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**Get Over the Past:  
An Empirical Study of the Chinese Government's Changing Rhetoric on  
China-Japan Historical Disputes**

by

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## **Introduction**

Disagreement on historical issues has always been a barrier in diplomatic relations between China and Japan. The Japanese historical textbook issue<sup>1</sup> and Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine<sup>2</sup> heavily damaged the diplomatic relations between the two countries and left a negative impression on the Chinese public's view of Japan. However, this study of the Communist Party of China's Newspaper, *People's Daily*, which reflects the Chinese government's rhetoric toward Japan, suggests the Chinese government has dramatically shifted its tone on China-Japan historical disputes to form a more positive public opinion toward Japan since Prime Minister Abe succeeded Koizumi in 2006.

While the shift of narrative I found in my research looks sudden, and maybe even rushed, I believe the change of narrative was necessary in order to improve the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the *Chinadaily*, "A controversial textbook, written by nationalist scholars for junior high schools, is displayed during a news conference held by civic groups opposed to the approval of the new version of the textbook in Tokyo April 5, 2005. Japan's Ministry of Education approved on Tuesday a revised version of the textbook that critics say whitewashes Japan's militaristic past, further fraying already tense ties with China and South Korea." This textbook has caused many protests in China and remained one of the major diplomatic disputes between China and Japan. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-04/06/content\\_431575.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-04/06/content_431575.htm)

<sup>2</sup> As Yasukuni shrine's official website has described "more than 2,466,000 divinities are enshrined here at Yasukuni Shrine. These are souls of men who made ultimate sacrifice for their nation since 1853 during national crises such as the Boshin War, the Seinan War, the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, World War I, the Manchurian Incident, the China Incident and the Greater East Asian War (World War II)." <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/about/index.html>  
However, there are 14 Class-A war criminals "responsible for the most atrocious crimes during Japan's war of aggression against its Asian neighbors...including wartime prime minister Hideki Tojo" who are worshiped in Yasukuni Shrine. Yasukuni Shrine is viewed as a symbol of Japanese militarism and any Japanese government official's visit to Yasukuni Shrine is interpreted as a revival of Japanese militarism by China and other Asian countries. Prime Minister Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine six times during his stay in office and caused a series of harsh protests from both Chinese government and average Chinese citizens. [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200608/15/eng20060815\\_293308.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200608/15/eng20060815_293308.html)

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Chinese public's view of Japan. The Chinese government's decreased emphasis on China-Japan historical disputes and increasingly positive portrait of Japan bring both economic benefit and political gain to China. Constructing domestic support to "create a new direction for a strategically mutual-beneficial China-Japan relationship"<sup>3</sup> is crucial to China's economic success and closely linked to the legitimacy of the government.

This study is not only relevant to China-Japan relations, but also gives us clues as to what this means for China's rise. It is uncertain how China will identify itself and play its role in the international community with a growing economy and global influence. Therefore, China's policy toward Japan is considered as "an important index by which to gauge how China will treat its neighbors during its rise."<sup>4</sup> This study analyzes how the Chinese government has shifted its narrative away from China-Japan historical disputes, indicating how China will conduct itself with other members in the international community during times of conflict. A shifting narrative on the China-Japan historical disputes and a warming of China and Japan's diplomatic relationship is a confirmation of China's "peaceful development"<sup>5</sup> promise to the international community.

After addressing the importance of the changing narrative on historical disputes

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<sup>3</sup> Hu Jintao, Remarks at the meeting with Prime Minister Fukuda in July, 2008. Hu Jintao also repeated this sentence on other occasions. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-05/11/content\\_8143520.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-05/11/content_8143520.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Yang Bojiang, "Redefining Sino-Japanese Relations after Koizumi," *The Washington Quarterly* 29.4 (2006): 130.

<sup>5</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's Peaceful Development Road," <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/152684.htm>.

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in China's relations with Japan, and the economic and political rationale behind those changes, I will further explain what the notion of "getting over the past" and an increasingly positive portrait of Japan mean to China's national identity in the twenty-first century. China is reshaping its old "victim" identity to a more active and engaging national identity in the international community.

