

Peace and Reconciliation through Environmental Cooperation: Changing the Image of Japan in Chin

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Abstract

Painful historical memories and their resulting animosities are often seen as insurmountable obstacles to peace and reconciliation between China and Japan. But historical memories are not necessarily immutable and can be reshaped and reconstructed through the processes of social interaction. It is possible, therefore, that major obstacles to peace and reconciliation could be overcome if previously mutually negative images could be reconstructed into more positive ones. The development of Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation over the past 30 years or so, especially in the new millennium, provides precisely such an opportunity for reconstruction of images and hence for a significant breakthrough in Sino-Japanese relations. Peace and reconciliation may emerge through the processes of building an environmental security consensus and through the pursuit of cooperation in countering common environmental threats. Over the few years, a new image of Japan, as a leading environmental nation has begun to emerge and is gaining a measure of acceptance, in China. This paper employs the sociological concept of collective memories, as well as social constructivist concept of collective identity to examine how Japan's image has been constructed and reconstructed in China from the post-war era to the present, which is going beyond the natural rivalry or enemy role structure.

Painful historical memories and their resulting animosities are often seen as insurmountable obstacles to peace and reconciliation between China and Japan. But historical memories are not necessarily immutable and can be reshaped and reconstructed through the processes of social interaction. It is possible, therefore, that major obstacles to peace and reconciliation could be overcome if previously mutually negative images could be reconstructed into more positive ones. The development of Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation over the past 30 years or so, especially in the new millennium, provides precisely such an opportunity for reconstruction of images and hence for a significant breakthrough in Sino-Japanese relations. Peace and reconciliation may emerge through the processes of building an environmental security consensus and through the pursuit of cooperation in countering common environmental threats. This chapter examines the processes by which Japan's image has been constructed and reconstructed in China from the post-war era to 2009. It does so by contrasting Japan's image as an invader and enemy with that of an environmentally cooperative and responsible great power. To this end, the sociological concept of collective memories – especially the distinction between communicative memory (something that is lived and witnessed) and cultural memory (something that is institutionally shaped and sustained), as well as social constructivist concept of collective identity, are used to identify important changes occurring in Sino-Japanese relations.

Collective Memory and the Construction of Identity

The importance of ideational factors (such as identities and interests of states) has been increasingly recognized in the field of International Relations in recent years. Yet, the crucial question (and extremely relevant to this study) is whether identities and interests should be taken as given, that is, as fixed objects that remain outside of social space and time, or whether they should be regarded as processes operating within social time and space. Constructivists, such as Alexander Wendt, argue that identities and interests are always changing because actions continually alter perceptions both of Self and Other. Even though Wendt acknowledges that sometimes these perceptions change so slowly that, for practical purposes, they can be treated as “given” and unchanging, the possibility of change, or fundamental change, remains possible (1999: 36). This possibility matters enormously when seeking to understand the nature of international politics in terms of structural change; and more specifically for capturing the changing nature of Sino-Japanese relations in the new millennium.

In this regard, it is useful to explore the concept of collective memory and to understand how it is constructed through social processes – not least because the collective memory plays an important part in constructing states' identities. This role is particularly crucial to the relationship between China and Japan both in the regional and international contexts. Collective memory is shaped and transmitted by selecting and excluding, by processes of remembering and forgetting, within collective entities such as nation-states or social groups. It is essential to investigate more thoroughly these exercises of selectivity, to determine how they affect the formation of collective identity and to explore the consequences for foreign policy orientation. Here, conceptual distinctions between types of memory are useful. Max Halbwachs, the founding figure of the study of collective memory, distinguished between social memory and historical memory. According to Halbwachs, social memory refers to memory through experience – in other words, history before it becomes history. Historical memory, on the other hand, is an experience mediated by representations, and hence it is represented memory (Halbwachs, 1992). Similarly, Jar Assmann distinguishes between communicative and cultural memories. He describes communicative memory as something that is lived and witnessed, whereas the cultural memory is an institutionally shaped and sustained memory (Assmann, 1995; 2006). Perhaps the most important characteristic of cultural memory (historical memory for Halbwachs) is its “capacity of reconstruction”:

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True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation (Assmann, 1995: 130).

