

China between Historical Knowledge and International Politics: With Special Reference to Prewar Japan's View Exemplified by Naitō Konan and Yoshino Sakuzō

Yu-Ting Lee*

Abstract

With the rise of China's influence on the global stage, China discourse of various kinds has emerged in many parts of the world, and historical factors are increasingly called on to explain contemporary China's international behavior. It is natural that the discourse made in China and in the West claims a major portion of the genre. However, given the crucial role that Japan has been playing in modern East Asia, and even in the whole world, the perception they have of China is often insightful and deserves systematic study. This project takes an academic and intellectual historical approach to explore the China discourse produced in modern Japan for its cultural, intellectual and political significance. Focusing on the early part of the twentieth century, the current essay begins with an overview of China discourse that requires transdisciplinary dialogue, but is faced with methodological difficulties. The second section illustrates the importance of Japan in the effort of making sense of China. The third and fourth sections feature Naitō Konan and Yoshino Sakuzō, respectively, to show the richness of their characterizations of China on the one hand, and on the other to demonstrate how different sorts of knowledge—history and international politics in particular—interact with each other in the specific context. The last section concludes the foregoing arguments with some critical observations and anticipation.

Keywords : China, history, international relations, Japan, Naitō Konan, Yoshino Sakuzō

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*Graduate Institute of National Development, National Taiwan University. Visiting Scholar at the Center for Northeast Asian Studies, Tohoku University. The completion of this article is supported by National Science and Technology Council, Taiwan, under the project "Construction of 'China' and 'the East' in Liang Shuming's Thought" (111-2410-H-002-152-).

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5. Concluding remarks

1. China discourse in transdisciplinary perspective

With the meteoric rise of China on the global stage in recent decades, so-called China discourse has become a popular genre in both academic and journalistic circles. While the image of China can be portrayed in widely different ways, an essential motivation for this kind of discourse is contemporary China's curious coupling of an ostensibly effective autocratic regime with a dazzling economic performance. This coupling has helped shape Communist China's self-confidence—confidence in its chosen path, theories, political system, and culture in President Xi Jinping's terms—and make China appear more outward-looking and ambitious. From this situation derive some critical but bewildering questions, which can be manifested in a threefold way. Realistically, how does contemporary China's international behavior and its aspiration of an “ideal” international order differ from the prevalent convention? Intellectually, is China's particular gesture on the international stage a product of its traditional culture, or can it be better explained by existent knowledge of political science? Methodologically, while the two fields in question—history and international relations—are called into close dialogue to interpret China's international behavior, has a desirable collaboration been achieved already?

These threefold questions interlock and reflect a core concern of many observers, researchers, and policy makers, that of facing China's sharp rise and the potential (or perhaps apparent) challenges this poses to the current world order, and if a new knowledge paradigm is required to understand the changes. The view of Henry Kissinger (1923-2023) [2010: 2-3], the eminent scholar and diplomat who played a crucial role in reconnecting the United States and China in the 1970s, is worth quoting to better clarify the situation:

China is singular. No other country can claim so long a continuous civilization, or such an intimate link to its ancient past and classical principles of strategy and statesmanship. Other societies, the United States included, have claimed universal applicability for their values and institutions. Still, none equals China in persisting—and persuading its neighbors to acquiesce—in such an elevated conception of its world role for so long, and in the face of so many historical vicissitudes. From the emergence of China as a unified state in the third century B.C. until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, China stood at the center of an East Asian international system of remarkable durability [...] While other countries were named after ethnic groups or geographical landmarks, China called itself *zhongguo*—the “Middle Kingdom” or the “Central Country.” Any attempt to understand China's twentieth-century

diplomacy or its twenty-first-century world role must begin—even at the cost of some potential oversimplification—with a basic appreciation of the traditional context.

This lengthy quotation is justifiable as several key elements in the contemporary China-related debate are contained therein. Kissinger assured readers that “China is singular,” even entitling the first chapter of his voluminous *On China*, “The Singularity of China.” While there are many points to the singularity of China, whose explication demands much greater room than this essay affords, in the passage cited above some of the most distinguishable characteristics of China have been singled out, including the long history of China, the Chinese people’s persistent memory of and reference to it, the enduring elevated role that China has assumed and persuaded its neighbors to acquiesce, and the self-centeredness of China embodied in the way of the country naming itself. In the final sentence of the passage, Kissinger stresses the importance of learning China’s “traditional context” to understand the country’s modern and present international behavior. However, for the purpose here, what is more important is the warning of “oversimplification,” by which we can surmise, for Kissinger, historical knowledge was a necessary condition for getting to know China, but not really sufficient. It is from this observation that the current essay advances to develop its arguments.

