

The Past and Future of Japan-China Relations

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by Asahi Shimbun and Yoichi FUNABASHI

Ever since the October 10 news conference announcing the discovery of a small tablet in China's Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an), excitement in Japan has run high. Recording the death of a Japanese student in China in 734, the tablet indicates that Jing Zhencheng posthumously received from the Chinese Emperor a high official appointment. It also contains the earliest use of the name Riben or Nippon, the Chinese and Japanese characters for Japan that have been used ever since.

The tablet, unearthed 1270 years later, reminds many Japanese not only of the Golden Age of Chinese culture but also of a period in which the sending of numerous envoys from Japan was emblematic of a flourishing China-Japan cultural and political relationship.

We couple this with an article by Asahi international affairs writer Yoichi Funabashi reflecting on contemporary Japan-China territorial and oil conflicts in the East China Sea, and the way forward toward a cooperative relationship.

But can China-Japan relations ultimately be placed on a firm foundation without resolving the legacy of China's fifteen year war in China?

An Ancient inscription reminds us of what Japan-China ties could be.

The news that broke in China was at first hard

to believe. Northwest University in Xi'an, known as Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), announced the discovery of a stone epitaph to a Japanese student who died there early in the eighth century. The man was a kentoshi, or envoy, to the imperial court. He was 36 when he died.

Inscribed on a small stone tablet that would have been placed at the gravesite, it records the man's name and title. It noted that he was appointed a bureaucrat for his diligence, and was posthumously conferred high bureaucratic status by Emperor Xuanzong who mourned his death.

The Chinese name given him was Jing Zhencheng, possibly after his Japanese family name that was either Inoue or Fujii.

This is the first such record of a Japanese envoy ever discovered in China from that period. The inscription is so clear it's hard to believe it dates back more than 1,200 years.

What also makes this discovery exceptionally valuable is that this might be the oldest existing material that mentions Japan by the name it is known today.

The accepted theory among scholars of ancient history is that the country name of Japan gained currency in the late seventh century when the word emperor had become an established title. In Japan, however, the oldest discovered documentation that refers to the nation by this name is a report written by a bureaucrat in the mid-eighth century.

Also meaningful is that the Xi'an discovery confirms China, an advanced nation in the ancient world, was referring to Japan as Nihon or Nippon rather than Wei.

Japan sent envoys to the Tang Dynasty court to learn the culture of the continent and world affairs. The ancient China accepted Japan and treated Japanese envoys so graciously as to fashion an impressive stone tablet to record the life of one such Japanese. We see in that bygone era what the Sino-Japanese relationship really should be.

Among the Japanese envoys who never returned home, perhaps the best-known is Abe no Nakamaro (698-770), who was taken into Emperor Xuanzong's confidence. Abe tried to come home once, but a shipwreck forced him to return to Changan. He expressed his homesickness in this tanka poem: Behold, the moon now rises high and clear/ The selfsame moon that people see at Kasuga/ My home, appearing from behind Mount Mikasa.

Jing Zhencheng is believed to have gone to China on the same ship as Abe in 717. Did the two men live similar lives? One wonders what thoughts might have crossed their minds as they lay dying, knowing they would never go home as returning heroes.

The news from Xi'an may have reminded many people of "Tempyo-no Iraka" (The roof tile of Tempyo), a novel by Yasushi Inoue that was also made into a movie. It is the story of young Japanese student monks who risked their lives to go to China to establish the foundations of Buddhism in Japan. After all sorts of trials and tribulations, some succeeded in bringing Jianzhen, a high priest, back to Japan, while others never made it back home and lived out their lives on foreign soil.

Northwest University was where Japanese students were attacked last year by their Chinese counterparts who took offense to a cultural festival performance by the Japanese students.

Ikuo Hirayama, president of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, was present when the Northwest University discovery was announced. He commented to the effect that the Japanese student in ancient China must have "returned" to the present day to remind us to learn from the history of bilateral goodwill

and friendship.

Stone epitaphs recording the lives of the deceased were very much part of Chinese culture and history. Many such artifacts continue to be unearthed around China. It is exciting to imagine those for Abe and other Japanese being discovered some day.

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Can dialog resolve China-Japan Oil Clash in East China Sea?