In this sense, collective memory is a social construct that, according to Lavabre, can be defined as an interaction between recollections of what has been experienced in common and “memory policies”. These insights are highly relevant to Sino-Japanese relations, where the processes of reconstruction and representation of historical memory have played a major part in the shaping of identities and forming the nature of nationalism in both countries. They have certainly been crucial in shaping China’s approach to Japan.

Anti-Japanese Elements in the Construction of Chinese Nationalism

In the past – and to some extent today – anti-Japanese elements have played an important part in shaping Chinese nationalism. Here we must consider how nationalism arrived in China and how the representation of historical memory contributed to the construction of Chinese nationalism and national identity. The beginning of nationalism in China can be seen as a response to the Western expansion in East Asia in the 19th century. However, Chinese nationalism was to take a radically different form to the Western version. In the West although nationalism emerged in opposition to imperialism and colonialism, it also sought to replace dynastic rule with popular sovereignty (Mayall, 1990). Unlike its Western counterpart, however, nationalism in East Asia was not closely associated with ideas of democracy and human rights. In the West, national self-determination was more than an end in itself; it was seen as a means of achieving a more democratic society. Ultimately, it would be democracy that would legitimate the new arrangements. In East Asia, however, the struggle against colonialism and for national self-determination was all-important. Thus, while they exploited the symbols of nationalism in their effort to dislodge foreign rule, political elites in East Asia paid scant attention to the ethnic or cultural dimensions of self-determination. Hence “decolonisation” and “self-determination” became unproblematic synonyms (Mayall, 2000). These differences had immediate and long implications for Sino-Japanese relations. From the start, Chinese nationalism was equated with patriotism; in fact, “Nationalism” is translated as *aiguo zhuyi* (patriotism), a concept strongly linked with political legitimacy, rather than *minzu zhuyi* (nationalism). This was clearly revealed when Japan was defeated and withdrew from China at the end of the Second World War. Both the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took on the mantle of patriotism and hence claimed legitimacy on the same grounds. Although neither could claim to be democratic in the “Western” sense of the word, both had fought against the Japanese.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), much care was devoted to the process of state formation. An essential feature of this process was the development of a particular type of patriotic nationalism – seen as vital both to the fostering of national unity and to the consolidation of CCP rule. In this sense, nationalism became a state-led ideology, and was perhaps a natural development of already existing anti-Imperialist memories of World War II. Yet it was still deemed necessary to take steps to promote nationalism and to give it a distinctive flavour. Here, active representations – such as pedagogical movies and songs with the overriding theme of patriotism – played an important role. For example in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the following movies – *didao zhan* (Tunnel Warfare), *nanzheng beizhan* (Fighting North and South), and *dilei zhan* (The war of Landmines) – were very popular and influential. While *Fighting North and South* was about the Chinese civil war, the other two films were about the war of resistance against Japan. *Tunnel Warfare* was particularly popular and influential; even today many people in China still know at least the name of the movie and songs from it. *Tunnel Warfare* presented three simple but compelling images: the Japanese invader; the traitor; and the anti-Japan hero. As a result, the devil image of Japan as invader (*Riben guizi*) has been widespread and consolidated through first hand experience and through memory policies. Of course, any Chinese who collaborated with the Japanese was to be regarded as a traitor (*hanjian*). Thus, a negative or even devil image long dominated Chinese perceptions of Japan. From this it was a short step to the conclusion that the two countries were destined to be eternal enemies, or at best, eternal rivals. This negative image has changed substantially since the 1990s through the processes of Sino-Japanese normalisation and friendship. Nevertheless, from time to time, especially when friction occurs, the ‘invader’ image of Japan re-emerged in China to fuel anti-Japanese sentiment.

