

*BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE***Middle Kingdom & Empire of the Rising Sun:  
Sino-Japanese Relations, Past and Present**

June Teufel Dreyer

*Oxford University Press, 2016***Sino-Japanese Relations; Past and Present**

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A nuanced understanding of past Chinese and Japanese policy and Sino-Japanese relations helps explain the actions of these pivotal Asian nations. Dr. June Dreyer's current book does not distill history down to a "good-guy, bad-guy" caricature, as done in so many contemporary textbooks, but clarifies the national interests that have so largely shaped East Asian history. The early 20th century was punctuated by a brief period of mutual cooperation between Republican China and Imperial Japan, but the People's Republic of China's current assertive policy towards its neighbors should be viewed as a return to historical imperial thinking which saw China at the center of a universal order and barbarians populating the periphery. That is something very different from the Maoist vision of spreading proletariat revolution. By contrast, Japan's recent foreign policy and actions represent less an aggressive return to historic national interests. Than a collaboration with U.S. interests. Foreign policy specialists and others who wish to understand the policies and actions of the world's second largest (and nuclear-armed) economy, China, and those of the world's third largest economy, Japan, will find Dr. Dreyer's current discussion highly enlightening.

As an annual ritual around August 15, the day Imperial Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration in 1945, the People's Republic of China (PRC) denounces Japan—and only Japan—on its alleged lack of historical perspective, asserting that Japan's current internal affairs and foreign policies are based on "misremembered" or "distorted" history. The CCP further condemns Japan's "insuffi-

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cient expression of remorse” for past alleged atrocities, visits by Japanese politicians to Yasukuni Shrine, and Japanese history textbooks revisions. By contrast, no nation annually chastises the CCP, to reflect on its own murderous past or demands that they apologize for oppressing the Tibetan people. One may not have high regard for either China or Japan, but given their economic scales, the world’s second and third largest economies, respectively, one should not be ignorant of their potential to influence regional and global events. Indeed, events that have originated within Asia, from civil conflict to disease epidemics, have had a tendency to spread worldwide. Thus, understanding of the source of current tense relationship between China and Japan would be markedly facilitated with an understanding of their past.

University of Miami Political Science Professor June Dreyer’s current work is highly laudable in that it does not take the one-dimensional, “good-guy, bad-guy” tact in discussing the historical foundation of contemporary relations between China and Japan. This reviewer sees contemporary discussion of China-Japan relations as being overshadowed by the post-war “Tokyo Trials,” or the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, the primary mission of which was to ensure that Japan would never again be able to militarily challenge the international order as represented by the Allies. To do this, the “Tokyo Trials” elaborated a history that laid blame for the (second) Sino-Japanese War and subsequent US-Japan War squarely on the shoulders of Japan.<sup>2</sup> Based on the Allies’ version of history, Japan was summarily found guilty of “aggression”—China being one of many “helpless victims” of what FDR called “mad dog” Japan. The Allies claimed that the verdict was entirely appropriate and executed or imprisoned Japanese authorities who were, in the Allies’ minds, somehow linked to a “conspiracy” to wage an “aggressive war” to conquer the East

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<sup>2</sup> Details of the Allies’ version of history can be found Richard Minear’s *Victors’ Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial* (1971). In addition to “Problems of History,” Minear pointed out numerous legal issues, including the fact that laws against the “crimes” committed by the defendants did not exist before they were committed (*ex post facto*) and that the tribunal was not to “be bound by technical rules of evidence.”

and dominate “the rest of world”. The American Occupation authorities condemned traditional Japanese society and substituted it with western-style liberalism. Japan was made to accept history as defined by the “Tokyo Trials.”<sup>3</sup>

Dreyer’s book is a broad history of the interaction between China and Japan but on closer reading, to the current reviewer, a theme that conspicuously emerges is that closely-knit groups form enduring attitudes and behaviors that maintain in-group cohesion and exclude outsiders. The idea that hostility to outsiders is a naturally evolved human behavior is hardly a popular one. The current book describes the evolution of Chinese and Japanese cultures from ancient times to demonstrate the development of respective distinct thinking of their place in the world. While initially similar, the Japanese eventually developed their own culture and social structure. Also, while to an extent xenophobic to outsiders, the Japanese have been more accepting of outsiders than the Chinese.

