Weight of History: The 1972 Chinese-Japanese Normalization in Historical Perspectives

YANG Daqing

According to Confucian thinking, forty years are what it takes for a man to reach the “age of no ignorance” (不惑之年). Anyone who has expected that Chinese-Japanese relations would have matured over the same span of time would certainly be surprised and disappointed. The rapid deterioration in bilateral relations due to the dispute over the islands in East China Sea—known to Japanese as Senkaku and to Chinese as Diaoyu—has led to the cancellation of many scheduled celebrations of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic normalization. Angry Chinese citizens in over a hundred cities held sometimes violent demonstrations against Japanese government’s “nationalization” of three of the disputed islands. On the other hand, according to latest annual Japanese government opinion polls, the percentage of Japanese who have favorable views of China has sunk to a mere 20%, an all-time low since the survey began some thirty years ago. Given such current atmosphere of bilateral relations, it is perhaps understandable for many commentators to highlight the deficiencies and negative legacies of the 1972 normalization.

The present always colors our perception of the past: it affects the questions asked as well as conclusions drawn. In the meantime, historians should caution against such a presentist tendency. It is not that historians alone possess the wisdom to assess past events. In fact, the 1972 Chinese-Japanese diplomatic normalization already has been studied by political scientists and international affairs analysts. It is not until recently, however, that historians begin to claim the subject as their own with some confidence. This begs the questions why historians have waited so long and whether forty years later the 1972 normalization has really become history.

Has 1972 become History?

Historians often deploy a different approach to the study of past than political scientists and policy scholars. Above all, historians of diplomacy aim to ground their analysis on hitherto unavailable original official documents. For diplomatic historians, multi-linguistic and multi-archival research has become the gold standard. The new international Cold War history is one such prime example. Historians studying the 1972 Chinese-Japanese normalization have made some progress: the Japanese government has declassified the official records of the negotiations between Chinese and Japanese leaders in 1972 through its Freedom of Information Act. Many participants on both sides have published their memoirs or given interviews. Availability of US documents often proves crucial and fills some gaps. However, the disadvantage for historians is still significant. Although the Chinese government began opening its diplomatic archive to researchers a decade ago, the 1972 normalization remained mostly classified. Even with Japanese side, internal policy deliberations remain poorly documented, if at all.

Moreover, even with bilateral negotiations, the already declassified Japanese records might not tell the whole story. This is illustrated by the ongoing island dispute. The current
government in Tokyo denies there was any agreement—tacit or otherwise—that the sovereignty of the island is in dispute. According to the declassified Japanese records, the Japanese and Chinese leaders engaged in one brief round of conversation concerning the islands before moving on to the important task of opening the embassy. After Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei made an inquiry of Chinese position, Premier Zhou Enlai simply indicated he was not willing to discuss it this time, arguing it was Taiwan (ROC) and the US that made it an issue after the discovery of petroleum and natural gas in its vicinity.  

In October 2012, however, an article published in the official Chinese newspaper People’s Daily quoted, for the first time, apparently from the Chinese records of the same conversation between Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and Premier Zhou Enlai. Unfortunately, one cannot read the entire transcript. What we can read still leaves ample ambiguity. But if the quoted exchanges are authentic, the Chinese record does leave an impression that Zhou considers the islands to be an “issue” that should be deferred for the sake of the more urgent issue of diplomatic normalization. In the meantime, it seems that Tanaka agreed to deferring such a discussion but did not indicate clearly whether he considered the island among “other issues” to be resolved after normalization.

Since availability of previously classified documentation is key to history writing, in some countries twenty-five years are sufficient since most documents become open to the public. However, even here documents deemed of sensitive or pertaining to national security are redacted and withheld from the public. Freedom of Information Act sometimes can overcome such barriers but not always successfully. This applies to the US as well as Japan, notwithstanding the fact massive amounts of postwar diplomatic documents have been made available. On the other hand, in countries where a complete regime change takes place, whether violently or not, documents can become accessible almost overnight.