Since the 1980s, alongside state-led patriotism, a new kind of mass nationalism has begun to appear in China. Indeed, this mass nationalism has been characterised by sentiments even more hostile to the Japanese than is the case with those associated with state-led elite nationalism. The development of popular nationalism and its accompanying hostility to Japan has not always suited the Chinese government, especially if it resulted in the frustration of initiatives judged by the authorities to be in China’s best interests. There can be no doubt that there are links between the emergence of mass nationalism in China and the introduction of internet in the mid-1990s and the resulting communication revolution. Although the effects of the internet remain controversial, it did provide the ‘ideal’ technology and communication device for the construction and reconstruction of collective memory on the mass scale. In particular, Chinese cyberspace quickly became an effective platform for mobilising nationalism, particularly anti-Japanese nationalism. In the new century, the phrase *wangluo minzu zhuyi* (Internet or cyber nationalism) has become a buzzword.

The phenomenon has been truly remarkable. As early as 1996, during the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute, dismayed by what they considered to be their government’s “soft” approach to Japan, activists petitioned the Central Military Commission to take decisive action though they could gather only 257 signatures. Since that time, however, (anti-Japanese) nationalistic websites have proliferated and so

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have a large following in fast-growing internet community. Anti-Japanese websites, such as the Chinese Federation for Defending Dia Island Zhongguo minjian baodiao lianhe hui (established 1996) and Coalition of Patriots Web aiguo zhe tongmeng wang (established in 2002), are among the most influential ones. Over the years, tens of millions of online signatures have been gathered in support of anti-Japanese petitions. Thus in 2003, when Japanese companies put in a US\$ 12 million bid to participate in the projected Shanghai-E high-speed railway, in just ten days the Coalition of Patriots Website gathered 80,000 online signatures to a protest later presented to the Ministry of Railways. The authorities simply could not ignore such manifestations of public opinion.

In some respects China remains an authoritarian country, yet recent developments have shown that a phenomenon like the internet still disseminate information, organise political actions and provide an extremely effective platform for mobilising mass opinion. In fact “anti-Japanese” and “patriotism” are useful tools in mobilising mass forces, with the advantage of not appearing to be “anti-government”. Thus, during the April 2005 anti-Japanese protests, among the many slogans shouted by the demonstrators – including “Oppose Japan entering the Security Council!” and “Boycott Japanese goods for a month!” – perhaps the most prominent was aiguo wuzui (“no one can deny that we are patriots”). The same words were spread throughout the internet. The message was clear: you cannot suppress us because our actions are patriotic and hence we cannot be guilty of any offence.

Thus, although it is still difficult to provide a precise definition of Chinese nationalism at the popular level, it has certainly become a stronger force. Especially since they have acquired new communication technology, nationalist groups have become more assertive and are better able to spread information, mobilise public opinion, and organise mass protests. This was vividly demonstrated in April 2005, when large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in major Chinese cities. In this sense, the emergence of mass nationalism in China complicates Chinese government stance towards Japan. However, alongside the development of anti-Japanese nationalist discourses, there has also been gradual but steady development in environmental cooperation between the two countries. This cooperation has become more significant in the new millennium. It is beginning to appear that environmental cooperation could be the key to a changed and more benign image of Japan in China. In turn this could be the basis for amelioration of tensions and even the achievement of peace and reconciliation between old enemies.

Emerging and Expanding Sino-Japanese Environmental Cooperation

A brief overview

Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation began in 1977, when the first Japanese environmental delegations visited China. Since then cooperation has been gradually but steadily expanding and deepening. In the 1980s, the main concern was with ecological degradation. There were two important developments in this period. First, in 1988, Japan provided official development assistance (ODA) to China for environmental projects, in the form of an environment-related yen-loan. Secondly – and also in 1988 – the Japanese Prime Minister, Nakasone, proposed the establishment of a Sino-Japan Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection (SJC) to his Chinese counterpart, Deng Xiaoping. Despite these important initiatives, however, environmental issues remained marginal in the overall context of Sino-Japanese relations.