To be specific, Kissinger seemed to warn that understanding China’s international role and behavior solely through history risks oversimplification. Although this concern is no doubt correct, what should be further added is that the kind of historical knowledge, resorted to for the purpose of explaining international situations, is all too often an oversimplified version. I would also argue, oversimplification in this sense—that is, treating historical knowledge in a political-science (that is, generalized, theorized, and modeled) manner—may hinder both nuanced understanding of history and its application to present circumstances, despite the fact that some scholars from both sides are striving to communicate the two already highly specialized fields.

While a thorough analysis of the dilemma is not possible here (Note 1), certain features that are ingrained in international relations and history scholars’ thinking deserve special mention to demonstrate the incompatibility, superficial or essential, of the *modus operandi* between the two academic circles.

International relations scholars who seek to penetrate contemporary China’s foreign policy and behavior by way of history, while not oblivious to the particularities contingent upon historical circumstances and the unique mindset shaped through history, tend to meet the criterion of being succinct in making theories and generalizations by taking for granted some dubious premises concerning Chinese history. For instance, they usually date the Chinese “state” or “nation” back thousands of years regardless of the tremendous transformations taking place throughout history,

usually regard “Chinese culture” as consisting of a fixed set of characteristics without paying heed to both temporal and spatial variations, and in their theorization, the so-called tributary system usually appears as a well-established and long-lasting system with definite, extractable parameters, whereas one historian makes the following assertion [Perdue 2015: 1002]:

An examination of China’s historical practice of foreign relations shows that there was no systematic tributary system, but instead multiple relationships of trade, military force, diplomacy and ritual. Furthermore, China’s neighbors did not accept the imperial center’s definition of hierarchy and subordination, but interpreted ritual relationships in their own way [...] The current myth of the tributary system ignores historical reality and misleads us about China’s true position in East Asia and the world.

In a sense, this quotation is a counterargument to Kissinger’s. Although the importance of learning from history is undeniable, the way of utilizing history by international relations scholars in their theory making and narrative framing is far from uncontroversial, and the oversimplification committed therein is no less misleading than the kind that Kissinger warned us of.

On the other hand, taking the complexity of history into account and allowing the coexistence of multiple viewpoints and contradictory interpretations without normalizing “inconvenient” cases, historians are often blamed for getting bogged down in details and losing sight of the big picture. For instance, by stating “what China really is,” historians risk undermining the concise, holistic understanding of China held by scholars from other disciplines, not to mention the discomfort they may cause by proposing such views as “the aggregate time of division was longer than that of unity in Chinese history,” or “Chinese culture cannot be solely represented by the Han people and Confucianism,” and so forth.

In any case, by illustrating some of the interdisciplinary disagreements through the example of the tributary system—a heated issue engrossing historians and international relations scholars alike—we can see specialists from the two camps not only have founded their studies on different grounds, but also see different images and ask different questions, in spite of the real stance of China being a common concern. Under the circumstances, some more time would be needed for the two fields to reach congruence on an appropriately syncretic way of portraying, and even predicting, the track on which China is moving.

Nevertheless, for the time being, the dispute around China provides an excellent case for us to examine how different disciplines operate in modern academia with all their respective rigor and specialization, and how they encounter difficulties when transdisciplinary dialogue becomes necessary (Note 2). Critically, this consideration is itself addressing a cultural, intellectual and academic

phenomenon unique to our time. The purpose of this essay is to reveal the phenomenon and use it to reconsider how knowledge is produced, rather than to bridge the present gap, much less to solve the disagreements. It is in this regard that the importance of the Japanese experience looms large.

2. Japan's importance in analyzing the image of China

In *China and Japan: Facing History*, Ezra Vogel (1930-2020) [2019: vii-viii] introduces the relations between the two countries in the following way:

No countries can compare with China and Japan in terms of the length of their historical contact: 1,500 years. Given the depth of emotion among the Chinese and Japanese people concerning their past, it would be impossible for them to gain a balanced perspective without discussing history.