In this sense, it is not the passage of time or availability of documentation alone that separate historians from others analysts. Just as important, historians tend to ask different questions and offer different assessment from their social scientist colleagues. Besides greater availability of historical sources, passage of time is said to give greater hindsight that makes history-writing possible. Many have proposed various temporal distance from historical events. Retired diplomat and commentator Okazaki Hisahiko has proposed 60 years to be more appropriate since it roughly equals two generations. Separated from the actual event after two generations, the reasons, make it possible for a truly impartial assessment. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier at the time of 1972 normalization, once famously claimed that time had not yet come for the proper assessment of the French Revolution of 1789!

I would like to examine the 1972 Chinese-Japanese normalization thorough a lens that I call the “weight of history.” The past weights on decision-makers on two levels: first, pressing issues, undoubtedly often legacies from the past, frame and influence agenda in the present; second, past experience shape their perceptions, which in turn affect their decisions.

How do we assess the weight of the past in the normalization process of 1972? How did leaders view the past, and the future for that matter? What kind of “perceptions of history” did leaders have and did they make any difference when the leaders negotiated vexing problems left from the past and lay foundations for future development? How did they themselves see normalization in history? Forty years later, with most of these architects gone, how do we re-assess their evaluation and accomplishment? What will 1972 look like if placed in longer span of history? Will the assessment be different if the scale of history is not 40 years, but 75 years? 100 years, or even longer?
Weight of the Past in 1972: The 1952 Regime

Shortly before noon on September 25, 1972, Tanaka Kakuei, Prime Minister of Japan, arrived in Beijing with a delegation of more than fifty members. Less than two hours later, Tanaka was already at a meeting with Premier Zhou. This is the first time a Japanese sitting head of government set foot on the PRC capital. Having become Prime Minister only two months ago, Tanaka’s sole objective was to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China. His mission was accomplished five days later, when leaders of both governments gathered in the Great Hall of the People and signed the Joint Communiqué that “normalized” relations between the two countries.

This historic event followed months of intense preparations. The changing international and domestic contexts, as well as steps undertaken by Japan and China towards normalization have been described elsewhere. Here I shall only reiterate the highlights. In 1971 the US President Richard Nixon made an unprecedented visit to PRC, drastically changing the international environment of East Asia. A few months later, Tanaka Kakuei, who had made normalization with China a top policy goal, became the Prime Minister of Japan. In late July, Takeiri Yoshikazu, Secretary General of the opposition Komeito party, visited China and held extensive talks with Zhou Enlai over three days. Takeiri’s meticulously kept records—known as the Takeiri memo—conveyed to Tanaka the positions of the Chinese government on key outstanding issues. Shortly after, the Japanese government reached the decision to proceed with normalization with China. After discussion with the US at the summit and explanations of the Japanese position to China through envoys, Japan and China agreed on the Tanaka visit. A few days earlier, a special envoy was dispatched to the Republic of China (Taiwan) with which Japan had maintained diplomatic relations since 1952.

There was no doubt that dealing with the 1952 Japan-ROC treaty that recognized the latter as the sole legitimate government of China weighed heavily in 1972. In the course of the negotiation over the normalization, a clash allegedly broke out between the Chinese and the Japanese. Between the dinner and the second Zhou-Tanaka talk, the two foreign ministers and their top aides held their first meeting in the morning to finalize the terms of the normalization. Takashima Masuo of the Japanese Ministry, insisted on the legality of the 1952 treaty, which terminated the war between the two countries and renounced China’s “right to reparations from Japan.” The Japanese insisted that the 1952 treaty with ROC, though soon to expire because of diplomatic normalization with Beijing, was in itself a legal base. More specifically, issues of crucial importance to Japan, such as the termination of the state of war and the question of Chinese demand for reparations from Japan, they insisted, must proceed from the 1952 treaty. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, was said have flown into rage and called one Japanese Foreign Ministry official a “bandit of law” (法匪). It took personal intervention of Chairman Mao to bring the talks back on track.6) (According to the Japanese record, Chinese Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei acknowledged Japanese point that the Diet had acted to terminate war between Japan and China when it approved the 1952 treaty with Taiwan, but suggested that a way should be found to satisfy the Chinese people.)