It was in the 1990s that environmental protection emerged as a more important area for bilateral co-operation between China and Japan. Perhaps the most significant step forward was the conclusion of the Agreement on Environmental Protection and Cooperation in March 1994. This agreement symbolised a common willingness and commitment to tackle environmental problems. Since then, many more agreements have been reached and some practical projects implemented. Among those was the formal establishment of the Sino-Japan Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection in 1996. The Centre was affiliated to the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) of China, and has since become a central body for environment-related policy research, educational activities, and environmental evaluation and analysis. Furthermore, in 1998, when Chinese President Jiang Zemin made an official visit to Tokyo, the two governments signed the Sino-Japanese Joint Communiqué on Environmental Cooperation in the 21st Century. Following those agreements and institutional developments, some practical cooperative projects have also been implemented. Perhaps the most notable are the Environmental Development Model City Plan, and the Sino-Japanese Greening Communication Fund (or the Obuchi Fund). The Model City Plan was designed to select model cities for priority implementation of environmental control; Chongqing, Guiyang, and Dalian were selected. The Obuchi Fund, established in 1999, provided support to Japanese NGOs engaged in afforestation and other environmental protection projects in China. In addition to bilateral cooperation, Environment Ministers from China, Japan, and South Korea have held annual meetings, known as the Tripartite Environmental Ministers Meeting (TEMM), since 1999.

After the turn of the century, environmental issues attracted ever more attention, not least because the prospect of global warming made cooperation appear imperative. Issues such as technology transfer, clean development mechanism (CDM), as well as energy conservation were central to the policy dialogue between Tokyo and Beijing. These trends have become even more powerful in the last few years. For instance, in December 2007 the first China-Japan high-level economic dialogue was held in Beijing, in which “environment protection and energy-saving” emerged as the central issue. Environmental protection now occupies such a special and significant position in the Sino-Japanese cooperation process that it seems possible that common environmental concerns could actually become the driving force behind an overall enhancement of Sino-Japanese relations.

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Why has environmental cooperation emerged as such an important area in Sino-Japanese relations? To answer the question it is important to understand the emerging environmental security consensus between China and Japan. By emerging environmental security consensus, I mean the process by which an environmental issue becomes a security issue. The securitisation theory, one of the main approaches of Copenhagen school approach to security, argues that security is not merely an objective condition or threat; rather, it is the outcome of specific social processes. That is to say, the existence of real threat is not sufficient in itself to construct security practice. Security is a particular type of inter-subjective politics. The crucial point in understanding security is to capture the process whereby a problem becomes a security issue – that is, the process of “securitisation”. In this sense, the study of security centres on security practices as forms of social construction and on securitisation as a particular kind of social accomplishment.

The key development in Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation is the common experience of “elevating” the significance of environmental problems by constructing them into security threats – even though this process has been gradual. As noted earlier, there was some environmental cooperation between China and Japan as early as in the 1980s. At that time, however, environmental issues remained in the realm of “normalcy”. In other words environmental problems – such as air and water pollution – were just part of general concerns. Cooperation in the environmental area was merely one facet of the interaction between China and Japan. However, from the mid- to late-1990s environmental issues began to be perceived in terms of environmental security. An initial change, obvious in the discourse language employed in Chinese government statements, was to approach environmental issues from the perspective of national security. At the fourth national environmental protection conference in 1996, President Jiang Zemin formally articulated the phrase “environmental security” and emphasised the importance of controlling overall pollution levels in China. In 1998, the growing importance of environmental issues led the Chinese government to upgrade the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) into the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), that is, from a sub-ministry to ministry.