## **Methods**

The state-owned newspaper, *People's Daily*, is considered the direct statement of the Chinese government's policy. To analyze the Chinese government's rhetoric on China-Japan historical issues, I searched its online database and found all the articles that included the word "Japan" that had been published since 2000 (Pre-2000 articles are not available online). My main focus was on articles featuring direct quotes and references from government officials about China-Japan historical issues. By analyzing three main elements of these articles, I assessed the importance of these articles and the impact on public opinion they created.

Three elements were crucial to my analysis. The first element was the position in the government of the person who was quoted or referenced in the article. The higher position the person had in government, the more important the article was. For example, a foreign ministry spokesman's comment on Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni shrine was less important than the Foreign Minister's comment. I assumed any quotes or references from the President or the Premier had the most significance and the biggest impact on public opinion.

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The location of the article also indicated its significance. In *People's Daily*, the section decides the location and the length of the article (these two characteristics are related so I consider them as one). *People's Daily* has four basic sections. The most important news is published in the first section, and it is usually related to top government leaders and major decision-making in the government. Section 2 covers domestic news. Anything that happened inside the country is located in this section, but is less important than Section 1. Section 3 is dedicated to international news. It is usually the same length as Section 2 but less important than section 1. Section 4 is a collection of short summaries of both domestic and international news. Each summary is no longer than one or two paragraphs; most of them are just a few sentences. I assume the order of significance and the impact on public opinion of these sections are: Section 1 > Section 2 & Section 3 > Section 4. In early years, *People's Daily* might have had a different sectional arrangement, so in this study, if the sectional arrangement was not clear, I used the length of the article to decide its significance.

The last element is the content and the language. I focused on the evocative and emotional sentences or words used in these quotations and references to evaluate the emotional meanings and stance attached to them. I further analyzed how these specific emotional meanings may impact the Chinese public view of Japan.

### **Three Periods of Narratives**

The narrative of China-Japan historical issues can be organized into three chronological periods. The first period, 2000 to 2001, is characterized by limited

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criticism towards Japan coupled with some constructive views. The second period, from 2001 to 2006, coincided with Prime Minister Koizumi's stay in office. In this time period, *People's Daily* gradually directed an angry narrative toward Japan. There were positive comments on China-Japan relations, but they carried a frustrated tone. The last period started after late 2006. The narrative since late 2006 tended to create a positive public opinion toward Japan. Exceptions existed but these were minor.

### **2000-2001 Pre-Koizumi Period**

This research is based on the study of all the articles published on *People's Daily* since 2000<sup>6</sup>. Because only one year of articles were studied for the Pre-Koizumi period, it is hard to conclude the characteristics of this period. Essentially, it is similar to the Koizumi Period. *People's Daily* frequently criticized Japan's unfavorable actions on historical issues, but they tended to be mild compared to the later period. A quote from President Jiang Zemin greeting Yoshiro Mori during his inauguration as Prime Minister confirmed the importance of the cooperative China-Japan relationship and the belief that the friendship between the two countries would "have new development under your [Mori's] effort." No "historical issues" were mentioned by Jiang.<sup>7</sup> Twenty days later, after Prime Minister Mori commented on Japan's invasion of China (Obviously the Chinese government was not happy about his comment), *People's Daily* published a speech by Foreign Ministry Spokesman Sun Yuxi: "We

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<sup>6</sup> Pre-2000 articles are not available from *People's Daily* online database.

<sup>7</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Yoshiro Mori inaugurated Prime Minister of Japan, Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji sent greeting," *People's Daily*, Section 1, 2000/04//06, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/337/29531.html#>.