This issue occupied much time in the second Zhou-Tanaka talk the same afternoon. Zhou began by highly praising Tanaka’s indication that this normalization was to be a political settlement, not a legal one. Zhou reiterated that China considered renouncing reparations for the sake of friendship between Chinese and Japanese people. “However, we cannot accept the argument that since Jiang Jeishi had given up (reparation), it is over. This is an insult to us.” Then, not to embarrass his counterparts, Zhou added “We respect the view of two Japanese leaders, but isn’t Foreign Ministry’s statement against you two leaders?” In response, Tanaka expressed his gratitude for China’s renouncing reparations, but also noted that on the Japanese side there are problems with the Diet and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).7)
The Japanese desire to maintain some form of relations with Taiwan did not become a major problem. This was largely due to the fact that Tanaka had repeatedly briefed his Chinese counterparts about the opposition to his normalization efforts from pro-Taiwan members of his own LDP. It is interesting to read the notes in the margin by one of Japanese participants in the negotiation. The Chinese, according to the note, were quite nervous as Foreign Minister Ôhira began reading Japan’s proposal regarding Taiwan. By the time he finished, the Chinese were visibly relieved. Indeed, Premier Zhou asked if Japan might have some sort of memorandum trade office, as they had done between China and Japan in the 1960s, and even suggested that Japan take the initiative first.

On Taiwan, Japan added that it would “maintain the position based on Article 8 of the Potsdam Declaration.” As Tanaka Akihiko notes, this is a compromise between the legal stand that Japan had given up Taiwan at the San Francisco Peace Treaty on the one hand and the political need to demonstrate that Taiwan is part of China.\(^8\) China also agreed to the Japanese proposal to declare the end to the Japan-ROC Treaty, separately from the Chinese-Japanese Communiqué. Both sides placed much weight on this promise, which Foreign Minister Ôhira duly carried out immediately following the signing ceremony.

Given the overall success of the normalization, few have dwelled upon the “bandit of law” exchange. Others, including Zhang Xiangshan, a senior Chinese official involved in the negotiation, have flatly denied it ever happened. To many, it seems quite unlikely for Zhou, Beijing’s most savvy diplomat, to lose his temper at a diplomatic negotiation.\(^9\) Despite the proliferation of writings on the Japan-China normalization, most English-language works have all but ignored this episode.\(^10\)

In one sense, China’s adherence to a political settlement instead of a legal one worked in Japan’s favor. There was in fact ambiguity in the language of the 1952 treaty. For instance, Article 10 indicated “For the purposes of the present treaty, nationals of the Republic of China shall be deemed to include all the inhabitants and former inhabitants of Taiwan (Formosa) and Penghu (the Pescadores) and their descendents who are of the Chinese nationality ... and judicial persons of the Republic of China shall be deemed to include all those registered under the laws and regulations which have been or may hereafter be enforced by the Republic of China in Taiwan and Penghu.” According to Article 11: “Unless otherwise provided for in the present Treaty and the documents supplementary thereto, any problem arising between the Republic of China and Japan as a result of the existence of a state of war shall be settled in accordance with the relevant provisions of the San Francisco Treaty.”

In the Exchange of Notes, ROC Government agreed to Tokyo’s request that “or” should replace “and” so that it reads: “The present treaty shall, in respect of the Republic of China, be applicable to all the territories which are now, or which may hereafter be, under the control of its Government.” The question, then, becomes, did Article 10 constitute such a provision that limited the geographical effect of the Article 11? If it is indeed the case—bearing in mind Japan’s desire to pursue separate treaty settlement with Beijing—then the termination of war was not fully accomplished between Japan and all of China in legal terms. According to recent studies, it was under the Kishi Cabinet that the 1952 treaty was reinterpreted to include all Chinese territory including areas outside the control of ROC government. By and large the 1952 problem was successfully resolved in 1972. What the Chinese side failed to recognize is that the scope of the 1952 Japan-ROC treaty had been extended through Japanese government interpretation.\(^11\)