But why was there such a strong tendency to securitise environmental issues at this time? Clearly the most potent factor was the deterioration in ecological and environmental conditions that resulted from rapid economic growth in China. In many ways the opening and modernisation programmes have been astonishingly successful, yet precisely because industrial expansion has been so rapid that there has been a correspondingly rapid increase in environmental challenges. Problems that took the best part of a century to reveal themselves in other countries that experienced earlier – and slower – industrial revolutions, became inescapable in China after a mere 20-30 years. In the early 1980s, China rapidly acquired the role of the new “workshop of the world” and hence, by the 1990s, air, water and soil pollution became increasingly grave concerns. Pollution proved to be no respecter of frontiers. Thus problems of trans-border air pollution – such as yellow dust and sand – were soon effectively securitised by China, Japan and South Korea. The result was establishment of the Tripartite Environmental Ministers Meeting (TEMM) in 1999. The Meeting is held annually and works to promote joint research and appropriate action to combat environmental threats.

By the 2000s, more specifically since 2007, there are clear indications of a recognition in the discourses of Sino-Japanese relations that the saliency of environmental issues has reached a critical point: if the two countries do not work together to tackle growing environmental challenges, they will endanger their own survival and even that of the planet as a whole. In fact, the repeated and extensive high-level dialogues, the conferences and the readiness to commit resources that might be sufficient to make a real difference are indications that almost any issue becomes politicised and even securitised.

These developments can be understood in a wider context of the global response to climate change. In the league of the world’s major greenhouse gas (GhGs) emitters, China ranks second behind the US (according to some research outcomes, China has already overtaken the US as the world’s biggest CO₂ emitter), and Japan ranks the fifth behind India and Russia. Inevitably, both countries are being pressed to meet GhG emissions limits. The report on the national “11th Five-Year Plan” (2006-2010) for environmental protection (approved by the State Council in November 2007), shows that China’s environmental situation remained grave, and that environmental protection targets set in the “10th Five-Year Plan” period had not been met. Meanwhile, Mitsune Yamaguchi (lead author of the IPCC Third and Fourth Assessment Report and a member of the Japanese government’s climate policy committee) also admitted that although Japan decreased its emissions by 1.3 percent in 2007, it was still below its target (Makino, 2007).

When faced with such serious challenges, both Japan and China determined that environmental protection required clear national strategies. In China the crucial year was surely 2007. After several decades of promoting economic growth – with little thought for its environmental consequences – as the best way of protecting national security, the Chinese authorities revealed a new set of priorities. At the 17th CCP Congress decided that the costs of unprecedented economic growth could have been too high. Far from strengthening national security, such growth had led to the depletion of resources and the degradation of the environment to such an extent as to constitute a serious threat to national security. In other words, rapid economic growth – if not balanced with measures to ensure sustainability – was actually undermining the very thing it was supposed to be securing. For the first time too, the Congress identified environmental protection as part of China’s vision of a harmonious world. Henceforth, environmental issues ceased to be the exclusive preserve of the Ministry

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Environmental Protection, and became crucial for the Foreign Ministry and for all aspects of China's relations with other countries, but especially with Japan. In other words, China could barely mention environmental protection without considering the international dimension and possible cooperation.

In the same year, the Japanese government also approved a national strategy entitled "Becoming a Leading Environmental Nation Strategy in the 21st Century – Japan's Strategy for a Sustainable Society". Clearly, Japan is determined to shift its earlier emphasis of national technology into Environment. The change in Japan is similar, though not quite the same as that in China. Whereas China moved emphasis from economic growth to environmental protection, Japan reduced its earlier stress on technological innovation. Of course China did not abandon economic growth and Japan did not abandon technological change but both countries now wished to be seen as leading environmental nations. Japan has now identified eight strategies to be given top priority in the next year or so – including international leadership in tackling climate change. Thus, it is the processes of institutionalisation of environmental problems as security threats that led the two governments into a series of cooperative projects. But what has this cooperation achieved and has it really contributed to the changing image of Japan in China?

Environment, ODA, and the changing image of Japan (?)

Environmental cooperation must count as one of the most successful areas in Sino-Japanese relations, and providing to others a good example of effective bilateral environmental cooperation between developed and developing countries. Both countries certainly have incentives and common interests that point to the wisdom of enhanced cooperation in environmental matters. Thus government initiatives and formal agreements between Tokyo and Beijing have been crucial in forwarding the process, yet it is also necessary to stress the role of Japan's official development assistance (ODA) in effecting and sustaining cooperation in this important area.

