Misperceptions in the China-Japan Interactions

A Case Study of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Crisis in 2012-13

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The “Middle-Age Crisis”: Whither the Sino-Japanese Relations?

Since the Sino-Japanese Joint Communiqué was announced in 1972, the diplomatic relationship between China and Japan has entered its forties. However, the year 2012, the fortieth anniversary of establishing the formal diplomatic relations between Japan and People’s Republic of China, witnessed a deteriorating relationship filled with tension and hostility and almost reaching its lowest point since the Normalization. The escalation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute serves as the key factor responsible for the deterioration. After the boat collision incident in the vicinity of the islands in 2010, the purchase of the Senkaku islands from the private owner by Ishihara Shintaro, the former Governor of Tokyo, and the sequent “nationalization” of the islands by the Japanese central government in 2012 triggered the crisis and severe antagonism between two countries. Beijing announced the statement of territorial sea baseline and regularized the patrol of marine surveillance vessels as countermeasures against Japanese “provocations”. Military escalation rendered the possibility of potential armed conflict over surrounding waters rapidly increased.

To make things worse, in mid-September large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in several major cities in China and many turned out to be violent by smashing or firing Japanese cars, restaurants and department stores. Niwa Uichiro, the former Japanese Ambassador to China resigned because of his public criticism on Ishihara’s purchase of the islands, deviating from the official position of Japanese government. However, his successor, the newly appointed Ambassador Nishimiya Shinichi suddenly passed away before his mission to China, casting more shadow upon the bilateral relations which has already been stuck in darkness. Ceremonies and events celebrating the 40th anniversary of Normalization had been largely cancelled, and leaders of both sides simply chose to ignore each other when they encountered in international occasions. Not only did the inter-governmental ties cool down dramatically, but mutual affinity among two nations has reached the nadir in history.¹

Antagonistic and nationalist sentiments in both countries continued in 2013. The LDP, which regained its ruling power in December 2012, holds an even tougher and assertive stance on the territorial dispute. The Abe administration pushed hard on revising the peaceful constitution in order

¹ According to public opinion survey conducted by Japanese cabinet office in October 2012, only 18% of Japanese respondents hold a positive image of China and 93% of them think Sino-Japan relations are in worse situation. (内閣府大臣官房広報室, 「外交に関する世論調査」, 2012年10月 http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h24/h24-gaiko/index.html.)
to expand the defense right and increased the military expenditure for the first time in the past decade. In addition, the revisionist attitude towards historical issues, including Japan’s past wrongdoings during the wartime, adopted by Prime Minister Abe and other conservative politicians further provoked China and made the stalemate aggravated. On the Chinese side, it seems that the hard-liners’ position, emphasizing persistent antithesis with Japan without any concession (and Chinese government does not need to repair the bilateral relationship in hurry), has become the mainstream opinion, and there is a crescendo of voice in both academia and public opinion to call for economic sanction/boycott against Japan. The 2013 trilateral summit among China, Japan and Korea was postponed due to the “immature” timing. The deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations, aggravation in mutual threat perceptions and increasing possibility of military conflict have not only become a great challenge or even common failure for Chinese and Japanese diplomacy, but posted threat upon regional peace, stability and prosperity in Asia-Pacific, and thereby drawing close concerns from neighboring countries and the United States as well. A critical question appears naturally: How could the Sino-Japanese relations come to this stage and who to blame for?

“Staring with dealing the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands issue and ending with dealing the same one,” Ambassador Niwa Uichiro concisely summarized his short-life diplomatic career in China as such. Right before his resignation, he put it, “some compare China and Japan as ‘neighbors’, however, you can choose your neighbors and are free to move out, but these two countries cannot. Therefore we must be friendly to each other.” Undoubtedly, a stable and close bilateral relationship not only is crucial for the domestic sustainable development in China and Japan, but lays the foundation for peace and prosperity in East Asia. However, with the interdependence continually increasing between Japan and China (in terms of trade, economic connections and communications), why have their frictions or conflicts in high politics been aggravating?

