was one of the strongest powers in the world; during that extended time, Japan, as the weaker side, implemented tributary diplomacy toward China.

China was strong; Japan was weak.

After the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Japan began to exceed China in the balance of power. The Meiji Restoration had prompted Japan to push forward with modernization, and eventually China was defeated by Japan and subsequently failed in its Hundred Days Reform of 1898.

With Japan's rise and fall before and after World War II, both domestically and internationally, and especially after the collapse of the Cold War and the bubble economy, and China's acceleration of its Reform and Opening policy instituted by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, East Asia seems to have entered what might be called a "Two Giants Era."<sup>2</sup> The dynamic rise of China and the relative decline of Japan at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have reshaped the general power structure of East Asia.

However, the new structure in recent years has undermined the Sino-Japan bilateral relationship and destabilized the entire East Asia region as well. Narrow, emotional and inward-looking nationalism on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Yoshikazu KATO is currently a visiting lecturer at the School of Journalism, Fudan University, and a research fellow at the Research Center of Korean Peninsula Studies, Peking University and the Charhar //spelling ok?// Institute in China, and the Shonan Fujisawa Campus (SFC) Institute of Keio University in Japan. He is also a columnist for the Financial Times (Chinese version-U.K.), Asian Weekly (HK), Guangzhou Daily (China) and The Nikkei Asian Review (Japan). Kato has published more than 10 books on China, the Sino-Japan relationship and other topics in Japan, mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> This is not the same as the so-called G-2, which refers to China and the United States.

part of both China and Japan is rising. Politicians in the two nations have, dangerously, tended to “compromise” with hyper-populist opinion among the public, especially on the Internet.

Now Sino-Japan relations have entered a new stage. How both governments and citizens of each nation communicate and perceive each other in the Two Giants Era, maximize their own national interests, and contribute to regional peace and prosperity is an essential issue.

This, in my eyes, is the great challenge for Japan and China.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. The governments of both sides would be wise to try as much as possible to make a point of the mutual importance of this year.<sup>3</sup>

For Japan, 2012 is a “restoration year” after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011; for China, it is a year of transition, in which the leaders at the national level will be changed. Under these circumstances, the two sides must inevitably concentrate on coping with domestic affairs, and try to have deliberate stances on management of the bilateral relationship, to avoid any confrontations in strategic areas.

Strategic stability can be realized on the basis of mutual vulnerabilities between Japan and China. I am personally paying close attention to whether and when a Chinese leader will visit Japan this year, and to how long Japan’s Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda can maintain his power through 2012. These will absolutely influence the comprehensive relationship between China and Japan.

## ***2. Three pillars of future Sino-Japan relations***

Through observation and thinking for nine years since coming to China and being based in Beijing, I have come up with three pillars to interpret the

---

<sup>3</sup> In *The 40th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China, and the opening ceremony of 2012, “Friendship Year for Japan-China People-To-People Exchanges”*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, to enhance exchanges and promote mutual understanding between the peoples of Japan and China, the leaders of both countries agree to designate 2012 as “Friendship Year for Japan-China People-To-People Exchanges,” and both the public and private sectors in Japan and China are organizing a series of events to mark the anniversary. (See the Web site of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: [http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2012/2/0201\\_02.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2012/2/0201_02.html))

future of the development of Sino-Japan relations.

First, **China and Japan have pushed forward their mutual relationship in a positive direction for the long run.** “Multi-dimensional interdependence”<sup>4</sup> could be shaped as a symbolic context for bilateral relations. “Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests,”<sup>5</sup> an initiative launched by the two governments in 2006, should become a principle for the two societies.

Second, at the same time, **emotions among the people in both China and Japan have been the biggest uncertainty in bilateral relations, due to their complex, tenacious and fragile nature.** Emotions running high among citizens of the two countries is the most serious problem requiring our attention and concern.