The statement is virtually a summary of Vogel's lifelong study on East Asia. Essentially a sociologist and widely known for his books on the Japanese economic miracle and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) the transformer of communist China, Vogel's emphasis on history as a key to understanding Sino-Japanese relations is noteworthy.

To be sure, China has imposed itself on Japan's worldview and self-cognition throughout history, and "the way of looking at China" constitutes a long-standing concern for Japanese intellectual and political figures, even when the West had already become a new target for emulation in modern times. Relatively earlier modernization (compared with non-Western countries) gave Japan a new impetus to re-position itself in the world, and its relations with China were accordingly put in new perspective with new interpretations of historical interaction and new projections of the future regional and world order. The transition was no less psychological than diplomatic. Therefore, "the changing image of China" to a great extent reflects the Japanese mindset along the way of their participation in the modern international system, both in political and intellectual terms. Owing to the radical changes occurring in the twentieth century, it is necessary to divide the discussion into two parts, prewar and postwar. For the sake of space, this essay focuses on the prewar period. Even within this smaller range, the importance of analyzing Japan's view of China still stands out for a number of reasons.

First, given the inseparability of Japan's history and worldview from China, Japan provides an excellent reminder of the need for transdisciplinary dialogue. As delineated above, contemporary international relations scholars do not easily find concord with historians in their respective style of perceiving China. Nevertheless, international relations as a discipline is of a rather young age with

the purpose of explaining the behavior of independent sovereign states under the balance-of-power principle, which is a highly Western and modern idea. Japan was just coping as well as struggling with this rule of the game in the early part of the twentieth century [Kissinger 2014: 187-188]. History, on the other hand, underwent a methodological shift in Japan with the influx of Western scholarship, while retaining some of its native conventions. By exploring Japan's view of China, this essay does not aim to propose a standard of associating the two fields, but to reveal a Japanese intellectual landscape of a specified period, in which knowledge operated on different criteria in response to different concerns.

Second, the Japanese view of China is inevitably connected with an East Asian and even world perspective, thus being productive in terms of setting research agenda. For example, in the two Japanese books that are identically entitled *Modern Japan's Understanding of China*, both authors address the issue in a pan-Asian context, while setting different subtitles and chapters (Note 3). Other interrelated topics, such as Japanese nationalism and responses to Western modernity and the West-centered narrative of world history, often appear in tandem or in a single scholar's research projects. One can even say that China was a mirror through which Japan saw itself, as remarked by Koyasu Nobukuni [2012: 341]: "the problem of Showa Japan was actually the 'China problem' in the end, which is a feeling that grew ever stronger during my study of intellectual history."

Third, critically studying the image of China viewed from Japan will complement the understanding of China based on either China-centered or West-centered stances. Indeed, much of the current interest in China arises from the ongoing confrontation of China with the West, especially with the United States. However, neglect of Japan's view means bypassing some of the most insightful records kept by a close neighbor, which would make relevant studies rather incomplete. Moreover, wherever China discourse comes from, to trace the past is often to look to the future. To borrow Nakajima Mineo's (1936-2013) [1982: 15] words: "the future of China, with the various impacts this country might bring to international politics, will probably become a huge problem for all human beings. This China is our neighbor forever." Through Japan's ever-watchful eye on this formidable neighbor, not only China's history is depicted in unique ways but also its future surmised out of unique considerations.

In short, this essay attempts to use "prewar Japan's view of China" as a nexus to explore some broader academic issues, such as dialogue (or tension) between historical knowledge and international politics, the presumed connection between the past and the future, and how the image of China reflected not only Japan's self-identity, but also the situation of the world. To make the argument more concentrated, I will focus on two towering figures: Sinologist Naitō Konan (1866-1934) and political scientist Yoshino Sakuzō (1878-1933).

Both Naitō and Yoshino were distinguished scholars who helped shape the directions of their

respective fields in Japan. In addition, both of them did a lot of journalistic writing on contemporary political situations and international relations, among which was the heated topic of what attitude and policy Japan should take toward East Asia, particularly China. Due to the stature of Naitō and Yoshino, relevant studies on them are abundant and most of their highly acclaimed works have been scrutinized repeatedly (Note 4). Accordingly, the ensuing sections will lay stress on neither biographical details, nor any close reading of particular texts. Instead, they will highlight the idiosyncratic views Naitō and Yoshino held toward China and the underlining rationale that supported the images they portrayed. As will be demonstrated, despite the widely different approaches and expectations in their China-related discourses, the two men also share certain commonalities, including deep knowledge of Chinese history and culture, strong emotional bonds with China, and adaptation of modern Western scholarship to their own intellectual worlds.