It is not difficult to find that historical controversies (including issues of history textbooks, Yatsukuni Shrine visit, and wartime responsibility and compensation, etc.) and conflict of interests (such as the territorial disputes in East China Sea) have comprised the major “structural factors”, which have been haunting the Sino-Japanese relations for a long time and remain as the biggest obstacle for the reconciliation between two nations. Therefore this paper serves as a serious effort to diagnose the “middle-age crisis” of Sino-Japanese relations by using analytical tools and theoretical frameworks from the studies of International politics.

**Beyond the “Power Transition” and “Security Dilemma”**

Literatures conventionally analyze and explain the fluctuations in Sino-Japanese relations from the

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Realist approach which emphasizes power politics, the shifts of power balance, conflicting interests and security dilemma, etc. The relationship between Japan and China has been viewed basically as a pair of power relations, and thus all the tensions and conflicts are the syndrome of the changing power distribution and sequent redistribution of wealth and interests. Power transition and security dilemma are the two major structural factors explaining Japan-China interactions.

For instance, John Chuan-tiong Lim, a researcher of Academia Sinica in Taiwan, regards the dramatic fluctuation and frequent frictions in bilateral relations in recent years as the syndrome of power transition between China and Japan, which underwent the profound shift of state power and regional status in century. Li Yu, a professor of IR at Peking University, also argues that changes in Japanese and Chinese perceptions towards each other could be mainly ascribed to the changing power distribution/balance between Beijing and Tokyo. The new “historic transitional period” of Sino-Japanese relations argued by Wu Jinan, a Japan expert in Shanghai Institute of International Studies, reflects the similar logic that both China and Japan have to relocate themselves and adjust the bilateral relations after the profound power transition during which conflicts and antagonism are easily found. Richard Bush, director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings Institute, analyzes the tension in two countries from the angle of security dilemma and points out both materialist and constructivist characters in the security dilemma between China and Japan.

Admittedly, the increasing tension and strategic sensitivity in China-Japan interactions is closely related to the relative changes in national power and regional status of two states. A century ago, a westernized and modernized Japan, after the Meiji Restoration, replaced the Chinese Empire as the strongest power in Asia and stepped upon the path of military expansion, while China suffered its one-hundred-year humiliation. However, the power transition took place again recently between these two Asian giants: On the economic dimension, in 2010 China exceeded Japan to become the second largest economy in the world; Contrast to China’s rapid economic growth with huge market potential and human capital it enjoys, Japan, after the burst of bubble economy and “the Lost Decade”, is struggling with the challenge of a outmoded “Japanese model”, fiscal deficit, national debts, and shortage of labor force in an aging society. Regarding the military strength, People’s Liberation Army achieved military modernization in a relatively short period and Chinese defense budget ranks the world second with its double digit growth, while Japanese military expenditure remained within 1% of its GDP and continually shrunk in the past decade. However, the key issue seems to be that both sides have not been well-prepared to adapt to their changing roles and status in

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Furthermore the security dilemma between China and Japan is ingrained and would probably aggravate in the geopolitical dynamics of Asia-Pacific. On one hand, a rising China with its growing military power would be more determined to defense its sovereignty claim and maritime interests, which increases the possibility of conflicts with Japan and render Tokyo further anxious about Beijing’s strategic intention; on the other hand, the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing affects Sino-Japanese relations directly, for the US “Pivot” or “Rebalance” towards Asia has urged Japan to share bigger defense responsibility with its American ally, and thus Japan’s pushing forward in military and security domain would exacerbate China’s threat perception. Consequently the Sino-Japanese security dilemma spirally goes up.