By Yoichi Funabashi

Flying over the East China Sea, we spotted the 10,000-ton Norwegian research vessel Ramform Victory running from north to south. The sea was rough, lashed by a strong northwester.

"When the waves are too high, the noise makes it difficult to collect data," said Kanda Keita, an engineer with the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corp. (JOGMEC), whom we had asked to join us aboard The Asahi Shimbun plane Asuka. Kanda had just spent a month heading up a crew of eight Japanese on a ship chartered by the Japanese government.

The Ramform Victory is gathering data on oil and gas reserves in a band of sea about 30 kilometers wide on the eastern side of the Japan-China median line that marks the limit of the exclusive economic zone claimed by Japan. JOGMEC was commissioned by the Japanese government to conduct the survey.

From the surface of the water, researchers collect data on the composition of the underground strata by bouncing sound waves off the seabed. To do so, the researchers use 10 cables, each 4,800 meters long with built-in receivers.

On the day we visited, however, the research had to be suspended because one of the cables had come loose and the ship was on its way to

retrieve it. Typhoons have caused frequent delays in the survey, which started in July.

"But when typhoons hit, the Chinese can't work either," Kanda said. "We both have no choice but to escape."

A Chinese vessel with the name Haijian painted on its side frequently approached the Victory.

"This is a China Marine Surveillance ship," someone aboard the vessel announced over the radio. This was followed by questions in English.

"What is the name of your ship?"

"What are you doing?"

Then came a warning: "These are Chinese economic waters. Please stop working at once."

A Japanese crew member aboard the Victory answered in English: "We are in Japanese economic waters; therefore, we will continue to work here. We are signing off."

From time to time, the Chinese vessel ventures within a hairsbreadth of the area laced with cables. When that happens, the Japanese side issues an immediate warning to back off. However, the Chinese ship sometimes shadows the Japanese-chartered ship for as long as a week.

The demarcation line between Japan and China in the East China Sea has yet to be determined. China refuses to acknowledge Japan's contention that the median line should be the border, claiming instead that the Chinese continental shelf naturally extends to the Okinawa trough.

We flew further west and saw an orange flame flickering above the waters. It was the Pinghu oil and gas field. I was told it is some 70 kilometers west of the median line. As we drew closer I could see the workers going about their business. The oil field, which went into production in 1998, pipes both oil and gas to Shanghai.

Heading south we passed over the Tianwaitian oil and gas field. Later, we saw the Chun Xiao oil and gas field, China's southernmost offshore oil and gas field in the East China Sea.

Only 4 kilometers from the median line, we saw a brand-new yellow rig rising from the ocean.

Until recently, China had been excavating and developing the area with two major European and American oil companies. But the partners withdrew, leaving China alone to work the field.

The drilling and development of Chun Xiao has given rise to a new problem between Japan and China. Since the reserves straddle the median line, drilling from the Chinese side could tap into oil and gas reserves that are buried under the seabed on the Japanese side.

To illustrate the point, when Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Nakagawa Shoichi met with Zhang Guobao, deputy director of the Chinese State Development Planning Commission in charge of industry and energy, this summer, he laid a ballpoint pen across the top of a glass of orange juice on the table and said: "If you suck the juice from your side, the level of our juice also goes down."

If no agreement is reached, it could develop into a serious dispute.

Because there is no other option but to seek a political settlement, Japan should break its habit of shelving pending problems. Japan has already turned down a Chinese proposal to jointly develop the area.

First of all, I think, the two sides should agree to respect the median line. Then they should study the possibility of jointly developing the reserves that lie under it.

However, before starting joint development, the Japanese government must excavate and test-drill the area from the eastern side of the median line to get an accurate grasp of the value of its reserves. Unless it is prepared to claim what is rightfully its own, Japan cannot make a proper plan for joint development, including how to divide up the reserves. Without such a plan, it cannot negotiate with China.

"At first the Chinese vessels used strong language to tell us to stop," Kanda said. "But gradually, they began to add 'please.' Now they say 'please stop' and repeat the phrase two or three times.

"We also tell them `please stop.'"

The best way for Japan and China to resolve their differences is through dialogue. Please do so.

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