### Historical trends

The Chinese worldview, in essence, is shown as *us vs. them*. Dreyer states that China always saw itself as the “central state” and the “outer realms” were “populated by uncivilized barbarians”. In fact, Dreyer explains that “Confucian society did not conceive of a Chinese civilization: there was only civilization and barbarism... What was not civilized was barbaric.” The Chinese emperor was a “righteous man designated by Heaven,” a “mediator between heaven and earth, the apex of civilization...” The emperor performed rites to bring continuing harmony in the universe. Thus, the book concludes, the emperor did not just rule China but “All under Heaven”. Barbarians may become civilized by performing the proper rituals and paying tribute. As the emperor received the Mandate of Heaven and is responsible for order in the universe, it would behoove visitors, especially barbarians, to show proper

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese dynasties have actively changed history, upstart regimes proclaiming that the previous regime lost their Heavenly Mandate to rule while erasing the existence of their predecessor, which included exterminating their immediate and extended family (*Rekishitsu*, Bunyu Ko, March 15, 2015). Dr. Dreyer points out that the PRC has yet to be forthcoming with their own blood-stained history.

“feelings of humility” in his presence. The book mentions that China’s neighbors demonstrated their acceptance to the Chinese order in varying degrees. At one end, the Korean kingdoms were “most sincere in their acceptance of a position of inferiority...” By contrast, Japan was “never entirely comfortable” with their assigned status and the few tributary missions they sent to China reflected this unease. As such, the Chinese looked down on the Japanese as uncivilized, calling Japan *woguo* or “country of the dwarves.” This dynamic between China and Japan, from the earliest times up until the present, is documented throughout the current book.

Chinese insistence on Japanese submission persisted from the reign of the Mongols (Yuan Dynasty), who attempted to subdue Japan with two separate invasions, through the Ming Dynasty. Dreyer relates the crude chauvinism expressed by a Chinese emperor, who went so far as to threaten Japan with destruction if they failed to show obsequiousness. Relations between China and Japan were not always contentious. Conciliatory gestures by the Japanese to the new Chinese emperor in 1398 apparently placated him, and the Japanese were granted license to trade with China. Nonetheless, old attitudes die hard—despite defeat at Japanese hands in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Chinese government continued to refer to the Japanese as “dwarves” and “dwarf pirates” in official publications.

Whereas the Chinese portrayed themselves as the center of the universe, presided over by a righteous, Heavenly-appointed mortal, Japan defined itself in mystical terms—the earliest written records feature “supernatural and cosmological” and “aristocratic” themes. Rather than a mortal chosen by Heaven, the emperor of Japan is a “direct descendent of the gods” who created Japan. While Japanese tribute missions to China were few and far between, as Dreyer points out, they were continued as the returnees brought back “material goods” and “useful information about Chinese culture”.

In 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea—the book does not elaborate why. In any event, the Korean king fled Seoul and,