Realist approach did make great contribution to providing a panorama of Sino-Japanese relations. However, Realism and other rationalist theoretical frameworks mainly focus on either the system level (power structure of international system) or unit level (nation-states and domestic politics), but to full explain the fluctuations in bilateral relations may require more micro-level analysis, the individual/human level, considering the role of decision makers and the masses. Since individuals have cognitive limits and bounded rationality, it is the perception (and misperception), how one perceives and interprets facts, rather than the “factual truth” that really matters. Based on my observation, many misperceptions exist in the interaction between Japan and China, negatively impacting the decision making and behaviors of both countries, and to a large extent, have exacerbated the crisis and antagonism between these two nations.

**Misperception as a Perceptual Explanation for China-Japan Rivalry**

For those problems severely impeding Sino-Japanese relations, the Gordian knot may not be the problem per se, but how people perceive those issues and their interactions based on that perception. In other words, tension and conflict between Japan and China has been under great influence of various kinds of misperceptions. Therefore cognitive or perceptual factors should be included into the systematic set of variables in the function of Sino-Japanese relations in order to accurately grasp the genesis and escalation of crises.

The population engaged in Japan-China interactions and the scope and extent it covers is unprecedented compared with other great power relations. Hence leaders in both countries do not absolutely dominate the decision making process, for the masses are not only influenced passively but constructing and shaping the bilateral relations initiatively. Particularly with the advance of technologies, wide spread of Internet and emergence of social networks, the impact of mass media and public opinions upon foreign policymaking and governmental behavior has increased dramatically. With increasing number of people participating in the game between China and Japan,
the role of perception and misperception has become more salient. It is therefore of great academic and practical significance to apply the cognitive theory in international politics to systemically analyzing the fluctuation in Sino-Japanese relations, since researchers have rarely done that.⁸

There have been tons of papers discussing historical issues and conflicts between these two countries, among which many pointed out the existence of different memories and interpretations of history and misunderstanding. However, few approached this puzzle from the perspective of cognitive/perception theory. “Culture, Cognition, and the Sino-Japanese Relationship”, written by a Chinese scholar Wang Zhenmin, would be a pioneering work in Chinese literature applying theories of International Political Psychology to studies of Sino-Japanese relations.⁹ While this paper originally included cognitive factors into the analytical framework, the author failed to specifically identify the role of perception and misperception in conflicts between China and Japan and lack of case study to solidify his argument as well. Trying to fill the gap, I would borrow the Cognitive theory in International Politics which Robert Jervis developed in his groundbreaking work, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, to examine and dissect misperceptions in Japan-China interactions, particularly by using the crisis of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute in 2012-13 as a case study to illustrate how misperceptions negatively influence the interaction between Tokyo and Beijing and act as catalyst to electrify the escalation of crisis.

**Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Theory in International Politics**

Perception, an important object in cognitive psychology, refers to the process of, after exposure to stimuli, selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. One’s reaction towards stimuli bases on his/her perception of them rather than the stimuli per se. Therefore misperception would finally lead to problematic reaction which could cause unwanted consequence. In this sense, perception plays a critical role in decision making. Robert Jervis’s great contribution comes at applying research achievements in psychology systematically into the micro analysis unit of international politics by exploring the impact of decision-makers’ perception and misperception upon conflicts among nations.

According to Robert Jervis’s study, there are four common types of misperception in international

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politics.\textsuperscript{10} (1) \textit{Perceptions of Centralization (Perceptions of Unity and Planning)}: to see the behavior of others as more centralized, planned, and coordinated than it is; (2) \textit{Overestimating one’s Importance as Influence and Target}: Actors exaggerate the degree to which they play a central role in other’s policies; (3) \textit{Wishful Thinking}: decision-makers and the public would sometimes fall into a cognitive trap, being obsessed with their own desires or wishes without fully considering the real situation; (4) \textit{Cognitive Dissonance}: being psychologically uncomfortable to dissonance, people tend to actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.