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are surprised and regretted by Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's blurring of the implication of Japan's invasion of China and his wrong, hurting statement." He asked Japan to obey the principle of the China-Japan treaties and to "maintain the overall situation of China-Japan relations."<sup>8</sup>

Later, on May 11<sup>th</sup>, *People's Daily* reported Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan's meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister. Tang criticized Japanese revisionists who "disturb the relation between two countries" and asked Japan "to obey the promises they have made to China, and prove (Japan's) understanding of historical issues by taking real actions, to control the right wing revisionists and prevent them from harming the overall situation of China-Japan relations." Tang also recognized the China-Japan relationship "generally keeps its developing direction," and the article said "China and Japan achieved several mutual-understanding and agreements in many areas during the meeting."<sup>9</sup>

These examples reflect the basic tone of *People's Daily* on Japan-China historical disputes in the year 2000. When a Japanese politician commented on historical issues and the Chinese government disagreed, there would be a protest in *People's Daily*. However, protests were usually short and from low-level officials. Most articles related to Japan in the first section were from top-level government officials. They usually featured quotes and references that repeatedly stated the

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<sup>8</sup> Sun Yuxi, "Foreign Ministry Spokesman answers questions from Journalists," *People's Daily*, Section 4, 2000/04/27, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/484/50746.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Tang Jiaxuan, "Tang Jiaxuan Talks with Japanese Foreign Minister," *People's Daily*, Section 6, 2000/05/11, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/560/61053.html>.

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importance of China-Japan relations and recognized the development China and Japan had achieved, both politically and economically.

### **2001-2006 Koizumi Period.**

In the second period, both China and Japan experienced leadership changes. Koizumi became the Prime Minister of Japan in 2001, and Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang Zemin as the General Party Secretary of Chinese Communist Party in 2002 and became the President of China in 2003. This period is characterized by the increasing criticism on Japanese history textbook issues and Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine. Different from the previous period, these comments were usually from higher-level officials. Fewer "Foreign Ministry Spokesmen" spoke the government's opinion. Instead, their bosses, Foreign Ministers and Vice Foreign Ministers, came out themselves and delivered many critiques. Sometimes they delivered their protests face to face with Japanese Ambassadors or government officials.

Surprisingly, Premier Wen Jiabao directly told Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi in April 2003 that "Japanese Leader's visits to Yasukuni Shrine have hurt Chinese people's feelings."<sup>10</sup> When President Hu Jintao finally had a chance to meet Prime Minister Koizumi during the 2003 APEC Meeting in Bangkok, he restated the importance of constructing a positive China-Japan relationship and told Prime Minister Koizumi that "leaders in both countries should carefully handle historical issues, never commit any incident that harms the feelings of the people from victim

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<sup>10</sup> Wen Jiabao, "Wen Jiabao Meets Japanese Foreign Minister," *People's Daily*, First Section, 2004/04/04, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/11702/1055029.html>.



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countries.” Obviously, by “leaders in both countries” Hu Jintao meant “you, Koizumi, should handle historical issues properly.” The next day, *People’s Daily* published the talk between Hu and Koizumi.<sup>11</sup> This kind of high-level, face-to-face criticism was nonexistent in the previous period.<sup>12</sup>

Another topic that dominated this period was the history textbook issue. Since the textbook issue emerged in 2001, the tone of *People’s Daily* gradually became angrier. When the revised textbook was submitted to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan for approval, *People’s Daily* quoted a mild protest from a Foreign Ministry Spokesman in Section 4. When talking about this issue, the Spokesman did not use any words like “against” or “protest.” Instead he carefully said we (China) “noticed” the issue and restated “our opinions to revise the textbook.”<sup>13</sup> However, when the new textbook was approved with only minor changes, *People’s Daily* published a long article in its third Section titled “Our (Chinese) Ambassador to Japan Holds News Conference, Strongly Condemn Japan for Approving the History-Twisting Textbook.” Ambassador Chen Jian blamed the “evil motivation” of the textbook, repeated the entire history of the Japanese invasion, and stated the tone of the textbook is “a public defiance to the international agreed historical fact and to the consciousness of human being.” Many other angry words

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<sup>11</sup> Hu Jintao, “Hu Jintao Meets Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi,” *People’s Daily*: Section 3, 2003/10/21, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper39/10434/950717.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Maybe there were some before 2000, or they happened but *People’s Daily* didn’t publish them.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Qiyue, “Foreign Ministry Spokesman says China can’t accept the so called Revising Opinions on Japanese History Textbooks,” *People’s Daily Overseas Version*, Section 4, 2001/07/05, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper39/3717/455608.html>. I started the research by looking at articles from both *People’s Daily* and its Overseas Version. However, they tend to cover the same articles related to China-Japan relations and no differences were found and I stopped researching the Overseas Version.