Japan's ODA to China dates from 1979, seven years after China and Japan established diplomatic relations, and consists of Japanese loan aid or yen loans (yen loans form the major part of the ODA), grant aid, and technical cooperation. In the 1980s, Japan's ODA to China was mainly targeted at large-scale economic infrastructure projects. However from the 1990s, ODA support was increasingly directed towards areas of environmental protection. For instance, the establishment of the Sino-Japan Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection (SJC) in 1996 was much aided by Japan's ODA; grant aid of 10.499 billion yen covered the cost of the construction of the building as well as providing research equipment. Over the years, Japan also actively implemented technical cooperation (1.997 billion yen) with SJC, including dispatching experts in wide-ranging environmental fields. Strongly backed by Japan, and also affiliated to China's State Environment Protection Administration (SEPA), the SJC plays an important role as a comprehensive coordinating body in enhancing environmental cooperation between China and Japan.

Japan's ODA to China peaked in 2000, with 214.4 billion-yen loan aid. Japan devoted about 70 percent of its loan to climate change and environmental issues – such as curbing desertification and soil erosion and promoting afforestation programs – as well as improving public health. With the massive growth of the Chinese economy, the yen loans began to be phased out and ceased in 2008, but Japan continues its technical cooperation with China. Over some thirty years, Japan has lent China a total of about 3.4 trillion yen. With Japanese aid, an environment information network has also been set up across 100 Chinese cities. Moreover, the Environment Model City Project has been operating since 1998 – in which Guiyang, Chongqing, Dalian were selected as model cities, and Japan contributed about 30.7 billion yen loan to the model city programme. Thus, over the years, alongside central governmental cooperation, Sino-Japanese local initiative environmental cooperation have been expanding. By 2003, about 193 Chinese cities from 26 provinces were "twinned" with Japanese partners as sister/friendship cities – Dalian / Kitakyushu, Chongqing / Hiroshima, Shanghai / Yokohama, etc. (Ren, 2003). Environmental protection often centres on the city-to-city (C2C) projects. Of course, outcomes have varied but perhaps the most successful case has been cooperation between Dalian and Kitakyushu, especially under the 'Kitakyushu Initiatives for a Clean Environment'. As a result, Dalian given a "global 500 environmental city" award by the UNEP in 2001, and has won many national awards in landscaping, environment improvement, sanitation, and housing.

In addition, Sino-Japanese environmental cooperation has involved extensive exchanges of people. For example, in the area of technical cooperation the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has accepted trainees from China; by FY2003 the total number reached 15,000 trainees. By the same time, the Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship (AOTS) had also accepted more than 2,000 trainees and JICA had sent 5,000 experts to China. There are also many young Japanese volunteers working in China. All these initiatives are impressive in themselves but they pose a more fundamental question: to what extent they have led to a changed image of Japan in China and hence to an improved relationship between the two great powers of East Asia? I first attempt to answer the question in the negative sense: has recent environmental cooperation reduced historical tensions and negative images? I then proceed to the more positive dimension that is: has cooperation actively promoted good relationship between China and Japan?

First, in a more negative sense, environmental cooperation between China and Japan certainly has reduced the negative impact of relations caused by earlier – and to some extent – continuing political tensions. Of course, this does not mean that environmental cooperation is immune to the effects of political ups and downs. Sino-Japanese relations experienced a serious deterioration after Koizumi's visit to China in 2001.

