

BOOK REVIEW

Japan-China Relations through the Lens of Chinese Politics

By Kokubun Ryosei

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Reviewed by Shogo SUZUKI

Japan-China Relations through the Lens of Chinese Politics, originally published in Japanese in 2017 and now translated into English, is a very welcome addition to the field of Sino-Japanese relations. The book consists of two parts. The first provides a chronological survey of the developments that have taken place in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the death of Mao Zedong. In the second part, the author shifts his focus to Sino-Japanese relations, and examines (also in chronological order) key events that have shaped interaction between the two states.

There are a number of features that make this book useful for furthering our understanding of Sino-Japanese relations. First, it is very strong on the political history of bilateral relations between the two countries, a consequence of the original Japanese being targeted at a more general audience. This may have shortcomings for some readers, as I will note below. Yet there is no doubt that it provides a very detailed overview of events that have shaped the two states' diplomatic relations. This will be particularly useful for scholars or students who are relatively new to the field. The author's deep and authoritative understanding of the topic enables this "general history" to be written and communicated clearly to a wider audience.

Second, as the book's title implies, the author provides a very interesting "Sino-centric" interpretation of Sino-Japanese relations. The key argument in the second part of the book is that most analysts have placed too much emphasis on the Japanese side of the equation. The author argues that China's domestic power politics within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership constitute the chief factor influencing Beijing's policies towards Japan. This argument has considerable merit, particularly in the context of successive controversies over Japan's collective memory of its imperial past (the "history issue"). Too often, analysts are quick to point the finger of blame at Japanese nationalist hawks who make poorly-thought out, morally offensive remarks that seek to downplay or even whitewash any Japanese wrongdoing in the past. Ascribing changes in Sino-Japanese bilateral ties to the actions of these figures does, to a certain extent, reflect the political sensibilities of analysts, who are quite rightly concerned with the rise of historical revisionism within Japan. In the context of analyzing Sino-Japanese relations, however, it can lead us to pay less attention to domestic political dynamics within the PRC. While it would be wrong to say that the

Chinese leadership does not care about how Japan remembers its history, this does not mean that the PRC's policies towards Japan are unaffected by contests over political power within the CCP.

The author's main claim is that Japan has been strategically used by certain CCP elites. At the beginning of the 1980s, it served as a tool to divert criticism by CCP conservatives of the overtly "capitalist" policies pursued by reformists such as Deng Xiaoping. Since the death of Deng in 1997, it is the Jiang Zemin faction within the CCP that has had the largest influence on the PRC's policies towards Japan. Jiang's father was a cadre of the Wang Jingwei regime, the puppet regime set up during World War II by the Japanese, and Jiang himself attended the National Central University in Nanjing, which had strong links to the Japanese. Kokubun Ryosei puts forward the fascinating argument that this background, as well as Jiang's own personal antipathy towards Japan, has led him and his faction to launch anti-Japanese attacks regularly. While such measures may rock Sino-Japanese relations, they served Jiang's domestic political interests by bolstering his nationalist credentials and providing an effective tool with which to snipe at his political rivals and protect his faction's vested interests.

Finally, another key contribution of this monograph is that it gives non-Western scholars and students access to a work that was originally written by a Japanese scholar for a Japanese audience. Within Anglophone scholarship, studies of Sino-Japanese relations are dominated by scholars based in the United States. While these works have provided valuable contributions to the field, there is no doubt that they sometimes come with their own nationalist baggage. As part of the move to "decolonize the curriculum," greater attention should be paid to making the voices of Asian scholars available to a wider audience. This book makes a positive contribution in that respect, for which it should be commended.

While this is a strong contribution to the literature, there are areas where additional information would have been appreciated, particularly for this somewhat greedy reviewer. One is with regard to footnotes, which are somewhat sparse in places. The author's key point about CCP elite politics is extremely interesting, and also plausible in a one-party state where the decisions of the Politburo can have wide policy implications. However, the lack of footnotes does leave the impression that some of the arguments are potentially speculative, and more concrete information or references would have given the author's arguments greater credibility. I could of course be demanding the impossible here. In an opaque regime like the PRC, it is impossible to access information that pertains to top level political decision-making. Inevitably, analysts must resort to "Kremlinology," and make "intelligent guesses." There is also the need for analysts to protect their informants. The author does, to his credit, acknowledge these difficulties associated with analyzing China, and his academic integrity here is something which should be lauded.

My other point is related to the well-known "level of analysis" problem. This has generated a vast library of literature, and there is no need to revisit it here. The point, however, is that foreign policy can be analyzed from multiple angles, each with their own merits. The author could have considered adding a chapter looking at these different approaches, and elucidated on the merits of each approach, particularly his own domestic-level analysis, which seeks to open up the black box of the state's domestic political decision-making process. This would have granted the book greater utility to students of foreign

policy analysis, as well as students of Chinese politics, and helped this book reach a wider audience.

These points are, however, minor. They do not take away from the fact that Kokubun's book has made a valuable contribution to the field, and I look forward to more excellent analyses by Japan-based scholars reaching beyond their domestic readership.