And major psychological or cognitive mechanisms which generate misperceptions include: (1) \textit{Cognitive Consistency}: Consistency can largely be understood in terms of the strong tendency for people to see what they expect to see and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing images. In order to maintain cognitive consistency, relevant information deviating from the existing schema in one’s mind would be deliberately neglected or distorted. (2) \textit{Impact of Evoked Set}: Perceptions are influenced by immediate concerns (“evoked sets”) as well as by more deeply rooted expectations. Rational or not, people perceive and interpret incoming information in terms of what is of concern to them at the time the information arrives. (3) \textit{Historical Analogy}: What one learns from key events in international history is an important factor in determining the images that shape the interpretation of incoming information. Using historical events disproportionately as analogies is misleading in decision making process, for inaccurate historical analogy could generate misperceptions and then wrong decisions.

\textbf{Case Study: The Crisis of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute in 2012-13}

Bilateral relationship between Japan and China in 2012 had been dominated by the inflammable Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute which, after a Chinese fishing boat colliding with a Japanese Costal Guard patrol vessel around the islands in September 2010, generated the longest, most fierce China-Japan antithesis over the territorial dispute. The current stalemate between Beijing and Tokyo largely results from this crisis. The development of this crisis could be revealed from several noteworthy events:

In April 16, 2012 Ishihara Shintaro, the former governor of Tokyo, in his speech at a Washington symposium announced that the Tokyo government had decided to purchase the Senkaku islands from the private owner by using government budget; the next day Ishihara claimed the deal with the landowner had been made, which was the prelude to the big crisis. In July 7\textsuperscript{th}, the Japanese Prime Minister Noda announced that in order to maintain the stable administrative control over the islands, the Japanese government would serious consider transferring the ownership to the central government; consequently this “nationalization” plan immediately received strong protest from

Chinese Foreign Ministry, and in July and August many Japanese right-wing activists and “BaoDiao” (i.e. “Protecting Diaoyu Islands” Movement) activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan landed on the island to claim sovereignty rights respectively.

In September 11, the Japanese cabinet meeting approved the proposal of nationalizing Senkaku islands by deciding to purchase them by 2.05 billion yen from the reserve fund of 2012 fiscal year, and the Japanese government signed the contact with the landowner. Countermeasures were adopted by the Chinese side: one day before the official purchase, the Chinese government announced the statement of territorial sea baseline around Diaoyu Islands, and starting from Sept. 11, the patrol of Chinese marine surveillance vessels over water area surrounding Diaoyu Islands has been regularized. Meanwhile Japanese Coast Guard also reinforced its surveillance. From mid-September large scale anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in almost every major cities in Mainland China and big travel agencies all postponed their tourism service to Japan. Inter-governmental and civil communications between Japan and China had been largely cut off.

Military escalation continued. The two sides sent fighter airplanes to monitor ships and other planes in the area. In December 13, Japanese authority detected Chinese patrol aircraft entered Japan’s airspace by flying over the Senkaku and took the countermeasure of scrambling jets from Air Self-Defense Force; In February 2013, Japanese Defense Minister revealed that a Chinese frigate had locked weapons-targeting radar onto a Japanese destroyer and helicopter on two occasions in January, while his Chinese counterpart denied it. In November 2013 Beijing’s announcement of Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, with the Diaoyu Islands included and a large overlap with Japan’s ADIZ, and the tough response from Tokyo added more fuel to the prolonged crisis.

Putting aside the complicated historical context of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute (which has been carefully discussed by numerous historians and scholars), based on my observation of the current crisis, various misperceptions existed in decision-makers and masses (media reports & public comments) on both sides.