as a Korea's suzerain, China dispatched military forces to Korea. Eventually, a truce was arranged between China and Japan. Further forays into the Asian continent ended with Hideyoshi's death. An earlier Japanese foray into Korea was in support of the Paekche, one of the Korean kingdoms. One of the other kingdoms, the Silla, backed by the Tang Dynasty, went on not only to defeat a combined Japanese-Paekche force but subdued the entire Korean Peninsula. Control for Korea as a final step from Asia to Japan, or from Japan to Asia, depending on the Russian, Chinese or Japanese point of view, continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The focus of the current book is relations between China and Japan. However, one could ask why Korea, claiming that it was either independent or a Chinese vassal as the situation dictated, never sought the path of neutrality, as did Switzerland, being surrounded by larger nations.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Korea frequently called in Chinese military assistance when westerners or the Japanese arrived off Korean shores, resulting in the stationing of Chinese troops for months on end in Korea. Sometimes the Chinese troops bullied Koreans and other times the two combined to massacre Japanese residents. The Koreans mimicked Chinese attitudes—condescension and derision—when dealing with Japan. Korean social structure generally mirrored that of China, wherein a tiny elite ruled a vast peasantry. “More than five hundred years of misrule had reduced the Korean people to a cultural and economic condition deplorable in the extreme...”<sup>5</sup> Such was the state of Korea up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As China forced barbarians to conform to its celestial order, Japan sought to define its own worldview. Dreyer summarizes the composition of the Japanese government of around the 16<sup>th</sup> cen-

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<sup>4</sup> The contentious interaction between Korea, a true vassal of China to the end, and Japan and attitudes that emerged from this history has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. *In Korea with Marquis Ito*, G.T. Ladd, 1908). Ladd states that Koreans view non-Chinese foreigners as inferior—as their Chinese master did. More recent books (e.g. *Getting Over It!* Sonfa Oh, 2015) also note how ancient Koreans considered the Japanese as barbarians—again as the Chinese did. Perhaps these ancient Korean attitudes drive modern relations with Japan.

<sup>5</sup> Ireland, A. (1925) *The New Korea*. NY, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co.

ture: “While the imperial house was endowed with the symbolism of national authority, it was almost devoid of power. The opposite was true of the institution of *shogun*,” the leading “general” of the warrior class and his government, the shogunate, or “military government”. The shogun took the title “Great Prince of Japan” as the form of address in foreign relations. The title was intended to differentiate Japan from China and to suggest the Japan was not a Chinese vassal, like Korea. The book suggests that this marked a turning point in Japanese history, a “declaration of independence” from a Sinocentric world order that had heretofore “dominated East Asia.”

The Tokugawa clan headed the Shogunate in the 1600s and embarked on a policy of national isolation, while continuing limited trade with the Dutch and Portuguese. Unlike the Chinese, who belittled anything that originated from beyond their borders, the Japanese welcomed the chance to trade for western “goods and knowledge”.

The Chinese contempt of the Japanese extended to the technologically advanced Europeans. Believing that they had everything they needed, the Chinese generally rejected foreign ideas and technology. To an outsider, accommodation would have been in China’s best interest. The Qing emperor rejected a British mission sent in 1792 to enhance economic activity between China and Great Britain, stating that they had no need for products “manufactured by outside barbarians” and ordered the British to show “proper demeanor”. Western attempts to improve Chinese infrastructure, so as to enhance foreign trade and internal commerce, was derided by the Chinese court as “unnecessary”. Given the Chinese disdain for western civilization and its technology, it should not be surprising how effortlessly Europeans carved up China’s territory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Perhaps a key differentiation between the Chinese and Japanese is that the Japanese are not as xenophobic as the Chinese. Rather than disregard the western presence, as China did to its detriment, Japan “quickly realized the need to respond ...rather than try to ignore them.” Seeing how its vast and ostensibly more

powerful neighbor China was rapidly turned into a patchwork of western colonies in the 1800s, Japan rapidly assimilated western knowledge and technology—the Japanese had long appreciated western technology as well as Chinese material goods. The Japanese modernized and displayed western trappings—including colonialism. Japan also was amenable to the “Westphalian conception of theoretically equal sovereign states,” a concept utterly contrary to Chinese ethnocentrism.

The current book points out that Japan later realized that “equality” between states was, in fact, reserved for Europeans, as white Western markets restricted Japanese goods and most white western nations barred Japanese citizens from immigrating.<sup>6</sup> America had proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine for the western hemisphere, a warning to European powers to keep out of the Caribbean and South America while reserving the right to intervene in these areas. When resource-poor Japan attempted to pursue a “Monroe Doctrine” for East Asia, the US strenuously protested, demanding that access to Chinese markets remain free (“open door”). This and other actions taken by western colonialist nations, especially the US, to isolate Japan and detach it from China fueled Japanese anti-western resentment, eventually culminating in a drive to kick westerners out of Asia.

