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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Japan-China Relations: Four Fallacies Masquerading as Common Sense

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To gain insight into the future of the Sino-Japanese relationship, we need to clear up the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and errors that beset the two countries' relations and take an intellectual scalpel to their source. Some of the errors are related to the way people think about or perceive themselves, while others stem from the thinking or attitudes of the other party; still others are linked to the history of Japan-China relations. Here, in four questions and answers, are errors currently regarded as virtually self-evident truths.

Question One

True or false?: "Now that sixty years have passed since the end of the war between Japan and China, we should not be obsessed with the past and should stop arguing about 'war crimes,' 'war of invasion,' and other issues of 'history.'"

Answer: While the military conflict between Japan and China may have ended long ago, in political terms the war is not yet over. For China, the war was not only a war against Japan, it was also a struggle for national unification. Yet the Kuomintang, which fought with the Communist Party for hegemony over a united China, is still alive and well in Taiwan. For both the Communist Party and the Kuomintang, the "revolution"—whether Sun Yat-sen's or Mao Zedong's—has not yet been fully realized. Although the "outsider," Japan, has been removed from the scene, the fight for Chinese unification is not over.

In Japan, meanwhile, people still use the term *shusen* (the end of the war) instead of *haisen* (defeat in the war). But to refer to "the end of the war" implies that neither side

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won or lost, that the fighting is over but the outcome was inconclusive. The other side of this coin is the unmistakable continuity between prewar and postwar Japan (as shown by the history of "war criminals" taking up important political posts). This continuity means that past issues cannot be settled as matters of the past and so inevitably exert an influence over matters of the present.

For both Japan and China, therefore, the war is not yet entirely a matter of the past. What is the significance of their failure to put the war behind them once and for all?

One of the consequences is that Japan, the losing country, must continue to examine the meaning of its defeat and must from time to time reaffirm its remorse for having taken a path that led to tragedy. Undertaking such reflection and self-examination once or twice is not enough. Indeed, the very existence of the feeling that "Surely we've done enough" indicates that Japan has not reflected sufficiently. Inasmuch as the past is still alive in the present, reflection on that past will always be required.

On the other hand, victors have a duty as victors—that is, to be satisfied with the fact that they have won and to be magnanimous to the loser. The problem is that China tends to forget that it, China, won the war, clinging only to the fact that it was "invaded by Japan." People like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, who actually fought against Japan—against the militarists—were able to reflect on the meaning of their victory because they understood that both the Chinese and the Japanese were victims of the war. Their enemy was the Japanese militarists, and their victory was over the Japanese militarists.

Now that the so-called revolutionary generation is all but gone, however, one gets the impression that the current Chinese leadership has only a dim awareness of this fundamental point. China's leaders need again to distinguish clearly between the people of Japan and Japanese militarists. In point of fact, there were Japanese socialists who were imprisoned for opposing the war, and there were Japanese who devoted their lives to bringing about the new China. The stories of these Japanese were recently told in a book, *Youyi zhuzao chungguo* (Friendship Molds History), edited by Ding Min and others. China should acknowledge squarely that the efforts and money of Japanese people have played a role in building today's modern China. It goes without saying that Japanese people must refrain from irresponsible remarks or actions that give the Chinese an excuse to blur the distinction between the Japanese people and Japanese militarists.

Question Two

True or false?: "As Chinese society gradually becomes more open, its political leaders will have to respond to public opinion, including popular sentiment regarding the scars left by the war with Japan. Leaders have no choice but to give diplomatic and political expression such issues. In Japan, as national sentiment toward Chinese people becomes increasingly marked by suspicion and dislike, Japan's China policies need to be reconsidered, including the question of accepting Chinese students at Japanese educational institutions."

Answer: It is not true that Chinese society is now more open. Falun Gong is but one of the movements and publications that have been suppressed on political grounds. The Chinese people's feelings have become apparent not because Chinese society has become more open, but because the lack of openness makes it is easier for people to vent their frustration at Japan or some other external target than to criticize their own government. So, when China's leaders claim to be taking popular feelings toward Japan into consideration, they are effectively admitting that Chinese society is not yet open enough. Public opinion surveys by both Japanese and Chinese journalists have produced little evidence that attitudes toward Japan have deteriorated in recent years. The scattered signs of an anti-Japanese swell may be less a reflection of popular feeling than a matter of the masses flattering their political masters or of intellectuals wanting to make a name for themselves.

