

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Sino-Japanese Reconciliation

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1. Japan, China and Humanitarian concerns

A Chinese rescue team arrived in Japan by a chartered flight two days after the great earthquake struck eastern Japan. They were among the first ten groups to arrive on the scene from various parts of the world. Geographically China is closer to Japan than most other countries, so it could have been the earliest to arrive, but considering that the Chinese rescue team was founded as recently as 2001, not to mention the political issues in China surrounding the idea of lending aid to Japan, this quick action was certainly commendable.

The Chinese team proceeded to a town called Ôfunato, where it stayed until it fulfilled its task and departed for home one week later. Like other rescue teams, they had to work in the worst conditions: extraordinary amounts of debris, putrid odors, heavy rain and snow, lack of energy, and the recurring medium-to-large-scale aftershocks that are the typical byproducts of such a gigantic earthquake. The Chinese team worked hard, it cleared the ruins of homes and public facilities so that the municipality could resume operation, and it found and protected the bodies of victims. Their work was greatly appreciated by the people of Ôfunato. The Japanese emperor and then Prime Minister Naoto Kan acknowledged and thanked the foreign rescue teams for their cooperation.

In the Great East Japan Earthquake the Chinese also thanked the Japanese, particularly a Japanese factory manager named Mitsuru Sato, who led a group of young Chinese workers who were horrified and paralyzed with uncertainty to a safe place. Naturally he had many problems of his own to deal with, but he first helped them, and then went back to the danger zone, never to return. The news of his heroic, self-sacrificing act was widely reported in China and moved many people. Later when Premier Wen Jiabao visited the area, he mentioned the factory manager by name and thanked him for his act.

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The Chinese people often said publicly or in private that it was their turn to help the Japanese. The last time a big earthquake hit Sichuan, a Japanese rescue team came to help them. It had to work in bad conditions as well, more or less like the Chinese team in Ôfunato. Its activities were also appreciated by the local people, and in particular the way the rescue workers paid their respects to the deceased impressed the Chinese. This scene was broadcast by Chinese television. President Hu Jintao met the Japanese team later when he came to Japan for the Hokkaido Toyako Summit and thanked them for their hard work in Sichuan Province.

Thus the two earthquakes in Sichuan and eastern Japan, which tormented the people of both regions so badly, had the unexpected consequence of helping the two peoples to acknowledge each other's goodwill and humanitarian concern.

I recognize that people tend to behave in special ways during emergencies. People act instinctively and do not care whether the people in need before them are Chinese or Japanese. Kindness performed in a state of emergency does not always develop into sustainable mutual understanding. It must be repeated many times and in different conditions before one becomes convinced that others are friendly and trustworthy.

Nevertheless, the exchanges of good will and humanitarian concern that followed the two large earthquakes mentioned above are important for two reasons: one is the fact that the two countries are still not engaging in as many exchanges of personnel as one might hope, and the other is the strong appeal these acts of kindness have for the public.

2. Underdeveloped state of Japan-China exchanges at the popular level

Perhaps one of the most widely acknowledged ways to promote the reconciliation process between hostile countries is to increase international exchange at the popular level. Japan and China are helping their citizens, particularly young people, visit each other's country. The number of Chinese students in Japan increased from twenty thousand in 1992 to eighty-six thousand in 2010, and the number of Japanese students in China from grew from five thousand in 1994 to eighteen thousand in 2006. There are various official and private programs that facilitate short visits. However, it has been pointed out that more efforts should be made to improve these programs and further promote exchanges.

Recently, the number of rich Chinese who come to Japan for sightseeing is increasing rapidly, and they are warmly welcomed in Japan, in part because they spend a lot of money in the country. Their interests range widely from household electronics to real estate. Ever since the Great East Japan Earthquake, the number of Chinese visitors shrank sharply to a minimum level, and Japanese

shopkeepers who depend on the Chinese tourists are reminded of the importance of exchanges between the two countries. As for the Chinese, they discover that the Japanese are very friendly, contrary to the image they had before they came to Japan. The Japanese in turn are often surprised to learn that their image was so bad among the Chinese, and they have to tell themselves that such bad images are due to their own acts in the past, as well as messages about Japan spread by the Chinese Communist Party.

Leaders of Japan and China seem to understand the importance of promoting youth exchange programs, but they are still often hampered by unfortunate disputes over issues such as Japanese state-level visits to Yasukuni Shrine, territorial rights in the East China Sea, and China's growing navy and foreign oil exploitation.

In China, the program of exchanges of youth on a large scale began during the economic reforms of the late 1970s. The process has not always been smooth, however. In the early days of reform, Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang was the most earnest patron of youth exchange, but was criticized for advancing too quickly, too boldly, and, worst of all, too hastily to improve the relationship with Japan. He lost his position in the mid-1980s.

Compared with the Franco-German case, conditions for reconciliation between Japan and China are quite different. The reconciliation process between Japan and China is in its early stage. The two countries have not made the type of strong political commitment that Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer made to one another. There are few agreements between the countries' industrial and business communities to promote common schemes so that both sides can profit from cooperation. Unlike France and Germany, Japan and China do not share the same social homogeneity and economic standards.