3. History as a sure indicator of the future: Naitō Konan's view of China

Naitō Konan is arguably the best-known sinologist of modern Japan. Extremely versed in Chinese studies, combined with the perception honed during his early career as a journalist, Naitō became a leading scholar on East Asian history and one of the opinion leaders regarding foreign policy toward China in early twentieth-century Japan. Strictly speaking, Naitō was not a history specialist in the modern sense but, as the term “sinologist” conveys, someone engaged in the multiple and integral aspects of classical Chinese learning. Nonetheless, Naitō's reputation mainly came from his contributions to historical studies, and he showed palpable confidence in giving advice to both the Japanese and Chinese people on the basis of historical knowledge. What follows is an elaboration of the role that history played in Naitō's understanding of China and his prediction of the country's future development.

In the preface to his famous *Discourse on China* published in 1914, a time when the newly founded republican China was still in disarray, Naitō [1972a: 295] makes a confession about the motive for this work:

Starting from the points of which I have certain knowledge, I would like to make some general comments: To what degree can China conform to the latest development of world politics? To what degree can order be restored to the aftermath of revolution? Is it a mission that should fall on the shoulders of those political progressives? I am intending to urge those responsible for aggressive measures to think more deeply, rather than to articulate what those measures should be in my current capacity that is not appropriate for the task.

In this preface Naitō appears modest in claiming that he knew little about the inside facts and economic statistics of China, but, precisely because of this deficiency, his confidence in historical reasoning becomes all the more obvious. Naitō [1972a: 294] said:

Judging from the natural course of development from ancient times, and investigation of both internal and external situations, I would say, for a country like China who has been moving on extraordinary inertia without any possibility of artificial corrections, any aggressive measures to be taken must base themselves on the natural outcome of that course in the future. Therefore, in my opinion, to understand the direction of this inertia is the most important thing for the moment. That is why I have no time for argument on trivial things.

In Naitō's prolific comments on China, such resort to historical knowledge is frequently seen. In the preface to *Discourse on China*, he claims the purpose of "this book is to think for China in the Chinese people's stead," which is a clear sign of his self-assumed authority in Chinese affairs. Furthermore, as previous research has pointed out—not without controversy, though—this knowledge of history, while insightful in academic terms, was inseparable from realistic considerations with advancing Japanese interests in China being a primary concern. In any case, Naitō's true intention aside, his strong conviction of history being a sure indicator of a country's future is conspicuous, and some of the most thought-provoking theses he proposed can be found in *New Discourse on China*. Published in 1924, this new discourse was addressing an even more tumultuous China after World War I, a time when China, especially its youth, was grasped by fervent nationalism.

When talking about the political and social organization of China, Naitō emphasized that the territory of China was too huge for any social forces to converge effectively, which usually limited commotion of any kinds to specific areas without spreading to even the neighboring places. Naitō [1972b: 501] called this phenomenon "immunity," which seems to be a euphemism for "paralysis" or "numbness." Instead of forces on a national scale, according to Naitō [1972b: 501-504], the real driver for administrative and societal workings in China was a kind of pervasive town-based organization, which had familial networks at its core. Therefore, in Naitō's view, it was impossible for such a fragmentary China to accumulate capital and no room was left for any public movements in a real sense.

Given the structural limitations, a pressing question for observers of China in the 1920s was whether China could accomplish its own reform or must it be carried out with external assistance. Naitō made some distinctions in this regard. Politically, he was impressed by Chinese people of extraordinary capabilities such as Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) who, amid a political atmosphere of empty formalities, was able to use his personal integrity and charisma to mobilize the town-based

organization into military preparedness and finally suppress the Taiping Rebellion. Having such a brilliant model, with due utilization of modern Western technology, Naitō believed that China could reform itself in the political and military realms.