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were used in his speech, and *People's Daily* quoted them all<sup>14</sup>.

Responding to Prime Minister Koizumi's repeating visit to Yasukuni Shrine, and the dispute over the history textbook issue, *People's Daily* started publishing articles written by scholars, reporters and "commentators" that blamed Japanese revisionists and right-wing politicians. These kinds of articles usually pretended to present some non-government opinion because they were not directly from the government. Thus, they had more room for expression and so tended to be angrier and sharper than official protests.<sup>15</sup> Some articles were very emotional and all of them seemed to perpetuate the notion that Japan is an untrustworthy country. Numerous similar articles were found in this period. For example, there was an essay titled "Twisting the History and Covering the Dark" that listed all the steps the Japanese government took to cover its war crimes and concluded that the Japanese government would "lose the trust of Asian community and the world" if they kept using the revised textbook.<sup>16</sup>

To the Chinese public, these articles were quite provocative, and their attached emotional value was powerful. Because of the narrative nature of these articles, they could create a more negative view of Japan in public opinion than these quotes from

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<sup>14</sup> Chen Jian, "Our Ambassador to Japan Holds News Conference, Strongly Condemn Japan for Approving the History-Twisting History textbook," *People's Daily*, Section 3, 2001/04/04, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/3095/412492.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Despite not being written by people who hold government jobs, I believe everything from *People's Daily* is related to the government's opinion and have strong political intentions. Basically, the Chinese government was using "scholars, reporters and commentators" to say angry things they did not feel able to say themselves.

<sup>16</sup> Cao Pengcheng, "歪曲史实 欲盖弥彰", *People's Daily*, section 32005/04/12, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/14508/1290461.html>. I cannot properly translate the title as it is one of the scholarly essays that has a strong literature affiliation. The title is written in two pairs four-character, classical style idiom, it basically means "Bend and twist the history, willing to cover the evidence." But it is expressed in an ambiguous way and could lead to many interpretations.

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Government officials. They were not just saying Japan did something bad; they used stories, detailed facts, and analysis to construct the rationality of the anti-Japanese feeling in the Chinese people's minds.

Positive or constructive quotes could be found during this period, and they were mostly from high-level governmental officials. These articles were always consistent: they confirmed the importance of a friendly China-Japan relation and recognized the improvements the two countries had achieved in the past. However, they sounded very frustrated in the larger context when China-Japan political relations were obviously deteriorating. For example, when Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing delivered a report on China-Japan relations in the People's Congress in 2005, he praised the thousands of years of friendship between China and Japan and emphasized the diplomatic achievements China and Japan had made since 1972. After all, Li Zhaoxing admitted that "recently, the passive side of China-Japan political relation is gradually emerging" and "(Japan did) many wrong things when it comes to historical issues. (Japan)not only hurt the feeling of Chinese people deeply but also complicated the China-Japan relationship."<sup>17</sup>

Overall, *People's Daily* reflected that the Chinese government's narrative on China-Japan historical disputes was very negative during this period of time. This kind of narrative really damaged Japan's image in Chinese society. Fortunately, a dramatic shift of this narrative occurred in the following period.

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<sup>17</sup> Li Zhaoxing, "Li Zhaoxing delivers Report on the situation of China-Japan relation," *People's Daily*, section 1, 2005/04/20, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/14571/1295617.html>

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## 2007-Present Post Koizumi Period

After Prime Minister Koizumi, the political relationship between China and Japan warmed up under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda. Prime Minister Abe visited China in 2006, and Prime Minister Fukuda followed in 2007. As a response to this friendly gesture, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan in 2007, and President Hu Jintao went to Japan twice in 2008. One trip was a state-level visit, and the other one was for the G8 summit meeting. President Hu was the first Chinese president to visit Japan in 10 years.<sup>18</sup> When the political relations dramatically changed, so did the tone of *People's Daily*. It looked like the faucet of angry words had been suddenly shut off. Suddenly, a fountain of completely different information was opened, showering the people with completely contrary information.

