Growing Up in a Neighbor’s Shadow

China and Japan: Facing History
By Ezra F. Vogel
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Reviewed by Richard McGregor

GO INTO ANY BOOKSTORE in the US, and you will find shelves groaning with volumes about America’s relations with China, Europe and the Arab world. Likewise, in the UK, the spiritual home of the Anglophone, the libraries and bookstores are overflowing with works chronicling Great Britain’s ties with France and Germany, and, now, in the age of Brexit, modern Europe.

What you won’t find, bar one or two exceptions, are any books on the relationship between China and Japan. The lay follower of geopolitics shouldn’t need a tutorial on the importance of the ties between Asia’s two great powers. They are the world’s second and third largest economies, respectively, and sit at the heart of the economic and logistical miracle that has allowed even states, are any books on the relationship between China and Japan: the reverence with which Japan once held Chinese culture and civilisation gradually became typified by disappointment and, in some circles, contempt in the late 19th century. Japan’s modernization in the Meiji Restoration was a stunning success. China floundered by comparison and the country didn’t really go through the same metamorphosis until more than a century later, in the late 1970s, under Deng Xiaoping. The modern story of the two countries is, in many respects, a tale of the unravelling of a once intimate, admiring relationship, and the periodic efforts to, if not re-establish it, at least find a modus vivendi to allow them to live peacefully, respectfully and profitably alongside each other.

Vogel speaks and reads Chinese and Japanese and has long been well-connected in top-level political and academic circles in both countries. Not only does this give him a first-hand familiarity with the intensity of feelings that often overwhelm efforts to get political ties between Beijing and Tokyo back on an even keel. Vogel himself has long been committed to building a greater understanding between the two nations. For the Harvard University scholar, this book is very much the product of a life’s passion.

A longtime academic who briefly served in the US government, Vogel has no pretensions to acting as a bridge between two ancient cultures that over time, and along very different paths, have turned themselves into largely prosperous modern states. But he does bring an extended intimacy and deep knowledge to the subject that is rare in both academia and government.

It is an ambitious book, starting at the start, in the 6th century, when Japanese monks travelling to China began to laboriously transcribe Buddhist texts and bring them home for study. By 757, Vogel writes, the Japanese court had at its disposal some 1,500 Chinese works. Between 600 and 838, Japan had learned, or borrowed, from China a written language, Buddhism, Confucianism, literature, music and architecture. Over time, the language, religion, the ethics and the sages and so forth were adapted and domesticated within Japan and remain embedded in Japanese life to this day. Some skills that disappeared in China were preserved in Japan. Even now, Japanese schoolchildren in Japan learn and recite Tang Dynasty poetry in the original characters.

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Tang Dynasty court ladies painted on the tomb of Princess Yangja, near Xian in 766AD. Dress styles of the time have been credited as an inspiration for the Japanese kimono, adapted over centuries to match Japanese culture.

Just that. Both leaders are nationalists with a firm grip on office and the levers of power. After relations hit a nadir over a territorial dispute in 2012, Xi and Abe have put aside their deep misgivings about each other to gradually stabilize the relationship. Donald Trump has helped push them together as well, with both seeing each other’s nation as a shelter in the trade storm unleashed by the US president. It is instructive, then, to see how gloomy Vogel is about the future of the bilateral relationship by the book’s end. He has too much of a long view to be lulled by the current period of quiescence: “It is unrealistic, considering the depth of the historical passions involved,” he writes, “that China and Japan will quickly develop feelings of trust and become close friends.”

I think Vogel is right, but I was taken aback nonetheless that he arrived at this position. Perhaps it is because the style of the book didn’t allow Vogel to display his own views until he proffered his conclusions at the end. Throughout, Vogel is fair to the point of fastidiousness in his accounts of different eras. His
narrative covers extraordinary and often brutal events, as well as seismic, history-making shifts in power, from the wars in the late 19th century through episodes like Japan’s invasion of China in the 1930s, the Nanjing Massacre and its aftermath, the colonization, and decolonization of South Korea and Taiwan, yet he manages to trek through the story in a resolute, calm and bloodless fashion. It is impossible in a book covering centuries of complex events to cover every base, and Vogel does not shy away from any of the difficult issues. But readers might have been better prepared for his gloomy conclusion if the book contained more of a sense of the internal political drivers of the two countries’ distrust. Domestic politics, along with overheated nationalism and florid theories of race and exceptionalism, have played a striking and pivotal role in the two nations’ modern diplomacy. The countries have become divided not so much by the history wars, but the politics of the history wars inside both governing systems. The 2012 confrontation over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, for example, was deliberately engineered by a prominent right-wing Japanese politician who set out to sour ties with Beijing. The politician, Shintaro Ishihara, knew that Beijing would have to respond forcefully to Tokyo’s purchase of the islands, which it did. The episode marred relations for years. Likewise, China’s repeated demands that Japan apologize for the war, and their indifference and indeed hostility when Tokyo has on multiple occasions tried to do just that, are tied up in internal communist party politics. Inside China, it is demonstrably dangerous to be overtly friendly towards Japan, something that has been reinforced by “patriotic education” campaigns since the 1990s and a diet of anti-Japanese movies.

The current constructive bilateral relationship is only possible because Xi has personally given his diplomats the room they need to do their jobs. Xi feels no warmth towards Japan. But unlike other recent Chinese leaders, as Vogel notes, Xi appears to carry no particular personal animus towards his neighbor as well. Whoever comes after Xi might have a different view. Certainly, many prominent Japanese believe that Beijing is simply biding its time with Japan, before it can force it into negotiations over their disputed territory. Likewise, Beijing is fixated on the view that conservative Japanese, with their allies in Washington, want to keep Taiwan as an autonomous self-governing state, to stop China expanding its reach into the Pacific Ocean. During the country’s imperialist phase, when Tokyo occupied Manchuria ahead of invading China, some Japanese leaders had the foresight to realize that their aggression would rebound on them through the ages. Vogel quotes Ishibashi Tanzen, a Japanese columnist and publisher, and one of the book’s many vivid characters, who predicted that Imperial Japan’s often brutal policies in China and Korea would make their populations “anti-Japanese, despise the Japanese and hold eternal resentment against Japan.” He was right. More recently, it is Chinese arrogance towards Japan that has had the equal and opposite effect. As a result, the Japanese have ended up disliking the Chinese, according to opinion polls that have tracked views over decades. Until the two countries, and peoples, can break this cycle, there will be no fundamental change in the relationship.

Vogel’s gloomy conclusion has profound geopolitical ramifications. Sitting next to a potentially hostile China, Japan has no desire to see the US depart the region. China might believe in an “Asia for Asians.” Japan once did as well, but no longer, as “Asia for Asians” these days means a region run out of Beijing. Indeed, no foreign leader has worked harder than Abe to get close to Trump, despite the US president’s regular sideswipes as Tokyo over trade and the cost of stationing US troops in the country. A strategic China would have seduced Japan as a way of undermining US power in Asia. Their failure to do so in all likelihood means that the US is in East Asia to stay, no matter what.

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