When it came to economic affairs, however, Naitō insisted that Japanese participation was necessary. The reason was historical, too. Naitō saw that, after World War I, the three countries most engaged in trade with China were Britain, America, and Japan. However, the British did business with China through compradors without going deep into the Chinese inland, while the Americans did business with China mainly to quench their thirst for adventure. On the contrary, Japanese merchants had been exploring local Chinese markets for years and thus making future success of economic reforms possible [Naitō 1972b: 510-520]. For fear that Japan was going to be shut out of the Chinese market, Naitō [1972b: 513] warned:

On the way of development of East Asian culture, the Japanese economic movement—which, unconsciously perhaps, fulfills the time’s mission and helps China’s renewal—is extremely important for prolonging China’s life. If the movement is stopped, the Chinese nation would probably die out.

To justify the necessity of Japan’s role in China’s reform, Naitō appealed to historical knowledge again by arguing that, throughout history, the cultural center of East Asia had always been on the move: from the Yellow River basin to the Yangtze River basin, and more recently to the southern maritime province of Guangdong. Hence, had it not been for the fact that China and Japan formed two separate countries in history, there was nothing strange about Japan becoming the new center of East Asia, because Japan accepted Chinese culture no later than Guangdong did [Naitō 1972b: 508-511].

Going deeper into Chinese history, Naitō was optimistic about the future of Chinese culture (premised on Japan’s involvement, of course). He pointed out that China had succeeded in rejuvenating itself periodically in history by fusing the fresh energy of northern nomads into the sedentary agricultural civilization of the south [Naitō 1972b: 512]. He then criticized the so-called New Culture Movement for violating traditional morals and literary forms, and blamed those anti-Japanese “May Fourth youth” for being ignorant of Chinese history (Note 5). For Naitō [1972b: 540-542], blindly attacking Confucian ethics was not acceptable. A more reasonable way would be to find out from history why Confucianism could help maintain China’s social order for such a long time, and then to study whether those causes were still available in the twentieth century.

Naitō also disagreed with the view that Chinese culture was already in decline or lethargic in modern times. Taking “cultural age” into consideration, he put emphasis on a culture’s diachronic

development rather than on synchronic comparison between cultures. For example, Naitō deemed it appropriate that a relatively young nation like Japan should be militarily powerful in the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, an ancient civilization like China had already passed its prime of political and military development and entered a phase of artistic mellowness. This prematurity by no means signified the backwardness of Chinese culture, but indicated a future direction for Japan and Western countries [Naitō 1972b: 525-528].

As the preceding description shows, Naitō's view of China was mixed with realistic calculations, but it is also undeniable that he had a keen perception of and deep love for Chinese history. In his outstanding monograph on Naitō Konan, Joshua Fogel [1984: 17] observes:

In the postwar reassessment of and self-reflection on prewar Sinology, Naitō has often been identified as an imperialist or even as one whose scholarship served as a cosmetic cover for Japanese imperialist encroachment on the Asian mainland. "Imperialism," however is too simplistic a basis on which to evaluate Naitō's work as a whole; it tends to oversimplify the complexity of his arguments and fails to get at his overall intellectual concerns. We shall not attempt to deny the connection between Naitō and imperialism, but to transcend it.

Even though Naitō's historical knowledge is admirable and "the complexity of his arguments" should not be oversimplified under political accusations, a question more relevant to this essay would be whether understanding of a country's history guarantees a clear vision of—or even a solution to—its contemporary internal and external predicaments. To express the question in another way it should be asked if Naitō Konan was too confident about his own knowledge and about history's power of shaping the future.

Koyasu Nobukuni [2012: 52-54] is critical of this confidence. He not only questions Naitō's qualification for "thinking for China in the Chinese people's stead," but also dubs the prescription Naitō made for China as an "oracle" [Koyasu 2012: 57]. An example Koyasu [2012: 70-72] chooses for criticism is Naitō's overemphasis on the "town-based organization" as the backbone of Chinese society. Crystallized from Naitō's erudition without doubt, this view led Naitō to conclude that China was too fragmented for political mobilization. Accordingly, he failed to explain the nationwide anti-Japanese sentiment and movement, blaming them instead on American instigation. Furthermore, since Naitō thought that China could not stand unified on its own, Japanese intervention was thus deemed inevitable.