**Weight of the Past in 1972: World War II**

At the welcoming ceremony for Prime Minister Tanaka, national anthems of both countries
—kimigayo and March of the Volunteers—were played. Perhaps hardly anyone contemplated the lyrics of the latter: “the Chinese nation was at a critical moment of life and death,” as China faced Japan’s onslaught in the 1930s. If the 1952 arrangement was the most important obstacle to be overcome by Japan and China in 1972, it is also true that the history of the last war also weighed on the leaders on both sides and influenced in the normalization. The question whether PRC would seek compensation for war damages caused by Japan had been one of the main issues. It was only after Chinese leaders reassured Takeiri Yoshikatsu, head of the Komeito who had visited China, that Tanaka resolved to take his trip to Beijing.

The first sign of the past war intruding into the normalization talk was on the first evening during the welcoming dinner. Chinese applauded Tanaka’s speech after each paragraph, but abruptly stopped after Tanaka expressed “deep regret” for the fact that in recent history Japan had caused China “meiwaku,” which the interpreter translated as “tian le ma fan.” This must have become a “Maalox moment” for those present. As one Japanese journalist noted, the Chinese must have felt nervous for giving the impression of acquiescence to such an expression, which was broadcast to Japanese TV viewers. Even though Chinese people did not know, Zhou had to seek cover for possible political damage at home. In response, Zhou reiterated the suffering of Chinese people but also the need to distinguish Japanese people from a few Japanese militarists. According to one Chinese participant, Tanaka used the same language in the afternoon meetings. Zhou did not elaborate on Tanaka’s choice of words because it was their first meeting immediately after the arrival. According to the Foreign Ministry bureaucrat who drafted the speech, this term was as far as a Japanese apology would go vis-à-vis China.

Actually, some 17 years ago Zhou had heard the same word from another Japanese politician. At their meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, Takasaki Tatsunosuke, then Director General of Economic Planning Agency, began his meeting with an apology to China for having caused “meiwaku” in the war. It is not clear, however, how it was translated into Chinese. Apparently this did not become a problem then, perhaps because the meeting was conducted behind close doors among only a few individuals.

At the beginning of their second meeting on 26th, Zhou made it known to the Japanese that the choice of words was grossly inappropriate for the damage and suffering Japan had caused. Tanaka, in response, explained that in Japanese, this does constitute a sincere apology. It is not clear whether Zhou was referring to the Japanese word—which he should understand, given his early experience in Japan, or the Chinese translation, which was lighter than their nuance in Japanese. (This was acknowledged by Sun Pinghua, a senior Chinese official involved). In the end, Zhou suggested leaving the exact language to the two foreign ministers to iron out. He also spoke of the need of “educating the Chinese people who had suffered from the brutal ‘Three All’ policy of the Japanese military during the war.”

In the talks between the two Prime Ministers that ensued, Japanese could no longer afford any mishaps. According to otherwise sparse Japanese official records, as if to underscore the solemn moment, Foreign Minister Ôhira stood up to read the passage concerning war damage to China in the proposed Japanese text. This episode also had a visible influence on the wording of the Joint Communiqué. According to a Japanese journalist, Tanaka overruled the strong opposition of a senior Foreign Ministry official (Director-General of Asia Bureau Yoshida) and included in the Communiqué apologies to China for Japan’s war. In 1972, the history of Japanese invasion thus played a secondary but important role for both sides.

In recent years, many consider the Asia Pacific region to be still governed by a 1952 regime. There is certain merit in highlighting the 1952 regime. The San Francisco Peace Treaty signed between the Allies headed by the United States with Japan not only “settled” World War II in Asia Pacific, but also laid the foundation of postwar US-Japan relations. At the same time, the exclusion of both governments of China, let alone either Korea, as well as ambiguity of territorial demarcation, raise many questions for the future. The 1972 Communiqué did not
completely resolve the representation issue. Nevertheless, the beginning of a generally equal political relationship between Japan and the government representing nearly a billion Chinese finally brought about a sense of “normalcy” that has been absent between the two countries for nearly a century.