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took office in 2001 and began his annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Coupled with other history issues such as the highly controversial Japanese history textbook, the relationship reached its modern nadir in 2005, when there were strong anti-Japanese demonstrations in Chinese cities. In March 2006, because of the sharp deterioration in bilateral ties, Japan decided to withhold its authorization of yen loans to China for FY2005. Yet the freeze did not last long, and in early June 2006, while Koizumi was still in Office, Tokyo resumed its loan

Moreover, although there were few significant high-level contacts during the years of icy political relations, the environment remained a rare and important area where ties and cooperation continued. Japan continued to receive Chinese trainees, as well as sending experts into China. The yen loan of FY 2005, though 10 billion yen less than in the previous fiscal year, still amounted to 74 billion yen and was sufficient to fund a wide range of environmental improvement projects – such as the Yunnan Kunming Water Environmental Improvement Project (up to 12,700 million yen), and the Inner Mongolia Huhhot Atmospheric Environmental Improvement Project (up to 7,400 million yen). The role of environment as an “absorber” in Sino-Japanese relations is succinctly captured by the Chinese leading environment scholar, Haibin Zhang. He argues that over the years, especially when Sino-Japanese relations were under strain, environmental cooperation reduced the shocks and tensions arising in other areas, and kept bilateral relations at a controllable level (Zhang, 2008: 7-11,18). I believe that Zhang is right to point out the “absorber” effect produced by environmental cooperation; I would further argue that more positive impacts of the environment on Sino-Japanese relations should also be considered.

This leads to the second point that in a more positive sense, environmental cooperation has provided opportunities for people to work together, and to know each other better. People-to-people ties are clearly crucial to the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations. Although their potential has not yet been fully developed, their significance is appreciated both by leaders and by the public in both countries. For example, speaking at the Tokyo-Beijing Forum in August 2006, Shinzo Abe (the then Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Minister in September 2006) blamed “misunderstandings” for the current problems in Sino-Japanese relations. At the same Forum, Wang Yi, then Chinese ambassador to Japan, also emphasised the importance of person-to-person contact in addition to state-to-state relations. It seems that people from both China and Japan increasingly support this view. In an opinion poll taken in 2009 (supported by China Daily and Genron NPO Japan) about 90 percent of respondents both in China and Japan believed that civil exchanges were either “important” or “relatively important”. In this context, the civil exchanges made in the area of environmental cooperation have proved extremely valuable in assisting greater mutual understanding. Contact with Japanese experts, visits to Japan, or simply understanding how Japan has responded to the environmental challenges that began to appear in the 1950s and 60s have allowed many Chinese to appreciate the magnitude of the Japanese achievement. They have come to admire the striking cleanliness of Japan, the emphasis on recycling and the environmentally friendly behaviour. Returning from a visit to Japan, China’s environmental industry study group reported:

Japan’s environmental governance is far ahead of ours, and in many respects, we should learn from them... Visiting Japan also gives us hope, since if the Japanese could devote decades to handling their serious industrial pollution problems and achieve such remarkable results, we should also have confidence to tackle the same challenges facing us today.

This is surely a positive image of Japan. More generally Japan’s image in China seems to be improving, although the change is gradual. This trend is reflected in a series of surveys taken annually since 2005 and jointly sponsored by China Daily and Genron NPO Japan. The 2005 survey revealed that many Chinese had a very negative image of Japan, with more than half (62.9 percent) of the Chinese respondents having a “very bad” or “not very good” impression of Japan, in 2007, the number of Chinese university students who regarded the bilateral relationship as “good” or “fairly good” was 5.3 percentage points higher than previous year, and the increase in Chinese confidence polled was 14.5 percentage points more. This trend continued in 2008 and 2009 – though the number having a “good” impression was under 50 percent. The changes – from very negative to more positive – were summed up in news reports of the surveys. While the 2005 report was summarised as “China-Japan ties need mending”, in 2007 it became “more Chinese, Japanese positive about bilateral ties”, 2008 “relationship warming up”, and 2009 “animosity lessens”.