Now it is time to go back to Kissinger's words already quoted in the first section: "Any attempt to understand China's twentieth-century diplomacy or its twenty-first-century world role must begin—even at the cost of some potential oversimplification—with a basic appreciation of the tra-

ditional context.” Despite the importance of historical knowledge, it must be emphatically noted that Kissinger based his interest in Chinese history on his experience of post-1949 China, which witnesses an independent China gradually coming out of isolation and becoming increasingly influential, while Naitō tried to find the historical causes of the disintegration of early twentieth-century China and saw little hope of China regaining autonomy in the near future. This contrast reminds us that history is multifaceted, and depends on each observer choosing a version suitable for his or her purpose, however erudite and perceptive this person might be. Besides, history is essentially about the past. To whatever degree the completeness of our historical knowledge might achieve, using it to predict the future requires identifying less changeable elements and conditions (whether psychological, cultural, institutional, or material) through time. But the modern international environment is known for unprecedented complexity and rapid changes. Therefore, inferring future development of international relations from history requires extreme caution.

Before ending this section, a paragraph on Naitō’s best-known, as well as the most debated, historical thesis is in order. Briefly speaking, Naitō argued that the transition period from the Tang to the Song Dynasty around the tenth century marked the beginning of “modern” Chinese history. Naitō touched upon this thesis in many places with different degrees of elaboration, and one of the most significant inferences from it was that China must march toward republicanism, because the historical trend was irreversible [Naitō 1972a: 328-329]. Arguably, Naitō proposed this thesis in order to relativize the Western timeline of historical periodization, but, ironically, this sense of competition reproduced some of the criteria of Western modernity and their counterparts were sought in Chinese history (Note 6). Since this is a point many scholars have dwelt on, suffice it to say that, in the early twentieth century, Japan competed with the West not only for political and economic interests in China, but also for academic authority on China. Naitō, however confident he was about his classical Chinese learning, was also obliged to respond to the Western impact. He and his historical insight were thus conditioned by a specific historical context as well.

4. A new future based on political ideals: Yoshino Sakuzō’s view of China

Yoshino Sakuzō distinguished himself as a political theorist and activist who pioneered the so-called Taisho Democracy, an aggregate term for democratic movements reaching the climax in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Some of his theses have long become classics in the history of Japanese political thought. Nevertheless, speaking of Yoshino’s view of China, we are faced with a field that is far from uncontroversial. Compared to Naitō, Yoshino’s attitude toward China underwent remarkable change, which Matsuo Takayoshi (1929-2014) [1996: 371-372] summarized as follows:

[...] Yoshino, who took for granted Japan as the “master of Manchuria and Korea” during the Russo-Japanese War and fully supported the Twenty-One Demands during World War I, turned against not merely the agreements based on the Twenty-One Demands but also all kinds of unequal treaties thirteen years later when the Chinese Nationalist Revolution (the Northern Expedition) succeeded, and he went so far as to oppose the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This change was attributable to the following causes. First, after the 1911 Revolution, Yoshino looked forward to China becoming strong and independent through the efforts of the revolutionaries. Second, the Nationalist Revolution succeeded as Yoshino had wished. Third, Yoshino’s view of international politics changed as he delineated in the article “From Imperialism to International Democracy.” Fourth, the change in the view of international politics was connected with Yoshino’s confrontation with the domestic forces behind imperialism.

A more detailed chart would place the watershed in Yoshino’s attitude toward China at the year of 1916, a time when Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), then president of the Republic of China, dared to restore monarchy back to the country. Yuan’s deeds aroused widespread anger and rebellion, and it was owing to this fervor—strongly felt among concerned Japanese as well—that Yoshino began to devote himself to studying the history of modern Chinese political development. Before this event, Yoshino showed no particular passion for China although he had lived there for three years. Yoshino finished in 1917, *A Concise History of Chinese Revolutions*, with “great sympathy and reverence” [Yoshino 1995a: 3], which is believed to be the first work dealing systematically with the successive revolutions breaking out in China [Hazama 1995: 400]. Interestingly, as Matsumoto Sannosuke [2011: 192] notices, “according to Yoshino himself, the arguments regarding constitutional reforms of domestic politics that made him so famous, though occasionally well received because they catered to the current of the times, were actually a field ‘I find myself least good at;’ on the contrary, ‘the China discourse that I am rather satisfied with,’ as he claimed, was the field about which Yoshino the political historian felt most confident.” In any case, both political theory and China discourse were genres that distinguished Yoshino’s intellectual career, and his view of China changed along with the advancement of his political thinking. The ensuing part of this section will demonstrate how Yoshino based his outlook on the future of China and Sino-Japanese relations on his political principles and beliefs, which is an illuminating contrast to Naitō’s reliance on the authority of history/historical knowledge.