Given these circumstances, one could surmise that the lack of a major war between Japan, China and the West would have been sheer luck. What if xenophobic China had rapidly modernized while Japan continued to reject contacts with the West? Perhaps Japan, rather than China, would have been a western colony. (This reviewer suggests that one would not be far off the mark to view the current situation in this manner.)

Up to and throughout World War II, the Republic of China sought western aid to oust the Japanese from Manchuria and elsewhere in China, despite the fact that one of the goals of the

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<sup>6</sup> Japan, as one of the charter members of the League of Nations, proposed a “racial nondiscrimination” amendment to an article of the League’s Covenant. Despite majority support, Chairman Woodrow Wilson rejected Japan’s proposal, declaring that an amendment of this nature required “unanimous” support.

Chinese was to “oust the barbarians,” including western ones. This theme, of pitting barbarians against barbarians, of violently ejecting outsiders while clamoring for their money and arms, appears with regularity throughout the current book.

### **Current trends**

The current book points out the fallacy of a number of historical “facts” that fall under the rubric of “conventional wisdom”. One could say with confidence that it is unlikely that the current book’s points will find their way anytime soon into history textbooks, given the prevailing pandering to groups that portray themselves as historical “victims”. As an example, the Chinese have claimed that the so-called “Marco Polo Bridge Incident” was a plot “aggressive” Japan hatched to provoke the “peaceful” Chinese into attacking the Japanese, thereby giving Japan the excuse to attack China. However, the book points out that the “Incident” was not at all premeditated, that it was in fact a Chinese military unit that attacked a Japanese unit firing blanks during night maneuvers. Live ammunition was indeed brought out later when the Japanese found themselves under fire. Furthermore, following the “Incident,” both the Chinese and Japanese sought to contain the situation. Also not likely to be mentioned in history textbooks anytime soon are the massacres of Japanese civilians living in settlements in China and the ambushing of Japanese military units by Chinese militias—which were armed and trained by the Japanese for the purpose of protecting Japanese settlers.

The CCP, as the book points out, offers a “mythical version” of World War II, in which the Chinese Communists single-handedly defeated Japan. As the CCP pass their contrived history off as real, the rest of the world says absolutely nothing. If Japan, however, pointed out errors in China’s version of history, such an act would be condemned as “revisionist” and would be further condemned for a lack of “remorse” for past “aggression,” by the CCP and “right thinking” people. Serious discussion of the facts would be lost in the strident recriminations against “aggressive” Japan. The Chinese court of the past demanded barbarians show “proper



demeanor” and to “trembling obey and show no negligence”. The parallel with today’s China and historic China is plain enough. One could characterize current Chinese behavior as nothing more than old Sino-centrism.

The conventional wisdom is that the frequent complaints by the CCP regarding the “revision” of Japanese school history textbooks and visits to Yasukuni Shrine by political figures are due to Chinese fears that Japan is re-militarizing. While there is talk within Japan of increasing military capabilities in order to participate in international obligations, such as peacekeeping, the book makes clear that it is the United States which ultimately decides if any “rearmament” occurs. As far as actual military spending, the book points out that Japanese spending has “remained stationary, even actually declining for more than a decade,” whereas the People’s Liberation Army has had “double digit increases” since 1989.<sup>7</sup> The PRC does not appear to be willing any time soon to give up its nuclear-armed ballistic missiles for the sake stability in East Asia much less world peace.