Viewed in the long history of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the historic nature of the communiqué becomes apparent. Scholars have also spoken of a 1972 regime. The significance went beyond bilateral relations. In the words of one leading American observer, 1972 ushered in the “golden age of a triangular relations between Japan, China, and the United States.” The 1972 also paved way for the signing of the 1978 Friendship and Peace Treaty between Japan and China. To some outside observers, it appeared the two Asian neighbors were to become what one scholar referred to as the “Sino-Japanese Axis.” Indeed, close Chinese-Japanese cooperation began to flourish after the Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao, and when China adopted the “reform and openness” policy under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. Not only were there close economic ties in trade, investment, and Official Developmental Assistance, there was also flourishing of cultural ties in popular culture and overseas studies. “Chinese-Japanese Friendship” dominated the public discourse.

Historians can also place the 1972 Chinese-Japanese normalization in world history. Although it was not a treaty, the significance of the 1972 Joint Communiqué cannot be overestimated. First, it changed one basic facet of the international system in East Asia since the end of World War II. Granted, it was the US and China that made the first move, with Henry Kissinger making a secret visit to Beijing in 1971, followed by the official visit of President Richard Nixon and issuing of Shanghai Communiqué. Nonetheless, Japan went a step further and established full diplomatic relations with China. In the meantime, Japan also broke the diplomatic relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan, a relationship it had maintained for two decades.

As a process that turned former enemies to potential allies, the 1972 normalization can be regarded as “reconciliation” between China and Japan. Indeed, as leaders of both countries focused their attention on the present and promised a bright future, problems of the past—reparation and apology—seemed to have been successfully resolved. However, this was a reconciliation of the “thin” kind. This, of course, does not mean that the crisis of 2012 was bound to happen. Much have happened since that time—in each country and in the world. The leaders of 1972 were not wrong. What they did not and could not foresee, for different reasons, was the staying power of popular nationalism as well as the repercussions of the impending power shift between the two countries for the first time in a century.

**Legacies of 1895: Hidden Past in 1972?**

Beside these two obvious legacies of the early Cold War and World War II, there were other scales of history against which the 1972 normalization could be weighed. In fact, there are evidences that leaders of 1972 had in mind other scales of history.

Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka seemed to have pre-modern history on his mind when answering questions from Japanese journalists after his return to Tokyo. One reporter asked whether there was a tacit agreement that Japan would provide assistance to China’s economic reconstruction in return for China’s giving up war reparation. Tanaka denied a qui-pro-quo: “It’s not such a negotiation where if you drop this, I will offer that. We must start from the fundamental posture or the spirit that we Orientals [東洋人] take most seriously.” Then, as if out of the blue, he continued:

There is a long history between the two countries. While Japan caused lots of trouble by waging a war, if you look whether China ever attacked Japan, it did. About 30,000 men
came from the South China Sea. But there was typhoon (laugh) and so they didn’t reach Japan. Only 4 or 500 men made it back to China. I learned this from books (laugh). Then there were also Mongol invaders of Kubilai. There were all sorts of things between Japan and China. We decided we all should focus on the new start instead of the past.\(^{18}\)

The jovial banter by Tanaka revealed a much longer span of history which in some ways framed his perception how the agreement was reached with the Chinese leaders. In addition to the past “Chinese” invasions of Japan, his emphasis on the “Oriental spirit” can be seen as nod to the long history of cultural exchanges between Japan and China.

His counterpart Zhou Enlai also had different scales of history. During the 1972 negotiation, Zhou reminded his Japanese counterparts that “we know the pains of reparation. We don’t want to the Japanese people to experience that pain.” This is apparently a reference to the nineteenth century when China repeatedly paid increasingly large sums of war indemnity to foreign powers, beginning from the Opium War of 1840 and culminating in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Whether or not Zhou had in mind the vast sum China was forced to pay at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, it could not have escaped his Japanese interlocors. Moreover, Zhou, who was in Germany to pursue “work study” shortly after World War I, would also have known the reality of a country devastated by war and burdened by imposed war reparations.