1. **China: Perception of Centralization and Evoked Set**

The perception of unity and planning could be easily identified on Chinese side—Chinese government tended to perceive the purchase of islands by Tokyo Mayor Ishihara and the sequent Nationalization plan proposed by the Noda administration as a well-designed maneuver with coordination between central and local government, aiming at strengthening the legitimacy of occupying Diaoyu Islands and thereby eroding Chinese territorial intactness. For instance, one article on People’s Daily, the mouthpiece of Chinese central government, argued that Japanese government “indulged the ‘purchase of islands’ drama played by the right wing force, and finally jumped to the
Noda government repeatedly explained that acquisition of the islands would help to stabilize the situation, for after putting the Senkaku under the direct administrative control of Japanese central government, building infrastructures on the island, dispatching officials and other moves which would further stimulate China, in the case of Tokyo’s purchase, could all be avoided. Therefore central government’s decision is an ad hoc and compromising option. Ministry of Foreign Affair (MOFA) of Japan also claims that “The transfer of the ownership is the practical and best measure from a broad perspective of Japan-China relations for the purpose of ensuring a continued peaceful and stable maintenance and management of the Islands over the long term.” However, the Chinese side refuted this explanation offered by Noda, insisting that the Japanese central government could have prevented Ishihara from acquiring the islands.

Jervis points out that, under the perception of unity, “the state’s behavior is usually seen as centrally controlled rather than as the independent actions of actors trying to further their own interests and their partial and biased conceptions of the national interest.” Regarding perceptions of planning, “accidents, chances, and lack of coordination are rarely given their due by contemporary observers. Instead, they suspect that well-laid plans give events a coherence they would otherwise lack.” This is a manifestation of the drive to squeeze complex and unrelated events into a coherent pattern. Particularly, perceptions of overcentralization and over-Machiavellianism are more apt to occur if the two sides are in conflict. It is the exact case of how Chinese perceived during the territorial dispute.

As an icon of right-wing forces in Japan, Ishihara Shintaro’s behavior is, to large extent, out of his personal political ambition and his partial, biased interpretation of Japanese national interest. The coordination with central government was absent and let alone he was authorized to do it. However, Chinese people are rarely informed of the relatively big autonomous power enjoyed by the local authorities entitled by the Japanese political institution. For instance, the decision made by the Tokyo Prefecture Diet, the fiscal budget of Tokyo government, and the election and appointment of Tokyo governor are all independent from the Japanese central government. Hardly realizing this, Chinese tended to regard the move made by Ishihara and his government as coordinated and well-planned with leaders in the central government. Moreover, since the dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands long exists, the evoked set that Japan “stolen” or occupied Chinese territory by maintaining de facto control of the islands has been imprinted in many Chinese minds. Therefore in Chinese eyes, the measure of “nationalization” made by the Noda government was naturally perceived as an “offensive”

14 Robert Jervis, p. 324
or “aggressive” behavior rather than a “reactive” or “defensive” approach to deal with Ishihara’s purchase and thus prevent the worst scenario.

2. Japan: Perception of Unity

As for Japan, those large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations in China, violence against Japanese cars and stores and radical “BaoDiao” activities usually have been perceived as collective actions approved or even deliberately organized by the Chinese government. From the Japanese perspective, it would be an advantage for Chinese government to manipulate nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment within Chinese society in order to further legitimize Chinese stance in the territorial dispute (and the Communist regime as well). After all, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system is more likely to leave the impression that China is a highly centralized and coordinated unitary actor. However, what has been neglect is that the socio-economic transformation in China has given birth to an increasing sense of independence from the masses, more pluralistic views and actions and the growing influence from bottom to up. Hence public opinions are imposing much greater pressure upon policymaking process in the government. The decentralization of diplomacy indicates that civil reactions against Japan probably did not receive commands from the top. But under this misperception, Japan tends to develop greater threat perception vis-à-vis China and thus easily overreacts.

3. Overestimating its Importance: the “American Conspiracy” in China

The theory of American conspiracy became quite popular in China during this crisis. Many Chinese analysts and even some scholars claimed that the outbreak of Diaoyu Islands crisis in 2012 was an intrigue of the United States, for it deliberately created tension between China and Japan over the island issue in order to reinforce the US-Japan alliance and thus contain China and maintain its leading role in regional affairs. The most obvious evidence, many argued, would be the place Ishihara announced his decision of acquiring the islands was Washington rather than Tokyo, which indicates the US was the manipulator behind the stage. Certain analysis goes too far as the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute contains the American intrigue of “a currency war” (to maintain the hegemonic position of US dollars by weakening yen and yuan). An online survey conducted by Chinese Yahoo shows that 96% respondents believe that the American attitude towards Diaoyu islands dispute is “actively pushing the conflict between China and Japan so as to take advantage from it”.