Third, **contingency events could stir up nationalism and bring about crises of trust between the two nations.** For example, the poisoned dumplings crisis at the beginning of 2008 became a serious emergency that worsened Japanese feelings toward China and destabilized bilateral relations.<sup>6</sup> To understand why emergency events inevitably lead to a rise in

---

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Report on recent Sino-Japan relations and Chinese domestic circumstances*, March 2012, Department of China and Mongolia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, mutual trade totals \$344.9 billion (2011); Japanese foreign direct investment in China was \$6.35 billion (2011); Japanese companies with operations in China totaled 22,263 in 2009, the greatest number among all foreign nations. In 2010, 3,730,000 //Japanese// people visited China, and 1,660,000 //Chinese// visited Japan (Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan not included); up to Oct. 1, 2010, 131,534 Japanese were living in China (including Hong Kong); in 2009, 15,409 Japanese students were studying in China; in 2010, 86,173 Chinese students were studying in Japan.

<sup>5</sup> In response to an invitation extended by the government of Japan, Chinese President Hu Jintao made an official visit to Japan from May 6-10, 2008. During his visit, Hu met with His Majesty the Emperor of Japan. He also had talks with then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, and they reached understandings on various points related to the comprehensive promotion of a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” and issued a joint statement. (See the Web site of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint0805.html>)

<sup>6</sup> In June-July 2008, the China Daily and the Japanese think tank Genron NPO released the results of a joint investigation, “How do the Japanese and Chinese perceive each other?” in which 1,500 to 2,500 citizens from different cities and classes in China and Japan were interviewed. According to the investigation, 82.3% of Chinese ordinary citizens and 64.9% of university students held optimistic attitudes about future Sino-Japan relations, a ratio much improved over the previous year. On the other hand, //Japanese// who thought “bilateral relations will improve in the future” totaled 32.2% (-8.7%) among ordinary citizens and 50.8% (-16.9%) among intellectuals. 75.3% Chinese and 76.3% of students thought “Sino-Japan relations will improve over last year,” but only 25.2% of Japanese had the same feeling. In addition, 75.6% of Japanese had a “bad

unhealthy nationalism, three factors in Sino-Japan relations should be considered: **The discordant systems, the lack of crisis management and the perception gap.**

### *3. Can Japanese “accept” the rise of China?*

Let me state my conclusion first: **The Japanese have basically accepted the rise of China, even after the historic switch in GDP positions.**

In 2010, China exceeded Japan in total amount of GDP, becoming the second-largest economic power in the world. Most Japanese had awaited this historical event rationally, even believing that an open, prosperous and dynamic Chinese economy could provide Japan with enormous benefits. Japan did not have to take countermeasures against the rise of China, but instead needed to take advantage of it. Many believed restoring the Japanese economy without a free and open Chinese market would be impossible.

This kind of perception, which is both reasonable and pragmatic, seemed to be universal, especially among businessmen considering the huge and potentially lucrative Chinese market.

In the area of economics and finance, nobody seems to agree that “the rise of China would be unacceptable.” They not only accept it, they enthusiastically expect the rapid and long-term growth of the Chinese economy.

The problem then is how Japan can take advantage of the rise of China based on its own grand strategy, and stimulate the “re-reform and re-opening-up” of Japanese society, which is at a crossroads following the 3/11 crisis. That should be a core question for Japan’s government and citizens in the post-crisis period.

At the governmental level, Japan and China have already normalized mutual perceptions. Former Japanese Ambassador to China Yuji Miyamoto emphasizes in a recent book the importance of the “Joint Statement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Comprehensive Promotion of a Mutually Beneficial Relationship

---

impression” of China, and this number was 9.3% higher compared with 2007. (See Yoshikazu KATO, *Learning with each other – Observation and Thinking on Sino-Japan Relations*, Beijing, Oriental Press, 2009.)

Based on Common Strategic Interests,” signed by two top leaders in May 2008. In the joint statement, both China and Japan define the rise or development of each other as “peaceful.”<sup>7</sup> “It was the first time that China had described Japanese development after World War II with the words ‘peaceful nation,’” Mr. Miyamoto points out.<sup>8</sup>

The biggest uncertainty is at the level of people-to-people relations. I suppose misunderstandings or misperceptions will inevitably increase in accordance with rapidly developing, multi-dimensional communications. People in China and Japan need to consistently communicate with each other with tolerance.

**Mutual understanding and trust will take a long time.**

One phenomenon in particular is interesting and needs to be taken into consideration. **Emotions among Chinese and Japanese against each other’s countries suffer a lack of balance.** While Chinese emotions toward Japan would obviously be influenced by political circumstances, Japanese emotions toward China have been much more changeable and unstable over the last couple of years.