There are many reasons behind these changed perceptions of Japan, although they undoubtedly owe much to the concerted effort of the two governments, including the resumption of top-level visits, as well as to the work of non-government agencies. As a result, bilateral relations have been repaired and improved. Especially in Chinese context, President Hu Jintao’s “warm spring trip” to Japan in May 2008 and, shortly afterwards, Japanese assistance to China at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake, clearly played a major role. At the same time, however, the long-term effort made by Japan through ODA should not be underestimated. For example, on 20 February 2008, when Japan announced the end of its ODA loans to China, the Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekly) published a report, reprinted in the Global Times the next day, examining the effects of the ODA loans to China over a period of thirty years. The Global Times also conducted an online survey asking respondents whether they appreciated the 224.8 billion Yuan (3.4 trillion Japanese Yen) aid given by Japan to China. Surprisingly, the article and survey attracted a good deal of attention and many “netizens” responded. Among 4100 respondents, 1856 (45.27%) said they appreciated the aid, while 2244 (54.73%) said that they did not. Of course, this survey revealed that more than half of the respondents did not appreciate Japan’s ODA to China. It is important to remember, however, that “internet nationalism”, usually directed against Japan, so the result should be considered more positive than it appears to be. Indeed, only a few years ago, it would have been astonishing if it had revealed that nearly half of the respondents agreed that Japanese aid had contributed to the development of China.

Conclusion: Peace and reconciliation?

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What then do these various stories suggest? Has Japan's image in China changed significantly and can peace and reconciliation be constructed between the two? There can be no doubt that many Chinese now view Japan more positively than in the past and that, in part, this change can be attributed to cooperation in the area of the environment. Of course, the complete transformation is unlikely to come or immediately, as the surveys clearly suggest that anti-Japanese sentiment is still strong. This means that once constructed, national stereotypes and images tend to become deeply imbedded in the popular memory and are thus exceptionally durable and resistant to revision. In other words, images derived from past experience can continue to affect current behaviour. As argued earlier, the experience of the Second World War produced a very negative image of Japan in China; Japan was the invader and China the victim. This image has been slow to change and has had lasting implications for China's own identity as well as for Sino-Japanese relations. Two decades after the beginning of environmental cooperation in the 1980s, anti-Japanese sentiments were still strong, especially among Chinese "popular nationalists". This was vividly expressed in the violent scenes at the 2004 Asian Cup Soccer Final in Beijing, and in the anti-Japanese protests of the Spring of 2005. It was clear, therefore, that any attempt to change the discourse or to reconstruct Japan's image would be extremely difficult. The attempt by some scholars in 2002/3 to bring a "new thinking" to Sino-Japanese relations – based on the idea that China focus more on its future partnership with Japan and less on past injuries – was met with huge antagonism from mass nationalists. Even in academic circles, the new thinking gained only minority support. Indeed, as revealed by the 2009 survey, the historical issue remains one of the major obstacles to the improvement of bilateral relations.

However, despite the slow progress and difficulty in changing mutual identifications, it would be wrong to think that identities are totally fixed or impossible to change. As Wendt argues, identities and interests are not fixed, but are processes that need to be socially sustained. In other words, we continue to produce and reproduce conceptions of Self and Other through social interactions. Even when processes are so stable that identities appear to be given, they are always subject to subtle modification (Wendt, 1999: 36). I believe that Wendt is right in taking identity as socially constructed and hence susceptible to change. This proposition has enormous implications for Sino-Japanese relations. In essence, it means that we should never assume difficulties and animosities as permanent or eternal. In other words, reconciliation and peace between China and Japan may be difficult to achieve but they are not impossible. Hence efforts to "deconstruct" and "reconstruct" our mutual images and identities are not doomed from the start. In this sense, the implications of joint efforts to combat major environmental challenges must never be dismissed as trivial. On the contrary, they are significant steps in the process of improving mutual understanding and creating more positive images – no matter how little the improvement. Further, such practices are important, because it is through repeated actions, that states learn and overcome egoistic identities and ultimately to the perception of a 'security community'. Of course, such a transformation is likely to take longer than commonly expected and there may be set-backs on the way, but the ongoing efforts are important in themselves. Thus, cooperation practices both at the governmental and civil society levels appear crucial to any prospect of genuine reconciliation and the achievement of lasting peace between China and Japan, above all the environmental area that provides the essential window of opportunity.

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