Let alone the fallacies and logic pitfalls in those arguments, the conspiracy theory per se is a

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17 An article titled “Beyond the Diaoyu Islands Dispute: A Deep Analysis” has been widely spread in Chinese websites. It is available at [http://biz.cn.yahoo.com/ypen/20120918/1317143.html](http://biz.cn.yahoo.com/ypen/20120918/1317143.html).
manifestation of misperception. Jervis argued that “when the other behaves in accord with the actor’s desires, he will overestimate the degree to which his policies are responsible for the outcome. When the other’s behavior is undesired, the actor is likely to see it as derived from internal sources rather than as being a response to his own actions. In this case the actor believes that the other is trying to harm him rather then that the effect was unintended consequence or a side-effect.”

While the US factor exists in Sino-Japanese relations, attributing the crisis to Uncle Sam is a kind of false attribution, by overestimating China’s own importance in American foreign policy. Strengthening the US-Japan alliance partially aims at dealing with uncertainties in the Korean peninsula brought by North Korea’s provocations, but Chinese tend to perceive the reinforcement as a strategic arrangement completely targeting at the rising China. To some extent, this misperception would make the “victim mentality” more ingrained in Chinese minds and thus render decision makers subject to misinterpretation of other’s intention.

4. Wishful Thinking of Both Leaders

Wishful thinking would be found on both sides in their interactions over this issue. For China, in September 9, 2012, during the APEC summit informal meeting, Chinese President Hu Jingtao had a talk with Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and reiterated China’s firm stance on the territorial issue in order to prevent Noda government from nationalizing the islands. In the talk Hu requested Japan to fully realize the seriousness of this issue and to act with prudence. Beijing thought after the face-to-face talk between two leaders, Tokyo should have remained “self-restraint” and at least given some faces to the Chinese leader. On the contrary, the Noda cabinet just approved the acquisition plan next day, which certainly caused outrage from Beijing feeling losing face and being humiliated. Similarly, Noda administration also wishfully thought that after explaining the rationale and motivation behind transferring the ownership to the central government, Beijing while being angry would finally understand and tolerate the Japanese measure, and thereby maintaining the friction at a low level. However, Tokyo completely did not expect such fierce reactions from Chinese government and society. On September 19, Noda admitted in an Asahi News interview that there was mistake in his calculation, for though he had considered purchasing the islands would cause some reactions from the Chinese side, the scale turned out to be unimaginable.

People usually hold expectation for certain results which could bring them enormous interests even though the chance is very thin. Leaders and masses tend to overestimate the possibility of success and thereby suffering from disappointment and agonistic sentiment easily. Wishful thinking of Chinese leaders made them believe that their Japanese counterpart had well received the strong signals sent from the Chinese side so that they would “rein in on the brink of a precipice”; Wishful

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19 Robert Jervis, p. 343.
thinking also made Japanese decision makers feel confidence that their decision would not bring severe consequences and thus had the guts to “let the horse go”. Unfortunately, escalation of the crisis was the result.

5. Self-Righteousness of China and Japan

The existence of ego-defensive motivation is prevailing, and it is no exception for this crisis. Both China and Japan hold a strong sense of “self-righteousness” by seeking justification for its own behaviors while blaming the other for all the wrongdoing. From Chinese perspective, Japan should be responsible for the escalation of crisis, because its acquisition of the islands damaged the consensus of shelving disputes reached by both leaders during the normalization negotiation. Thus it is the Japanese side which broke the status quo. For instance, Cui Tiankai, the former Chinese vice foreign minister and now Ambassador to the U.S., points out, “We had tranquility over these islands for many years, until the Japanese government decided to nationalize the islands last year.”