As I mentioned before, Chinese emotions toward Japan were greatly improved when President Hu Jintao visited Japan in May 2008. The Great Sichuan earthquake struck on May 12 that year, and, desiring to help

---

<sup>7</sup> According to item No. 4 of the statement, the two sides recognize that they are partners who cooperate and are not a threat to each other. The two sides reiterate that they support each other’s peaceful development, and they share the conviction that Japan and China, upholding the course of peaceful development, would bring great opportunity and benefit to Asia and the world. (1) The Japanese side expresses its positive evaluation of the fact of China’s development since the start of Reform and Opening policy, saying that China’s development has offered great opportunities for the international community, including Japan. The Japanese side states its support of China’s resolve to contribute to the building of a world that fosters lasting peace and common prosperity. (2) The Chinese side expresses its positive evaluation of Japan’s consistent pursuit of the path of a peaceful country and Japan’s contribution to the peace and stability of the world through peaceful means over the more than 60 years since World War II. The two sides agree to strengthen dialogue and communication on the issue of United Nations reform and to work toward enhancing common understanding with each other on this matter. The Chinese side attaches importance to Japan’s position and role in the United Nations and desires Japan to play an even greater constructive role in the international community. (3) Both sides state that they will resolve bilateral issues through consultations and negotiations. (See the Web site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint0805.html>)

<sup>8</sup> Yuji Miyamoto, *From Now On, How to Communicate with China* (Tokyo, Nippon Keizai Shimbun Press, 2011), p153-164

manage the crisis, the Japanese government dispatched professional rescue teams to the disaster area before any other countries did.

Unfortunately, the mutual emotions between Chinese and Japanese during that term were not interactive. Because of the negative impact of the poisoned dumpling incident that occurred at the beginning of 2008, ordinary Japanese completely lost trust and confidence in China.

What we should learn from the incident as a precious lesson is supposed to be that Japanese tend to recognize livelihood issues such as food, health, the environment, public order and so on as the most important criteria to judge the meaning of the rise of China or how Chinese characteristics will be shaped.

Comparatively, Chinese people place more emphasis on political circumstances such as how often top leaders visit or whether the Japanese prime minister has a “sincere” attitude on historical matters, especially on how to deal with the Yasukuni Shrine issue.

One more thing should be pointed out. Although I referred to “Japanese basically accept the rise of China” earlier, emotions among ordinary people toward the rise of China are still very complicated.

According to research on public opinion regarding diplomacy, which has been investigated continuously for more than 30 years after being launched by the Japanese Cabinet Office, those who feel an affinity for China totaled 20.0% (2010) and 26.3% (2011), while those who do not feel an affinity for China were 77.8% (2010) and 71.4% (2011). These numbers were pretty optimistic in 1980 – at that time, they were 78.6% (affinity) and 14.7% (no affinity).<sup>9</sup>

For most of the Japanese public, their perception of the rapid rise of China surely reflects how they perceive the relative decline of Japan. In this sense, **the rise of China has been like a “mirror” for a re-identification process for the Japanese.** They are not only very cautious toward China, but they are also losing confidence in themselves. That is why, no matter how China and Japan promote or stabilize their bilateral relations, at least in the short term, Japanese emotions toward China and the Chinese will not be pushed forward dramatically.

In order to keep these emotions from plunging to the bottom, three

---

<sup>9</sup> *Report on Recent Sino-Japan Relations and Chinese Domestic Circumstances*, March 2012, Department of China and Mongolia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan.

conditions must be ensured.

First, the top leaders should visit each other often, to maintain a friendly atmosphere between China and Japan.

Secondly, under consistent political stability, “multi-dimensional interdependences” should proceed sequentially.

Thirdly, the two governments have to establish and regularize a “joint committee on crisis management against emergency events” as soon as possible so as to tackle any uncertainties that occur in different areas – livelihood, business, territory, history, cultural exchange and so on – between Japan and China.

The strategic mechanism which could facilitate mutual and frank communication in different areas between the two nations would play a crucial role in a time of misperceptions and distrust.