The Postcolonial Clue: Bringing Japan Back In

Introduction

Most of the discussions of China’s Japan policy are focused on economic trade and investment, armament and disarmament, and Japan’s potential role in facilitating or hindering China’s reunification with Taiwan. Focus on these issues indicates (although not without some unstated assumptions) that one would interpret Sino-Japanese relations in light of a predetermined set of national interests, presumably including China’s economic development, national security, and nationalism. It is not difficult, however, to observe certain contradictions among these interests, for example, between China’s economic need to attract more investment and aid from Japan and the political need to act independently from the seeming surge of Japan’s overseas ambition or, for another, between the nationalist need to punish those Japanese politicians interested in rewriting Japan’s role in World War II and the political–economic need to maintain an amiable East Asian environment.

The problem is that when nationalism is treated as a plurality of interests guiding China’s foreign policy (and perhaps an inferior one from the realpolitik standpoint), the psychological foundation upon which Chinese leaders must make sense of their foreign policy options is difficult to identify. In short, nationalism is not a policy goal per se; rather, following chapter 4, it is a first-order screen that often affects sensible second-order policy goals. Nationalism reflects the psychological necessity to draw a boundary between the Chinese and those who are accused of imperialism, colonialism, and hegemonism. What is interesting is that no matter how the labels have changed
throughout contemporary history, the main threat to China’s sovereignty is thought to have come from those who have remained closest to it, namely Russia, America, and Japan. This symbolic relationship of closeness and threat indicates a ubiquitous and profound sense of uncertainty about China’s identity, because, without the threat, the closeness would obscure the boundaries between China and others. If this is true, it is not difficult to appreciate the embarrassing position that Japan faces, compared with Russia and America, as it is racially, culturally, as well as geographically closer to China, yet more than the others it threatens China’s sense of boundary.

Whether Japan, the United States, or Russia is in fact more of a threat to China does not really have an easy answer and history has not left much time to give Japan a fair trial in China in any event. The fact is, and will continue to be, that China has up to now perceived Japan as being ambitious; it has acted upon this perception, and has reproduced this image of Japan through its Japan policy. Indeed it would be a painful exercise to find any substantive base for China’s suspicion toward the new Japanese generations as a whole today. Fortunately, such an exercise has never been attempted and this perception of a threatening Japan serves to differentiate China from Japan and consolidate an otherwise shaky national identity in China.

Unlike other modes of foreign policy analysis, this chapter will examine three cases wherein Japan is not the major actor, but a critical vehicle through which Chinese leaders interpret their oppositions’ intention. Examination of Japan’s seemingly auxiliary position in these cases accurately reveals the Chinese leaders’ deeply held assumptions of Japan. The first case describes China’s critique of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui as being non-Chinese because of the intimacy and affection he has expressed toward Japanese culture in a quasi-private interview with a Japanese journalist published in May 1994. The second case outlines Lee’s attempt to participate in the 1994 Asian Games in Yokohama, Japan, which irritated the Chinese delegation who threatened to boycott the games over the issue. The last case describes China’s condemnation of a former Chinese table tennis player, who was a political outcast in China but went on to represent Japan and won her event in the Asian Games in October 1994. These three cases suggest that there is an affective element in China’s Japan policy, which is often overlooked, and yet constitutes a deeply rooted element of China’s quest for national identity.