However, both Japanese Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo argued it was the Chinese proactive behaviors that originally exacerbated the situation. The MOFA claims that Japanese government’s “decision to acquire the property rights to the Senkaku Islands is not a major change of the current situation”, but “in recent years, China has actively made inroads into the ocean, and has taken provocative actions around the Senkaku Islands”, “attempting to change the existing order through coercion and intimidation.” According to MOFA, the current escalation dates back to the Chinese action in December 2008 when Chinese official vessels, for the first time, intruded into Japan’s territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, which surprised and raised concern among the Japanese public. These actions contributed to public support for a plan to purchase the Senkaku Islands by Ishihara. Japan is extremely concerning about China’s attempt to change the status quo of the islands by coercive manners. Abe in an interview by The Washington Post, revealed “what is important first and foremost is to make China realize that they would not be able to change the rules or take away somebody’s territorial water or territory by coercion or intimidation.”

Furthermore the 2010 boat collision incident had great influence on Japanese public opinion. By exaggerating China’s assertive reactions and demanding, if not unreasonable, request for apology, Japanese media successfully portrayed Japan as the victim bullied by its big neighbor, which also contributed to the public support for Ishihara’s initiative. Nevertheless, if both sides just firmly

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25 Ibid.
believe in the righteousness of their own behaviors, and simply point finger to each other as the evildoer who destroyed existing order and provoked conflict without considering the simulating effect of its own actions, then it would be impossible for both parties to take a step back and compromise.

6. Questioning the Status of Ryukyu (Okinawa): China’s Wishful Thinking and Miscalculation

In another attempt to justify the Chinese sovereignty claim over Diaoyu, on 8th May 2013, People’s Daily published a sensational article written by two Chinese scholars casting doubt on the Japanese sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands, namely the current Okinawa Prefecture of Japan.27 Afterwards, another article advocating China to support the independence movement in Okinawa and even cultivate local political forces to restore the state of Ryukyu appeared on Global Times.28 Since People’s Daily serves as the mouthpiece of Chinese government, though the argument of revisiting the status of Ryukyu is not an official statement, it drew lots of attention both within and without China. Japanese government strongly protested via diplomatic channels immediately and Yoshihide Suga, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, claimed that “by doubting the sovereignty of Okinawa, People’s Daily lacks common sense.” Prime Minister Abe also mentioned this article in the interview by Foreign Affairs magazine, concerning China’s ambition of expanding its territory. 29

While questioning the Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa has been regarded as a countermeasure against Japan on the Diaoyu Islands dispute30, “revisiting the status of Ryukyu” probably turned out to be China’s wishful thinking and ran the risk of miscalculating the situation. On one hand, Chinese have a blind spot on the issue of Okinawa, believing that the independence force in Okinawa is pro-Chinese and anti-Japanese and would welcome China to support its independence movement. However, the political identity of Okinawans is merely swaying between “Japanese” and “Okinawa’s” and thus they do not share any political identity with China.31 Against Chinese wishes, most Okinawans do not hold a positive image on China, and local media even criticized Chinese actions on the territorial dispute by arguing that just because of Chinese provocation, Okinawa has to suffer

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30 Compared with the media, Chinese government’s attitude towards this issue is relatively cautious. Hua Chunying, the spokeswoman of Chinese foreign ministry, commented on the status of Okinawa by saying that “the history of Ryukyu/Okinawa has been concerned by scholars for a quite long time. Diaoyu islands are Chinese territory and never be a part of Ryukyu or Okinawa.”
31 According to the survey on the political identity of Okinawa people, the majority has a Japanese national identity, and only about 20% Okinawans thought Okinawa should achieve independence from Japan in 2007. This number is even smaller than the percentage of Hong Kong people who agreed on the independence of HK in 2007. See John Chuan-tiong Lim, “the Real Public Opinion behind the Independence of Ryukyu,” Phoenix Newspaper Blog, May 20, 2013, http://blog.ifeng.com/article/27256195.html. (林泉忠: 《“琉球独立”到底有多少民意基础？》， “凤凰博报”，2013年5月20日)
On the other hand, playing the “Ryukyu card” would contribute nothing to the solution of Diaoyu/Senkaku issue and might be counterproductive for China—rather than occupying the moral high ground of the international community, it might leave a wrong impression that China has special interests on Okinawa and intervene in domestic affairs of other countries, which could make the “China Threat” argument and the Japanese right-wing forces more popular in Japan. Furthermore it could increase the possibility of Japan to support the separatists in China and thereby intensifying the problems of Tibet and Xinjiang. Therefore, keeping a coherent, prudent position on the Okinawa issue and avoiding misinterpreting the public opinion in Okinawa is the only wise choice of Chinese government.