While Japan does have a modern, high-tech military, it is apparently incapable of independent offensive operations, not only because of its primary objective, homeland defense, but also due to restrictions placed on it by Japanese law. Dreyer points out that Japan has been frequently criticized, particularly by Americans, for “distaining” from “meaningful participation” in international military operations such as the 1990 Gulf War even though Japan’s lifeline to oil was at stake at the time. Perhaps conveniently forgotten by most Americans is the fact that the post-war US occupational authorities wrote and imposed the “peace” constitution on Japan, in which the Japanese people “forever renounce war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes” and that military forces “will never be maintained”. While Americans show frustration over Japanese

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<sup>7</sup> Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested that Japan pay more to maintain US forces in Japan. In fact, maintenance of US bases is within Japan’s defense budget. The current book also points out that most of the defense budget is spent on personnel rather than weaponry.

“restraint,” as dictated by a constitution written by Americans, at the same time, there is little American support to amend the constitution, which, ironically, would benefit the US. The CCP, however, views discussion of constitutional revision as a revival of Japanese “militarism” and Japan, and only Japan, is denounced. Observing this behavior, one could conclude that PRC, after hundreds of years, still considers the “country of the dwarves” as its vassal.

The book points out controversies such as Japanese politicians’ visits to Yasukuni Shrine, history textbook revisions and the Senkaku Islands dispute are relatively modern in origin. Almost all of Japan’s post-war prime ministers made a pilgrimage to Yasukuni Shrine, which “clearly honors all Japanese who have fallen in battle anywhere and not just those of World War II.”<sup>8</sup> Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe (1986; father of the current Prime Minister) pointed out that Japan had previously expressed “regret” for the war in a 1972 Sino-Japanese normalization communiqué. Abe also pointed out that the communiqué stated that neither side would “interfere in each other’s internal affairs.”<sup>9</sup> Visits to the shrine were to “simply mourn those who have died.” As another example of the CCP ignoring the normalization communiqué, in 1982—and almost annually thereafter—the CCP castigated the Japanese government, as reported by the Japanese media, for “revising” its high school history text books to “deny” Japanese “aggression” during World War II. In fact, in this particular case, there was no revision—the Japanese media were entirely mistaken.<sup>10</sup> The CCP has

<sup>8</sup> Yasukuni Shrine was created during the Meiji Era to honor Japan’s war dead. Within the Yasukuni Shrine precinct is a memorial (*Chinreisha*) to the opponents who fell for their country. Yasukuni Shrine thereby houses non-Japanese as well as Japanese souls.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Japan has kept to the letter of the 1972 communiqué: while the rest of the world reacted in horror and moved to sanction the PRC following the Tiananmen Square massacre, Japan refrained from commenting or acting, as this would “constitute interfering with the internal affairs of another country.”

<sup>10</sup> The current book notes that the “comfort woman” issue is the result of the media totally disregarding the truth for what is fashionable. A major daily newspaper, the *Asahi Shinbun*, recently apologized for not fact-checking their “comfort women” articles, which were based on a fraudulent book. Nonetheless, the “comfort women” has embedded itself into the modern western psyche.

taken to solving modern problems with ancient thinking. It may not matter what barbarians are thinking, even if they are in the right, so as long as they hold China in high esteem.

Amazingly, as the CCP repeatedly pried into Japan's internal affairs and admonished Japan for whatever it found, the CCP continued to receive low-interest loans and other economic assistance from the Japanese government as Official Developmental Assistance (ODA), channeled into a wide range of infrastructural and environmental projects.<sup>11</sup> One could speculate that Japanese aid greatly boosted PRC military capabilities as well. The PRC surely benefited from Japanese largess, and their surpassing of the Japanese economy in 2010 shows that this was indeed the case. Government aid to the PRC continued even as Japan underwent a period of economic decline and it was not until prior to the Beijing Olympics that aid was terminated. The Japanese private sector also poured money into the PRC to further modernize and build-up its infrastructure. The Japanese hoped that aiding China would promote regional "peace and stability." While Japan continues to rely on the PRC as a key export market, the importance of Japan as a Chinese market greatly declined over time. During all this, the PRC continued to benefit from Japanese investment.