After Yuan Shikai’s failure and death in 1916, the most significant event that affected China’s relations with Japan was probably the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (see Note 5). While most Japanese critics voiced discontent with the anti-Japanese sentiment, and not a few of them accused

either the Chinese government or Western countries for fanning the flames, Yoshino [1995b: 240-242] was strongly convinced that the movement was voluntary. In the movement, he identified a sign of enlightenment of the nation, as well as an awakening of its political consciousness. This awakening manifested itself in many respects, including politics, literature, religion, and philosophy, and Yoshino was obviously excited about the development. Yoshino [1995b: 244] went further to argue that the movement originating from Beijing sounded an alarm to the Japanese government and military, who had long been colluding with those pro-Japanese Chinese officials who cared little about real needs of the Chinese people. According to him, “we cannot but take a humanitarian stance and base our China policy on the principles of independence and coexistence.”

Some remarks Yoshino made in 1927 and 1928, when China was on the way to unification through the military expedition led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), are also exemplary of a political idealist, nonetheless tinged with certain “Japanese characteristics” when special interests in China were under discussion. In an article publicly addressed to Dai Jitao (1891-1949), who was visiting Japan as a representative of the southern (Nationalist) government, Yoshino [1995c: 335-337] laid out certain principles he held toward Dai’s mission. To begin with, he claimed that most of “the Japanese people sympathize with your spirit of reform and sincerely wish for your success.” Nevertheless, “considering international etiquette, no matter how much we feel morally attached to your cause, we are not in a position to sever official ties with the northern government immediately.” In response to Dai’s possible request of Japan acknowledging his government’s full domination of specific areas to the exclusion of any other country’s free action therein, Yoshino suggested that “first of all China must be prepared to take full responsibility for all kinds of happenings there.” Most importantly, while he was willing to see the revision of those agreements that had long been hurting China’s autonomy, he found it not entirely reasonable to blame all of them on foreign invasion, because “it is not to be forgotten that China was not able to form itself into an independent country then.” Fortunately, since “China has started to assume a good shape through your effort, we are also determined to abandon the invasive policy.” Yoshino [1995c: 337] continued to say:

But, in connection with the abandonment of the invasive policy, there is one thing I would like to request of you. That is concerning the special role Japan has occupied in China. Leaving aside the self-interest a few classes seek to satisfy, when it comes to those affairs that bear direct relevance to the living of the general Japanese public, no matter how they might take place, proper consideration must be given when you deal with them [...] Of course, we shall give up all invasive measures and show complete respect for our neighbor’s autonomy.

Indeed, this insistence on or appeal to the “special role of Japan” in China has caused contro-

versy among researchers, and Yoshino himself was no doubt responsible for the ambivalence (Note 7), but in the end idealism seems to have prevailed, and Yoshino [1995d: 356] made the following declaration:

In a word, the future relations between China and Japan shall not be decided on the basis of existent agreements, but shall be started all over again, taking the interests of both countries into consideration and following the instruction of pure reason and justice.

It was out of this sense of “pure reason and justice” that Yoshino fiercely opposed the Japanese military action in Manchuria in the early 1930s. He pointed out that the Japanese military was used to excusing themselves with the right of self-defense, but what they were doing was actually no less than invasion, which could not avoid the accusation of imperialism [Yoshino 1995e: 359-363]. As things happened, Yoshino died in 1933 and Japan quit the League of Nations in the same year as he had foreseen.

It is plain that Yoshino Sakuzō held a very different view of China from that of Naitō Konan, especially of Sino-Japanese relations and the direction China should take. Nonetheless, apart from the oversimplified indicator of imperialistic inclination, the major concern of this essay lies in their respective intellectual and emotional approaches to China.

Both of the two great masters nursed strong feelings toward China. As a professional sinologist, Naitō showed unreserved appreciation of classical Chinese culture as a whole. Precisely because of this holistic view, he observed that such a time-honored civilization as China could only move on the track that had been entrenched throughout history, and he saw no way for China to become entirely unified and independent without foreign intervention due to its fragmented social structure. Ideals do not seem to count in this picture since, as Naitō firmly believed, what he did was nothing more than clarify the current situation and make prescription for China in line with objective historical insight. His expectation of Japan's role in reinvigorating China can also be understood in this epistemological context. Sino-Japanese relations are arguably the longest among all bilateral relations between two countries, and, according to Naitō, this fact had also made both Japan's understanding of China and Japan's interests in China deeper than any other country could aspire to achieve.

