

*** Originally published in [The Ambassador's Brief](#)***

China and Japan: Facing History

By Ezra F. Vogel

The China-Japan relationship is arguably the second most important bilateral relationship in the world (after U.S.- China): China is about to become the world's largest economy, and Japan is the world's third largest.

But fifteen hundred years of history have produced a relationship which is tense, dangerous, deep, and complicated. In recent years, less than ten percent of each population had positive feelings toward the other, and both countries insist that the other side must deal openly with its history before relations can improve.

The stakes are high:

- **If the relationship deteriorates further:** it could lead to vast military spending by both nations, frustrate cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global issues, and even descend into conflict.
- **If the relationship improves:** the two countries could cooperate in preserving the international order, supporting regional organizations that provide a framework for collaboration, and cooperate in dealing with problems in which they have a common interest.

My new book, *China and Japan: Facing History*, unpacks this relationship, arguing:

1. Passionate patriotism in either country is potentially a very dangerous force: historically leaders have been unable to control it, and it has spiraled into war. Yet China is stoking it again today.
2. China and Japan have deep cultural connections which form a strong base for mutual understanding should political leaders show a willingness to build on them.

3. An improvement in the relationship is possible, but both countries need to face history. The Japanese need to expand their apologies for the suffering they caused China during WWII, while the Chinese need to reduce their anti-Japanese propaganda and expand their appreciation for Japan's role in China's development from 1895-1931 and since 1978.

1. Passionate patriotism in either country is potentially a very dangerous force: historically leaders have been unable to control it, and it has spiraled into war. Yet China is stoking it again today.

Both the Japanese attack on Manchuria in 1931, and the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, were the product of Japanese patriotism that spiraled out of control. They were the result, not of a long-term Japanese national plan to acquire more territory, but, of Japanese leaders being unable to control the passionate patriots who ignited the wars.

As Prof. Kenneth Pyle has noted, Japanese political leaders encouraged Japanese patriotism to gain public support. By the 1930s this patriotism was out of control. Top Japanese political leaders, weakened by the assassination of other national leaders, could not prevent the super-patriots in the military and elsewhere from igniting the flames of war.

At the time, Jiang Baili, a Chinese military strategist, saw this Japanese patriotism building, and the invasion coming. Jiang had graduated first in his class in 1906 at the Japanese Imperial Military Academy, and remained friends with his classmates, who later became leading Japanese generals.

By 1931 Jiang had concluded that the Japanese military at some point would likely invade China. And he knew that the Chinese military did not have the unity, the organization, and the military equipment to defeat Japan in battle.

So Jiang devised a plan whereby China could over the years wear down the invading Japanese army and thus defeat them. Jiang became a leading advisor to Chiang Kai-shek and China, with the cooperation of the United States, ultimately wore out the Japanese.

Given how patriotic sentiments have historically impacted the relationship, one can hope that Chinese leaders who have encouraged patriotism will be able to keep it from spiraling out of control.

2. China and Japan have deep cultural connections which form a strong base for mutual understanding should political leaders show a willingness to build on them

Japan's cultural connections to China date back to 600 AD. After Empress Suiko became leader of Japan in 593, she actively sought to import features of the more advanced Chinese civilization. She believed that Chinese innovations – including the government structure of a strong centralized administration – would allow her to expand the territory she controlled.

As a result, between 600 and 838, the Japanese sent nearly twenty missions to China, studying all aspects of Chinese civilization.

The elements of culture that the Japanese learned from China included:

- written language;
- governmental structure;
- Buddhism & Confucianism;
- literature & music; and
- city planning & architecture.

These became building blocks for Japanese society that still have a large impact on Japanese civilization today.

These cultural connections are complemented by strong business connections. It has been customary for the Chinese and Japanese to describe their relationship as “cold politics, hot economics”.

The question going forward is whether the two nations can build on their business relations and cultural connections to improve their political relations.

3. An improvement in the relationship is possible, but both countries need to face history and provide their citizens with a fuller and more accurate account of it:

- **Japan needs to expand its apologies for the suffering it caused China during WWII:** although Japanese leaders have expressed apologies, they have not educated their youth with a deep understanding of this suffering; it's still given light treatment in Japanese high schools. As a result, the Japanese have difficulty gaining the whole-hearted trust and cooperation of the Chinese. In short, the Japanese need to get better at saying “we are sorry”.

- **China needs to reduce its anti-Japanese propaganda:** Chinese leaders should learn the lesson from the Japanese experience, that encouraging super-patriotism can create passions that they may have difficulty controlling.
- **China needs to expand its appreciation for Japan's role in its development:** although some Chinese leaders have expressed formal appreciation for Japanese contributions to Chinese development since 1978, China has not educated their people on the full extent of the funding, technical aid, and advice which Japan provided. This limits the willingness of the Japanese to contribute further to Chinese development. In short, the Chinese need to get better at saying “we appreciate”.

It is unrealistic, considering the depth of the historical passions involved, that China and Japan will quickly develop feelings of trust and become close friends. That may be a goal for several decades in the future.

A reasonable goal for the next decade would be to manage their relations in a straightforward, frank, and businesslike way so that the two countries can become reliable partners.

Ezra F. Vogel is the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences Emeritus at Harvard. His latest book is [China and Japan: Facing History](#), currently available in English and Chinese.

English Edition: [China and Japan: Facing History](#)

中文版: [《中國和日本：1500 年的交流史》](#)

*** Originally published in [The Ambassador's Brief](#)***