Zhou also emphasized the purpose of the normalization is to enable Chinese and Japanese people to have friendly relations for generations to come, and to avoid “repeating the history of the past half century.” Previously, in his numerous meetings with Japanese visitors since the 1950s, Zhou has repeated stated that relations between China and Japan were not good since 1895 but China and Japan had enjoyed a thousand of years of good relations. Cautioning against viewing the Chinese-Japanese relationship only through the recent experience, Zhou lamented the fact that it was unfortunate for him and his generation because “we only lived in this last period.”

Although interaction between the two East Asian neighbors goes back to antiquity, it was almost exactly one hundred years ago in 1871 that Japan and China first signed a modern diplomatic treaty to manage their bilateral relations. A little more than a decade later, top leaders from China and Japan—Li Hongzhang and Itô Hirobumi—met for the first time to discuss tensions in Korea. The Tianjin Convention, as it was known, calmed the relations, but only for a few years. For Zhou, the “unfortunate” period began roughly in the 1890s. Less than a decade later after the historic meeting in Tianjin between Itô and Li, Japan and China became embroiled in a major war for the first time since the Hideyoshi invasion of Korea three hundred years earlier. In the wake of China’s crushing military defeat, the two governments, represented by the same Li and Itô—negotiated what is known as the Shimonoseki Treaty in 1895.

On April 5, 1895, barely ten days after Li was shot and wounded by a Japanese ultranationalist, talks resumed and the Japanese side revealed their demands on China. They included Chinese cession of territories to Japan (Liaodong Peninsula, Taiwan and adjacent islands, Penghu/Pescadores Islands) among others. In his reply, Li attempted to eliminate territorial cession on the ground that it would contradict the Preamble which called an end to future conflicts between the two countries. If China was forced to give up territory, Li reasoned, this would be the “sure and fruitful source of complications which will be transmitted through many generations.” “Nothing will so arouse the indignation of the people of China and undying hostility and hatred, as to wrest from their country important portions of their territory.” He also reminded Japan that when it declared war on China, it claimed the aim was seeing Korean independence, not acquisition of Chinese territory. Li’s plea was not heeded.\(^{19}\)

Under unrelenting Japanese pressure, China paid a huge reparation equalling three times Japan’s annual national budget, ceded large pieces of its territory (Taiwan and Pescadores islands, Liaodong Peninsula, although the latter was rescinded in exchange for additional
indemnity after the Triple Intervention), and made concessions on various other issues. Relations between the two countries over the next fifty years essentially ebbed and flowed although Japan’s pressure on China never ceased. Perking up in moments such as the 1915 Twenty-One Demands, Japanese militant expansion eventually clashed with rising Chinese nationalism, bringing about a disastrous war from the 1930s.

For most political scientists, the ROC/Taiwan problem in Chinese-Japanese relations is commonly filtered through the lens of 1952 and the civil war of China. Back in 1972, Japanese leaders promised not to support the “Taiwan Independence Movement”. Even Zhou took note of the poor relations with several millions “mainlanders” and Taiwanese. The separate identity building up in and outside Taiwan, with the ultimate expression for political independence from China, certainly has many factors. It certainly builds upon a separate cultural identity that permeated the Taiwan society during the half century as a Japanese colony. The Japanese diplomatic record of the negotiation had a vivid description of the Li’s attempt to conceal his shock when he first heard Itô mentioned Taiwan on April 10, 1895. As far as we can see, the full weight of the 1895 settlement probably eluded its own architects, especially on the Japanese side.

