

BOOK REVIEW

The China Problem in Postwar Japan: Japanese National Identity and Sino-Japanese Relations

By Robert Hoppens

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x + 298 pages.

Reviewed by Giulio PUGLIESE



This book is a valuable resource on the history of postwar Sino-Japanese relations up to the early 1980s. Robert Hoppens' study provides a useful overview of the winding road leading to the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972, the signature of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, and Japan's decision to provide Official Development Assistance (ODA) to China in 1979. More importantly, this study's historical overview contextualizes Japan's China policy within the identity politics of postwar Japan.

Contrary to arguments downplaying nationalism in postwar Japan, Hoppens argues in favor of its pervasiveness. In fact, Japan's China engagement, or lack thereof, elicited a variety of national discourses aimed at understanding Japan's place in the world and its own identity. Scholars have often singled out and studied the role of the U.S. as Japan's most significant "Other," in light of the asymmetric nature of U.S.-Japan relations following the end of World War II. After all, the subordination of Tokyo's foreign policy outlook to U.S. grand strategy, particularly evident during the Cold War, has fed powerful nationalistic narratives. Intellectuals and policymakers on the right side of the political spectrum were concerned with Japan's emasculation and lack of subjectivity (*shutaisei*), while those on the left side were instead preoccupied with its "militaristic" pro-Americanism. This study, instead, sheds light on the importance of China to Japan's national identity, well before its staggering reemergence as a truly global player. In so doing, Hoppens provides a vivid picture of nationalistic and, to a lesser extent, mainstream conservative debates on the significance of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Japan.

In the process, the author makes two major claims. First, he argues that an overly emotional approach based on feelings of war responsibility and war guilt was not the main causative factor behind Japan's engagement of China. To substantiate this claim Hoppens provides illuminating evidence from one of the founding fathers of modern Sino-Japanese relations: Ōhira Masayoshi. Ōhira's decisions to hasten normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972 and to offer substantial Official Development Assistance (ODA) to China in 1979 are often imputed to his reflection over his wartime experience as a bureaucrat with the Asia Development Board in occupied China. Instead, Hoppens demonstrates that Ōhira's feelings of remorse were secondary to the recovery of Japan's pride as an industrialized nation that benefitted greatly from its role as a "systemic supporter" of the

U.S.-led international order. For instance, Ōhira's extension of ODA to China reinforced his mainstream conservative ideas in favor of Japan as an economic powerhouse.

Hoppens' second argument is related to the first. In light of the pervasiveness of Japanese nationalist sentiment, Japan's China policy was no policy of easy submission to Chinese positions. Counterintuitively, Japanese leaders' preoccupation with domestic politics and criticism from nationalistic fringes strengthened their negotiation hand in their pursuit of national interests. For instance, Hoppens claims that the Chinese leadership compromised on all major issues of concern to the Japanese government during the negotiations for the 1972 joint communique, especially the thorny issue of imperial Japan's brutal legacy. Japan's ODA program harnessed China's economic potential during the early stage of its "Reform and Opening Up" period to the benefit of Japanese business interests. Japanese policymakers would socialize China in the U.S.-led international order—a strategic goal recognized by then Prime Minister Ōhira—and in the process conservative politicians would strengthen their own understanding of Japan as a technologically advanced nation that successfully "settled" its history of aggression.

While much of the above argument rings true, Japan could have used its economic and geopolitical leverage to greater effect. After all—as Hoppens himself acknowledges—the PRC leadership was particularly keen in bolstering its relationship with Japan to confront the Soviet threat. Japanese decision-makers could have taken advantage of China's needs to more confidently advance Japanese interests during bilateral negotiations. The Japanese government's tacit consent over the shelving of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in 1972 and 1978 partly invalidates Hoppens' argument. After all, successive Japanese governments demonstrated a willingness to abide by the gentlemen's agreement and avoid rocking the status quo in and around the Senkaku/Diaoyu, notwithstanding Japan's effective control of the islands. To be fair, the author briefly tackles the Senkaku question by positing that there's no evidence that the Chinese leadership would have been willing to renounce its claim. Yet, Beijing's claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu was a relatively recent one and, since Tokyo was negotiating from a clear position of strength, a sterner and more strategic approach would have helped Japan secure more results. This is particularly true of the hastened process of the normalization of diplomatic relations.

Apart from the above criticism, this study is an excellent resource. In light of the dearth of English-language literature on the same subject, and given its extensive use of archival material in three languages and, especially, recent Japanese scholarship, this book is highly recommended for the holdings of all major university libraries.