Since Japanese Prime Ministers stopped visiting Yasukuni Shrine, Prime Minister Fukuda even vowed in 2007 that he would “stay away from a Tokyo shrine seen by Asian neighbors as a symbol of Japan's past militarism if he were chosen as the nation's new leader.”<sup>19</sup> The issue cooled down and protesting articles related to Yasukuni Shrine disappeared from *People's Daily*.

When *People's Daily* talked about historical disputes, they were often lightly mentioned in the middle of a speech from a top government leader. The entire speech

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<sup>18</sup> “Chinese president to visit Japan in early May,” Chinese Government Official Website, [http://www.gov.cn/english/chinatoday/2008-04/29/content\\_957661.htm](http://www.gov.cn/english/chinatoday/2008-04/29/content_957661.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Fukuda leads Japan PM race, Won't Visit Yasukuni, [www.chinadaily.com](http://www.chinadaily.com), [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2007-09/16/content\\_6110119.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2007-09/16/content_6110119.htm).

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would be about encouraging a relationship with Japan, economically, politically and culturally. In this case, historical disputes served as the negative reflection of the current, improving China-Japan relations. Here is an example: When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao held a news conference before his visit to Japan in 2007, he was asked how China would react if Prime Minister Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine. Wen said:

Everybody knows that in the previous years, some individual Japanese leaders continuously visited Yasukuni Shrine, where WWII Class-A War Criminals are worshiped, this greatly hurt the feeling of Chinese people, and caused serious consequence to two countries' relations. We don't want to see that (negative consequences to two countries relations) and we don't want it to happen again. This year is the 35-year anniversary of the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations, but also the 70<sup>th</sup> year since the Lu Gou Bridge Incident, the China-Japan relationship faces opportunities but also challenges. Both China and Japan should stand on a strategic level and use a long-term insight to understand and handle two countries' relations. (I) hope Japan will not do anything to hurt Chinese people's feelings.

That was it, and Wen quickly shifted the topic to Abe's visit to China in 2006, during which "both sides achieved many understanding on how to overcome the political barriers between two countries."<sup>20</sup>

Later, Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan and delivered a speech in the Japanese Diet. He started the speech by praising the thousands of years of friendship between ancient China and Japan, and this friendship was ended "by the 50-year miserable, unfortunate history. The Invasion of China launched by Japan brought enormous disaster to Chinese people and also caused huge pain and damage to Japanese people." Premier Wen then stopped talking about historical issues and no specific dispute was

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<sup>20</sup> Wen Jiabao, "Before the official visit to Japan, Wen Jiabao Accepted Interview from Japanese News Networks," [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2007-04/05/content\\_12681798.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2007-04/05/content_12681798.htm).

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mentioned. Next, he stated that building the China-Japan friendship “follows the trend of history and the will of people in China and Japan.” He endorsed driving the China-Japan relationship “to a new historical period and achieve peaceful coexistence, ever-lasting friendship, mutual benefit and cooperation.” After picturing the bright future of China-Japan relations, Wen talked about five strategies to strengthen China-Japan friendship and listed every possible area for cooperation between the two countries. These areas ranged from “cooperation in energy, environmental protection, finance, cutting-edge technology, information and technology, and intellectual property rights” to “energy security, environmental protection, climate change, disease prevention and anti-terrorism, crush multi-national crime, and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>21</sup> No historical issues were mentioned again.

This positive narrative improved even more in 2008, as President Hu Jintao visited Japan twice, and Fukuda visited China to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China”. Also, the Japanese and Chinese governments jointly announced 2008 as the Japan-China Youth Friendship Exchange Year.<sup>22</sup>

In 2008, *People's Daily* kept publishing full-text speeches from top government leaders about the cooperation and friendship between China and Japan. When

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<sup>21</sup> Wen Jiabao, “Wen Jiabao Delivers Speech In Japanese Diet,” [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2007-04/13/content\\_12793041.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2007-04/13/content_12793041.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/exchange08/index.html>

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President Hu Jintao met Prime Minister Fukuda in Japan, he further expanded the significance of China-Japan relations by stating that “(China and Japan) hold hands to create a structure for peace in North East Asia and the regional cooperation in Asia, work together on Asia’s revival and face global challenges.”<sup>23</sup> This was unheard of before. Hu only mentioned historical disputes in one sentence. It was highly summarized, and it appeared along with other issues as seen in his quote “learn from history and face the future, properly handle historical issues, Taiwan issue and other sensitive important issues to maintain the political foundation of China-Japan relation.” He didn’t mention the Yasukuni Shrine or history textbooks. “Properly handle historical issues”—that was all.