Did the significance of 1895 also elude the architects of 1972? Indeed, 1895 seemed far enough, definitely outside the life experience of anyone present. On the surface, these two negotiations could not have been more different. 1895 was negotiated when the war between the two countries were going on, although Qing China’s defeat was already obvious. On the personal level, however, the two did share some similarities: as with the 1972 Joint Communique between China and Japan, the 1895 Shimonoseki treaty was negotiated directly between the leading statesmen of both countries. There was similarity in age among the major actors: Li Hongzhang was 73 as compared to Itô Hirobumi at 55. In 1972, Zhou was 74 compared to Tanaka at 54. If Zhou speaks of age-old friendship, Li spoke of brotherly relationship between the two countries, though with very different purposes. By and large, architects of the 1972 normalization shared a similar sense of history of World War II. The top leaders were contemporaries of that conflict between China and Japan. Perhaps as a result, leaders from China and Japan—Zhou, Tanaka, Ôhira in particular—as well as their bureaucrat assistants—overcame enormous difficulties in accomplishing the historic normalization that established diplomatic relations between China and Japan and ended “the abnormal relations.”

Conclusion: Between Past and Future

In 1958, the prize-winning Japanese writer Hotta Yoshie (1918–1998) made a remarkably stark prediction about future relations between Japan and China: “The most difficult time is after the normalization.” The reason is “Discontent on the Chinese side...is the most delicate, most difficult problem in the heart-to-heart relationship between Japan and China…in extreme terms, this is where all problems lie.” Hotta knew something about China and the Chinese: he had spent part of the war years in China and came back to Japan in 1947. He published Time 時間—the first postwar fiction of Nanjing Atrocity and visited China again in 1957. Following the breakdown of PRC-Japan relations in the wake of the 1958 Nagasaki Flag Incident, Hotta immersed himself in reading about Chinese-Japanese relations. He became appalled at the lack of self-reflection in the reports by Japanese veterans who had recently visited China.

Fast-forward to 1972. Foreign Minister Ôhira had a clear sense of history at a turning point when he declared at the start of his press conference back in Japan: “this is indeed a historic moment.” He later clarified that “the settlement of the dark past between Japan and China has been concluded with the Communiqué today.” Zhou Enlai was perhaps less unequivocal but cautiously optimistic: In private talks held a few days ago, however, Zhou emphasized the weight
of history: “In view of the past history,” Zhou noted, “China is concerned about Japanese militarism. In the future, Japan and China shall exchange visits; we also want to see the reality in Japan.” Architects of 1972 can be credited for navigating the currents and succeeding in setting up diplomatic relations. They paved way for China and Japan to cooperate in various areas and also for Japan to offer economic assistance to China a few years later.

Compared to Hotta writing after the break-off of Chinese-Japanese ties in 1958, the architects of 1972 could perhaps be forgiven for being optimistic and under-estimating the weight of underlying problems between the two countries for the future. Whatever one may say about the state of the mind of these politicians and their bureaucrat assistants, one thing is almost certain: the current state of affairs in Chinese-Japanese relations is not something the chief architects of that normalization would have anticipated.

Since the early 1980s, issues related to past conflicts are having an increasingly visible impact in Chinese-Japanese relations. What emerged as small trickles at first—exemplified by domestic Japanese debate over the Nanjing Atrocity around the time of the normalization and later controversy over Japanese textbooks and the Yasukuni visit during 1980s—would become a tidal wave by the end of the century. What were “small differences” in 1972 now become wider and even at times dominant in bilateral relations. Many factors contributed to the up and downs in Chinese-Japanese relations in the past 40 years. Since 1972, momentous changes have taken place: the common threat of the Soviet Union has receded; China’s economy has been enjoying a steady growth for over three decades, even though Japan’s economy has stagnated. In addition, there have also been great changes in outlooks—brought about by the shifting ideological landscape, political and generational change, among others. The rise of ideology centered on national pride in both China and Japan has made differences over their modern history of interaction a more prominent factor in their current relations; a partial opening in China has made popular patriotism a potent force even for the leadership to reckon with. Interestingly, what concerned the Japanese leaders like Tanaka the most in 1972 was whether China would export revolution. It was reassuring to him that Chinese Communist Party aimed at “unifying a great China instead of acting under international communism.” Today, few Japanese leaders would be so sanguine about the “great renaissance of the Chinese nation.”