3. Chinese media reports on Japan

The Chinese public seemed to be strongly impressed with activities of the Japanese rescue team in the Sichuan Earthquake, thanks to reports on Chinese television, which was at the time taking a more liberal attitude than usual.

Originally, the Chinese government was not eager to accept emergency rescue teams from foreign countries, but when the earthquake occurred in Sichuan, it quickly decided to accept them, including Japan as one of the first eleven countries. It was a step forward.

The Chinese government also showed a relative amount of openness in communicating on measures to minimize the earthquake damage. For instance, it stated frankly that the earthquake

had done no serious damage to nuclear facilities and that there was no need to worry about nuclear contamination.

Non-state television stations were first advised not to go into the disaster area, which meant that they were not to make their own reports and just use official releases from the NCNA (New China News Agency) instead. This is the traditional way of controlling the media when a subject is politically sensitive. Guizhou Television, however, did not follow the state's advice to the letter. They detected some flexibility on the side of the central government, which they knew was interested in playing up the growing humanitarian concern among the Chinese. The station thought it would be acceptable if they reported on its own provincial activities, and they decided to let their reporters accompany the rescue team from Guizhou Province. It turned out that they were right, and they received retroactive consent from the government.

Later, many television stations began reporting from Sichuan Province, and the Chinese government began to worry that free reporting might interfere with official recovery and reconstruction efforts because reporters were shedding light on sensitive problems, such as the fact that schools were heavily damaged in the earthquake while the well-built municipal buildings stood unaffected. Unfortunately, these reports went beyond the boundaries of journalistic freedom set by the government. Li Changchun, the member of the Standing Committee of the Communist Party in charge of publicity and propaganda, gave a directive at a conference to major media outlets like Peoples' Daily (*Renmin Ribao*), NCNA, and CCTV (China Central Television) to concentrate on *zhengmian baodao*, or what I would call "regular reporting" (*Renmin Ribao*, May14, 2008).

The Chinese media is still under the strict control of the party and the government, but changes are certainly occurring, even in official media such as NCNA and Peoples' Daily. In the first place, they cannot stay unaffected from the influence of information technology, just like the major media in the West must, more or less, begin disseminating information on the internet. Furthermore, even the official media are becoming reliant on income from commercial advertisements. They are forced, in a sense, to make their articles more interesting to get more sponsors.

4. The internet and public opinion

The Chinese public reacted very strongly on the internet to the Great East Japan Earthquake. It seems that roughly 2.5 million Chinese "celebrated" the incident (Baidu, March13, 2011). But we should not be surprised by that number, because the majority of the 400 million net users in China did not join in. The 2.5 million who dared to celebrate the disaster represent much less than one percent of all net users. Many people even criticized the mean-spirited reactions of the "handful of

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people” who celebrated the earthquake in Japan, and they wrote in strongly worded disapproving messages such as, “Those who rejoiced are a disgrace to the nation.”

Although this statistical analysis of the Chinese public view does not suggest that the Chinese public is friendly to Japan, it does demonstrate that the Chinese can be both ways, that is, either friendly or unfriendly toward Japan. Internet users among the Chinese public may regenerate and even stir up anti-Japanese sentiment, but they have surely demonstrated that they also want to know the truth about Japan. Similar things can be said of their government. The Chinese government is even afraid of possible criticisms or attacks from the Chinese public.

To put aside the efforts that the Japanese must make, the views and sentiments of the Chinese public should play a decisive role for the reconciliation between Japan and China. We must grasp the real situation which is often concealed behind official statements, and the opinions freely expressed on the internet may give us important clues about conditions in China.

In conclusion, some lessons regarding Sino-Japanese reconciliation merit proper reflection in the wake of natural disaster.

First, even though it is safe to say that the exchanges of goodwill and humanitarian concern helped to generate friendly feelings about each other, it is too soon to draw any conclusion on the reconciliation between Japan and China. It is still in its early stage and much remains to be done to promote the process.

Second, the Chinese youth play an important role in the reconciliation between the two countries. They make significant discoveries in their direct contact with the Japanese during their trips to Japan, or in concerts by young Japanese musicians where the Chinese behave just like youths of any other country. They are flexible enough to modify the old views they held before. They express their views so strongly on the internet that both the Japanese and Chinese governments must acknowledge their opinions. We can rely on the capacity of the youth to play a leading role for the change of the society, and we have good reason to do so.

Third, the Chinese mass media is still controlled by the Chinese authorities in principle, but we are also observing some new developments. It may help China change in a constructive direction in the future if both governments and peoples in the meantime deal with occasional eruptions of anti-Japanese emotions carefully, patiently, and with reason.

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Finally, some people seem to think that the Chinese do not change, particularly in their views of foreign cultures. But they are wrong. China is a huge and multi-faceted country. From the perspective of medium-sized countries, social change might seem to take place slowly there, but the country is certainly capable of change. We must be patient observers of the Chinese as they continue to change.