Discussion of historical disputes almost vanished from *People’s Daily* in the Post-Koizumi period; the only exception: one comment from the Foreign Ministry Spokesman Jiang Yu. It was a four-sentence response to The Chief of Staff of Japan’s Air Self-Defense Force Tamogami Toshio’s controversial essay.<sup>24</sup> However, General Tamogami was dismissed right away by Prime Minister Aso<sup>25</sup>, and no further related articles were found from *People’s Daily*.

Another surprising finding in this period was that critical pieces on Japanese revisionism written by scholars, reporters, and *People’s Daily* commentators entirely

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<sup>23</sup> Hu Jintao, addressed during his meeting with Prime Minister Fukuda, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-05/08/content\\_48484149.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-05/08/content_48484149.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Jiang Yu, This article is the response to The Chief of Staff of Japan’s Air Self-Defense Force Tamogami Toshio’s Essay, *People’s Daily*, Section 3, 2008/11/02. [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-11/02/content\\_130491.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-11/02/content_130491.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Japan Times, Tamogami out of ASDF, Not out of Range, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090128f1.html>.

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disappeared. Instead of criticisms, essays praised Japanese culture, technologies, and other positives. Most of them were quite sentimental, and they were seemingly everywhere. A good article to exemplify this kind of writing was a poetic essay about the Arashiyama Park outside of Kyoto. The author was astonished by Arashiyama Park's beauty and compared this park to the traditional Chinese aesthetic value of nature, revealing that the park made the author miss his home. It had an extremely emotional title and differentiated itself from other politically oriented articles.<sup>26</sup> Many similar articles have been published since 2007.

After the Koizumi period, the narrative entirely shifted direction, and the degree of change was astonishing. It appeared *People's Daily* almost completely got over the past with Japan. The overall narrative in the Post-Koizumi period was very positive, and it coincided with warming political relations between the two countries. It was expected that this change would create a more positive Chinese public opinion toward Japan and benefit the overall relationship between the two countries.

## **Conclusion**

This study indicates that the Chinese government's narrative on China-Japan historical disputes, as reflected in China's state-run newspaper *People's Daily*, gradually became angrier in 2000, reaching its height during Prime Minister Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and the rising intensity of the

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<sup>26</sup> "Cuo e...Cuo e... a Tourist's Speaks from his Heart," *People's Daily*, Section 15, 2009/02/24, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2009-02/24/content\\_198642.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2009-02/24/content_198642.htm). According to the article "Cuo e" is a phrase from ancient Chinese poems describing the cragginess of mountains and the title sounds like the author is singing an ancient Chinese poem on a Japanese mountain. When did *People's Daily* become a place for poetry singing? Its political intention is obvious: creating a nice image of Japan.



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history textbook dispute. Nevertheless, a dramatic narrative change occurred after 2007, seemingly as an immediate response to Prime Minister Abe's visit to China. The narrative's path is closely related to the change in the political relationship between China and Japan. The change confirmed the Chinese government's understanding that "the peaceful coexistence, ever-lasting friendship, mutual cooperation, and mutual development of China and Japan are extremely important to the peace, stability and prosperity of Asia and the world."<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, the cooling down of historical disputes, improving diplomacy toward Japan up to now, and the positive portrait of Japan in general gives the world a sense of China's future policy toward other countries. It appears to suggest that China is willing to create cooperative relations with other nations in an attempt to realize the promise of the "peaceful rise."

The changing narrative on historical disputes is also a practical move. The Chinese government is concerned that the anti-Japanese sentiments that built up during the bad period of China-Japan diplomatic relations earlier this decade will "spill over" and ruin China's economic relations with Japan, which is crucial to China's rapid economic development. It is possible that a worsening China-Japan economic relationship may create a ripple effect on the entire foreign investment-based economy, especially when anti-Japanese sentiment is transformed into a pan anti-Western sentiment. Here is a worst-case scenario imaged by Japanese

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<sup>27</sup> Hu Jintao, Addressed during his meeting with Prime minister Fukuda, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-05/08/content\\_48484149.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-05/08/content_48484149.htm).