A key architect of the geopolitical realignment of the early 1970s, Henry Kissinger once remarked: “Mao was eager to accelerate history; Zhou was content to exploit its currents.” In reality, history comprises of many currents and undercurrents, not all of which can be mastered or exploited even by outstanding statesmen. Moreover, despite the adage “past not forgotten is a guide for the future,” the past does not offer easy clues for the present since the course of history is not pre-determined. History is not all about continuity of past patterns. Thus, it is not so much that Hotta was right or Ôhira was wrong in their respective predictions. There were forces and development that neither could foresee entirely. What needed to be recognized—and Hotta and Zhou were at least aware of—is that there are certainly deeper structural forces that may seem latent and irrelevant but can be reawakened, harnessed and even run out of control of any single leader. It is the convergence of many currents and undercurrents—domestic and international, material and ideational—that brought these seemingly dormant forces up to the forefront. How the present generation of successors to the architects of 1972 will manage these currents depends at least in part on how the pasts weight on them.

Notes
2) For more information see its official website (www.wilsoncenter.org/.../cold-war-international-history-project).
3) Minutes of Meetings, Database Japan and the World, University of Tokyo (http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.
All subsequent citation from the 1972 normalization talks are from this source unless indicated otherwise. For a published collection of these records as well as recollections and commentaries, see Ishii Akira et al., *Kiroku to kôshô: Nitchiu kokkô seijôka, Nitchû heiwa yûkô jôyaku teiketsu kioshô* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2003).

4) "Diaoyudao shi Zhongguo lingtu tiezheng rushan," People’s Daily (2012/10/12).


6) See, for example, Hirano Minoru, *Hiroku: Gaikô kisha nikki-Ôhira gaikô no ninen* (Tokyo: Gyôsei tsûshinsha, 1978), pp. 82–83. As far as the “bandit of law” episode, Ishii Akira, a leading authority on PRC diplomacy and Japan-China relations, was unable to ascertain whether the term was used, and speculated that it was probably used by those around PM Tanaka to describe the MOFA officials.

7) Minutes of Talks between Tanaka and Zhou (September 26, 1972).


9) Tanaka Akihiko mentioned the episode in passing without either confirming or disproving. *Nitchû kankei*, 81; Zhang, “Zhong-Ri fujiao danpan huigu.”


13) Zhang, “Zhong-Ri fujiao danpan huigu.”

14) Zhang, “Zhong-Ri fujiao danpan huigu.” Sun was born in northeastern China in 1917 and later headed the L-T Memorandum Trade Office in Tokyo and was apparently family with Japanese language and culture. See *Zhong-Ri youhao suixiang lu* p. 105.

15) Zhang, “Zhong-Ri fujiao danpan huigu.” Though not present, Zhou was immediately notified by a Chinese official who placed a phone call in a separate room and his approval ended the episode.


17) A few historians were unswayed by the talks of “friendship.” In 1973, Japanese historian Sanetô Keishû 実藤恵秀 (1896–1985) published *Nit-Chû hiyûkô no rekishihon* 日中非友好の歴史 (The Unfriendly History between Japan and China) (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1973). In 1988, the American historian Joshua Fogel founded a new journal Sino-Japanese Studies. He went out of his way to choose 日中 from Sanetô’s book title to adorn the cover of his magazine. Moreover, he chose 研究 from the biography of Timur Tash 鐵木兀塔識, *Yuan shi* 元史 [History of the Yuan Dynasty] as if to remind his readers of the Mongol invasion of Japan six centuries earlier.

18) *Gaikô seishô* No. 17, pp. 541–549; included in Database Japan and the World.

19) “Shinkoku kôwa joyaku sôan,” (April 5, 1895), *Nihon Gaikô Bunsho* 336. The original Chinese text was more blunt: it would sow seeds of endless conflict and “sons and grandsons would become bitter enemies forever.” If Japan presses unreasonable demands on China based on its military superiority at the moment, then the Chinese government and people would bite the bullet and see revenge.”

20) Minutes of Talk between Tanaka and Zhou (September 28, 1972).


24) Minutes of Talk between Tanaka and Zhou (September 28, 1972).