Conclusion: Overcoming Misperceptions as a Way Out

The crisis of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is not the single case of misperceptions in Japan-China interactions. Actually, historical issues, which also have caused tensions and hostility between two countries, suffered from severe misperceptions as well. In the case of history textbooks, Chinese people naturally project the Chinese educational institution to the Japanese procedure of selecting textbooks. Failing to realize that textbooks are edited by non-governmental organizations and schools have autonomy to choose certain versions they want, Chinese people, under perceptions of centralization, believe the revisionist textbook represents the official interpretation of history, especially their attitude towards wartime wrongdoings of Japan. In addition, the important role of Japan’s ODA in China’s economic development after 1978 has been largely neglected by Chinese media and public opinion. Because the sheer fact that Japan is the country which had given China the largest financial and economic assistance in the past three decades simply runs counter to the existing image of evil, brutal “Japanese monsters” (riben guizi) in ordinary people’s cognition. In order to reducing this cognitive dissonance, many just treat ODA as a substitute for wartime reparation Japan should have compensated China, and thus it deserves no appreciation from Chinese people. Examples like these can run a long list. The point is that misperceptions aggravate mutual distrust and misunderstanding and block the opportunity of building trust and friendship between these two nations.

From the Realist perspective, the analytical framework of power and interest could capture the macro dynamics of Sino-Japan relations. But the distribution of power and national interests are relative stable in a certain period and thus fall short to fully explain the fluctuation of bilateral relations. In this sense, the cognitive explanation deriving from micro level of analysis unit could be regarded as a

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complementary approach trying to grasp the development of crisis or conflict. Misperceptions in Japan-China interactions cause inappropriate policies, acts and reactions from both sides and thus make misunderstanding and distrust deepen, and finally lead to the deterioration of bilateral relations. Overcoming or at least reducing misperceptions is critical to break this vicious circle of dragging Sino-Japanese relations into abyss.

Enlarging the channel of information exchange in both inter-governmental and cross-societal level would be a possible way to mitigate misperceptions, for it could help to overcome cognitive failure from information asymmetry. On the governmental level, it is of great significance to further institutionalize the regular communication and meeting between national leaders and expand bilateral talks to different bureaucratic divisions and functional institutions, especially enhance the crisis management mechanism and build up hotlines between decision makers. Only by improving communication and trust-building, could misperceptions be reduced in decision making. On the civil level, media, educational and research institutions are supposed to play more constructive roles to prevent each side from demonizing the other. For instance, in reporting those historical issues and disputes, both Chinese and Japanese media could have provided more comprehensive and objective pictures to reduce blind spots in audience instead of presenting single-faced, oversimplified, and extreme discourses which merely exacerbate misperceptions. And considering Japan and Sino-Japanese relations, Chinese historical education should not just emphasize the wartime history and anti-Japanese sentiment (which actually is a very common phenomena in primary and secondary education), but present more balanced and diverse perspectives on the long-lasting crosscultural communication between China and Japan, in order to construct more positive cognitive structure in the minds of younger generation and abolish sources of cognitive dissonance. Only by extricating from the trap of misperceptions, could Sino-Japanese relations truly find a prescription to the “Middle-age crisis”.
Main References