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Scholar Hoshiyama: “If some unforeseen incident were to befall a Japanese company in China, this could have a knock-on effect on other foreign capital and deal a deadly blow to the Chinese economy. More conducive to China’s ‘peaceful rise’ would be to make continued use of Japan’s economic might and technological capability.”<sup>28</sup>

When I was in China during the years Prime Minister Koizumi was still in office, an anti-Japanese sentiment was developing. Resulting from this anti-Japanese sentiment, the call for a boycott of Japanese products and economic protectionism was heatedly debated. It is understandably necessary for the Chinese government to secure economic ties with Japan by cooling down its negative narrative on historical disputes, since its own legitimacy today is largely based on China’s economic success and increasing regional and global influence. To maintain this progress, improving the economic, political, and cultural relationship with Japan has irreplaceable significance. In the long term, there is greater room for cooperation, and the mutual benefit for the two countries could be enormous. As the two largest economies in Asia, China and Japan have the responsibility for the economic integration of East Asia. As the two largest foreign reserve holders in the world, these two countries have to cooperate to confront the current worldwide economic recession. Japan has the most advanced energy-saving technologies in the world and China still has much to learn from Japan. Security is another field necessitating increased cooperation; Japan needs to work with China to find a solution to the de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As a

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<sup>28</sup> Takashi Hoshiyama, “New Japan-China Relations and the Corresponding Positioning of the United States—History, Values, Realism in a Changing World,” *Asia-Pacific Review*, 15:2, 74

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Chinese scholar has suggested, “China and Japan can learn from Franco-German cooperation as a basis for future growth. Zero-sum games are out of fashion on globalization.”<sup>29</sup> However, this amicable future cannot be guaranteed if the China-Japan relationship is still haunted by traumatic war memories. It is quite possible that China will put historical disputes back on the agenda if an incident happens again. For example, if another Japanese Prime Minister visits the Yasukuni Shrine, China will protest. However, it will not be too loud. It is time to get over the past for the sake of a better future.

Shifting the dominant agenda of China-Japan relations from the “past” to the “future” also has a potential to influence China’s national identity. China used to define the China-Japan relationship as one of victim and aggressor. By trying to redefine this relationship as one between two equal partners, a new Chinese national identity is emerging. However, China has portrayed itself as a victim in the international community for a very long time, and the Communist Party of China has made the war against Japan one of the most important foundations for its own legitimacy. Japan’s invasion of China<sup>30</sup> served a crucial role in defining China’s national identity. The way China perceives Japan has deeply influenced how China defines itself and the Chinese government has been using this victimized identity as a

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<sup>29</sup> Fang Youngming, Searching for Common Interests between China and Japan: a Chinese view, “*Journal of Contemporary China*,” 17: 55, (May 2008): 381-382.

<sup>30</sup> In Chinese, the Sino-Japanese Wars are called the Japanese Invasions of China, or the Anti-Japanese Wars. The specific terms dedicated to these invasions showed the importance and the traumatic aspect of the war from a Chinese perspective.

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foundation for its legitimacy and a source of national identity and unification.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the way the Chinese government changes its narrative on China-Japan historical disputes may have a deep impact on the future of China's self-identification.

This change of narrative on China-Japan historical disputes is not just about improving China-Japan relations or reshaping a better public opinion toward Japan.

This change also serves as the first step for China to look for a new identity in the twenty-first century. After the Koizumi Period, Chinese leaders repeatedly announced

their desire to expand mutual interest and create a strong cooperative relationship with

Japan in the face of global challenges. This may suggest that China is moving away

from its old identity of the "victim"—rebranding itself as a more active and engaging

player in the international community.

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<sup>31</sup> Shogo Suzuki, "The importance of 'Othering' in China's National Identity: Sino-Japanese relations as a stage of identity conflicts," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 20 no.1 March 2007: 37.



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