Meanwhile, negative Japanese feelings toward China have to some extent been whipped up by some of Japan's political leaders. Making China out to be a villain and taking a hard-line position is an easy way to win public approval. This leads to a vicious cycle in which the Japanese people, carried along by the rhetoric, grow ever more hostile to the Chinese. One might even say that the growing anti-Chinese feeling in Japan is not so much China's fault as Japan's.

Question Three

True or false?: "Japan-China relations today can be characterized as 'politically cold, economically hot,' where active economic exchange contrasts with a chilly political climate."

Answer: In the narrow sense that political issues frequently surface between Japan and China, raising people's hackles in both countries, it is true that political relations are cool. But from a wider, strategic perspective, the developments in political relations have not been all bad. Japan and China have cooperated in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea, for example, and no rift is visible in the efforts of the two countries regarding the formation of an East Asian Community. One gets the impression that the term "politically cold" represents the views of some Chinese leaders who are apprehensive about Japan's growing political clout. Some say that Japan is attempting to strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance while China is seeking to engineer global multipolarity as a means of resisting U.S. hegemony. But U.S.-China relations are stable strategically, and so long as no unforeseen situation arises in connection with the Taiwan issue, the idea that strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance will lead to a cooling of Japan-China or U.S.-China relations seems a little simplistic.

The term "economically hot" also presents problems. Although the Chinese economy is said to be doing well, some 30 to 40 percent of the goods produced by Japanese companies in China are destined for overseas markets. Thus the country's significance remains more that of a provider of cheap labor rather than a market. Considering the various rules, regulations, and market-entry restrictions to which China's financial and capital markets are subject (including restrictions on money transfers), one must ask to what extent the country's apparently huge trade and investment figures are simply the result of temporary action by companies anxious to ensure that they do not miss the boat.

We should remember, too, that the development of the Chinese market is actually causing some problems for the Japanese economy in such areas as intellectual property rights. Nor can we ignore the fact that China's economic development has disturbed the balance of global supply and demand in natural resources and is making it more difficult for Japan to secure these resources. It is unwise to overlook the fact that the term "economically hot" embodies China's current political desire for its economic relations with Japan to remain "hot."

Question Four

True or false?: "The basis for the formation of an East Asian Community is taking shape, founded on the natural common ground shared by Japan, China, and South Korea, such as their economic interdependence, geographic proximity, and common cultural traditions. While it may be politically and strategically difficult for the three countries to form a community in the short term, particularly given the existence of the Japan-U.S. alliance, they should seek to develop joint actions and common perceptions in the economic and cultural spheres."

Answer: The increasingly close economic relations among Japan, China, and South Korea are less a result of specific government policies, ideas, or efforts than a natural consequence of China's low labor costs and the three nations' mutually complementary industrial structures. They have little to do with the political desire to create an East Asia Community.

As far as cultural homogeneity is concerned, the key consideration in today's international community is whether countries can share the values of democracy, human rights, and market principles. In East Asia, at least, so-called commonality of national cultures and traditions is not a major determinant of international relations. It is therefore not appropriate to base the concept of a community among Japan, China, and South Korea on cultural ideas.

There are four reasons why such a community would have considerable strategic meaning for Japan, each of which is more important than the community's potential economic benefits or cultural significance. The first reason is that such a community would serve to maintain China's unity. If the three countries are to cultivate common political and economic perceptions and promote joint action, it is essential for China to avoid an internal split. A trilateral framework would help, albeit indirectly, to maintain China's unity. Second, the bonding together of Japan, China, and South Korea could help draw North Korea into the international community and contribute toward Korean reunification. Third, depending on future developments, Russia or the United States might one day attempt to drive a wedge between Japan and China and fish for strategic gain in the resulting troubled waters. A Japan-China-South Korea community would help to block such a scheme. Finally, if Japan and China accept South Korea as an equal partner and develop a three-country union, South Korea will perform a kind of balancing or coordinating role, promoting a more international vision in South Korea itself and at the same time helping to avoid friction between Japan and China.

For these reasons, I believe that the strategic significance of the trilateral community concept is a more important consideration than its economic or cultural facets.



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