China’s Changing Japan Policy in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s and the Impact on Relations with the United States

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For years, in studying postwar Sino-Japanese relations, particularly the normalization of bilateral relations, most scholars focused more on Japan’s policy-making or the U.S. role than on Chinese diplomacy. Actually, in most of the Cold War period, China held a key posture in dealing with the Japan problem, whether its offensives succeeded or suffered setbacks, confronting the United States and later the Soviet Union and regaining China’s central position in East Asia and even the world. As a rising great power, China exerted increasing influence on the postwar international order. And Japan policy constituted an indispensable part of China’s general Cold War policy and in the long run proved effective. Thus, it has become necessary to further study China’s diplomacy with Japan to achieve a full and better understanding of the evolving Sino-


2. For the concept of “China at the Center,” see Mark Mancall, China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy (New York, 1984); Warren I. Cohen, East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World (New York, 2001).
Japanese bilateral relationship and its impact on East Asian international politics in the 1970s. This article, based on sources recently made available in China and America, examines and assesses the evolution of Chinese policy toward Japan from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, its rationale, the subsequent Sino-Japanese diplomatic breakthrough, as well as other impact. It argues that China’s Japan policy combined radical orientation and fidelity to basic principles with flexibility in implementation. This combination promoted the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations and exerted subtle influences on the U.S.-China normalization of relations and the evolution of the U.S.-Japan security alliance.

The Evolution of China’s Japan Policy from the Late 1960s to the Early 1970s

Because of the U.S.-Japan anti-Communist security alliance established in the early 1950s, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was unable to establish diplomatic relationship with Japan. Yet, adopting the traditional strategy of yongyi zhiyi, that is, “balance of power” diplomacy of “using foreigners to control foreigners” and utilizing Japan’s traditional close political, economic, and cultural relations with China along with the Japanese feeling of war guilt, the PRC focused on unofficial contacts with Japan and used flexile people-to-people diplomacy to push the Japanese government to be engaged in the official contacts with China and break up the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Throughout the 1950s, this civil diplomacy promoted the rise of a powerful pro-China force in Japan. Nevertheless, after Kishi Nobusuke, prime minister from 1957 to 1960, took an anti-China stand, the Chinese government adopted a policy of Friendship Trade to unilaterally give economic privileges to Japanese businesses which were politically “friendly” to Beijing. Friendship Trade not only strengthened pro-China elements in Japan but also attracted more Japanese businessmen who coveted the China trade and forced the Japanese government led by Ikeda Hayato to make positive response. As a result, China and Japan in 1962 introduced an expanded and government-involved trade with deemphasis on the political requirements: the “LT trade.” The letters “L” and “T” respectively represented Liao Chengzhi and Takasaki Tatsunosuke, the two negotiators. With the Friendship Trade and the LT trade, Sino-Japanese relations by the mid-1960s had steadily developed into a semi-governmental and semi-civil status.3

3. For the civil diplomacy in the 1950s, the Friendship Trade, and the LT trade, see Li, Zhongri minjian jingji waijiao, 104–352; Chen Dacai and Han Huanzhao, Yimin cuguan: Zhou Enlai yu Zhongri guanxi (Using the civil to promote the official: Zhou