It was only after the discovery of undersea natural resources in the late 1960s near the Senkaku Islands that the PRC (and Taiwan) showed interest. The United States returned administrative control of Okinawa, which included the Senkaku Islands, to Japan in 1972. The CCP did not make settlement of the Senkaku Islands "issue" a condition for normalized relations with Japan in 1972. To conclude a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Japan (1978), Deng Xiaoping stated that any concerns over the Senkaku Islands were "to be put off for another generation". Later, PRC Rear Ad-

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<sup>11</sup> A similar ODA was given to South Korea from the 1960s well into the 1990s, wherein Japan gave Seoul the equivalent of several billions in US dollars in low-interest loans and grants (Editorial Supplement in Ireland, 1925). The Japanese government hoped to improve relations with South Korea. South Korea repays Japan with nearly annual rituals of strident denunciation that echoes those of the PRC. Other issues raised particular to Korea include the so-called comfort women and ownership of Takeshima Islands.

miral Yin Zhou announced that the Senkaku (“Diaoyu”) Islands were not “core interests,” or interests important enough to go to war over. In contrast to previous ambiguity, the PRC’s National Peoples’ Congress annexed the Senkaku Islands in 1992, among other disputed islands. A surge of Chinese fishing vessels, PRC surveillance ships and aircraft brazenly intruded into the Senkaku Islands’ territorial waters and airspace. In response, the Japanese government did nothing, granting the PRC requests economic aid all the while. The current situation is surreal: while Japan claims the Senkaku Islands as its own, it does little to enforce its claim and the PRC crosses borders with impunity.<sup>12</sup> In keeping with historical behavior, the PRC does as it pleases in the South China Sea, a “Chinese bathtub.”<sup>13</sup>

The current reviewer suggests that the facts as laid out by Dreyer’s book more accurately reflect circumstances rather than the “good vs. evil” fiction favored by the CCP and other anti-Japan groups. There are a number of historical issues the current book discusses, including the so-called comfort women issue and the “Nanking massacre,” that may be of interest to readers searching for enlightenment.

The current book should help to raise understanding of the background of current Sino-Japanese relations, which is a result of behavior shaped hundreds of years ago rather than a recent result of World War II. It may not be entirely clear to readers that

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Dreyer cites the Japanese government’s 2010 handling of the captain of a Chinese fishing vessel, who rammed two Japan Coast Guard vessels. The Japanese government released the captain following threats by the PRC of economic sanctions. It is not entirely clear whether the captain was under orders to provoke Japan or did it under his own volition, as the captain was placed under house arrest after he was hailed as a hero. Nonetheless, the PRC took advantage of the episode to “strengthen its presence in the area”.

<sup>13</sup> In a case brought by the Philippines against the PRC of its delineation of its maritime boundary in the South China Sea (2013-19, “The South China Sea Arbitration”), the PRC did not even bother to send a representative, since, they stated, that the Court had no jurisdiction. On July 12, 2016, the Court found that that the boundary claimed by the PRC, the “Nine-Dashed Line,” had no historical basis. In response, the Chinese stated that it will ignore the ruling. What the Chinese really mean, consistent with the theme of the current book, is that a barbarian court of law has no bearing on the celestial order as defined by the Middle Kingdom.

the Chinese continue to persist in believing that the universe revolves around them. The current reviewer suggests that Chinese ethnocentrism has survived despite the current era of “equality” and “democracy,” because the Chinese people themselves have not changed. Human attitudes and behavior shape culture and culture shapes human attitudes and behavior.

While neither Chinese nor Japanese would have submitted to the other in the past, neither has truly dominated the other. Dreyer suggests that for stability in East Asia, both countries will need to see the other as a co-equal—perhaps problems can be “managed” if they can’t be “resolved”. While both the PRC and Japan are aging, given the sheer size of the PRC’s population, time may be on the PRC’s side and at some time in the future it may finally claim the *woguo* as it has with Korea, as its own.