On the contrary, though “essentially not a sinologist, Yoshino made comments on China, chiefly because the problems of China would affect the development of Japan, both domestically and diplomatically” [Huang 1995: 5]. Far more politically oriented than Naitō seemed, Yoshino, who was so inspired by democratic ideals and Wilsonianism that proposed national determination, turned out to be more optimistic about China's future as guaranteed by the successive revolutions and move-

ments in the early twentieth century, had the progress not been choked—rather than assisted—by the Japanese military. Yoshino was doubtless also historically-minded as he authored many books on the history of modern Chinese politics, but showed none of the historical determinism that one can recognize in Naitō. Perhaps it is not too much to say that, for Yoshino, history shaped rather than decided the course on which a country moved, and even international relations should be restarted from scratch in search of political idealism. Once the power of idea reigned, history became something not only given passively and objectively from the past, but also to be created with due subjectivity in the future. In this sense, Kissinger's warning that to understand China's contemporary diplomacy through the country's history risks oversimplification is quite true. There are always new situations to cope with, and new impetus to push history forward, that fall outside of past experiences.

Of course, from hindsight, what happened after the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, especially in the recent decades, can be said to have failed both Naitō's and Yoshino's expectations, in that China has become ever more centralized, and in the meantime, further removed from democratization. Such a drastic change has been baffling historians and political scientists alike and obliging them to delve deeper into history and theory for appropriate explanations. However, to blame Naitō and Yoshino for not being prescient is unfair. They lived in a specific context and tried their best to make sense of what was going on between Japan, China, and the world through their respective expertise. It is the indelible intellectual traces they left, though contradictory as they appear, that can teach us significant lessons.

5. Concluding remarks

The previous comparisons drawn between Naitō and Yoshino are illuminating in demonstrating that different intellectual approaches to an object—a China in chaos in this particular case—can bring about entirely different diagnoses and expectations. Admitting that both historical and political perspectives are important for depicting a country's gesture on the world stage, we are faced with a challenge that, despite their inseparability, the two fields are not yet in perfect accord. Nevertheless, the problem is pressing, because the two disciplines are now being called together again to address a rising China. What can scholars today learn from the Japanese examples of a century ago? In Section 2, three main reasons for studying early twentieth-century Japan's view of China have been laid out. For the sake of convenience, I will try to conclude this essay by elaborating on the previously mentioned points.

First of all, transdisciplinary dialogue is required in the endeavor to understand China. It is true that both Naitō and Yoshino were blessed with the talent and erudition necessary for connecting

China's past to its possible future, but a contextual factor is not to be overlooked, that is, they lived in a time when there was not so much overspecialization that consumes a scholar's energy, which is largely directed toward technicalities. As Joseph Nye and David Welch [2017 : xiii] point out: "Policy makers (and students) complain about jargon-laden texts that go on and on about theory yet seem to say more and more about less and less." On the other hand, historians limiting themselves to evidential findings also fail to address big issues. A more eclectic and perhaps more practical attitude might be necessary [Nye & Welch 2017: xv-xvi]:

Neither theory nor history alone is sufficient. Historians who believe that understanding comes from simply recounting the facts fail to make explicit the hidden principles by which they select some facts rather than others. Equally mistaken are political scientists who become so isolated and entangled in a maze of abstract theory that they mistake their mental constructs for reality. Only by going back and forth between history and theory can we avoid such mistakes.

It is hard to say whether Naitō and Yoshino were fully aware of the "hidden principles" in recounting the historical "facts" they saw, not to mention the risk that every scholar faces of blurring the boundaries between "facts" and "mental constructs." Nonetheless, through the examples of Naitō and Yoshino, we are reminded of a time when a general (rather than merely specialized) knowledge base was prerequisite to scholars. Combined with the urgency they felt toward the situations in China, Japan and even entire East Asia, they were able to compose highly incisive but comprehensible writings, which are still of value today.

Second, the writings of Naitō and Yoshino are still valuable today, partly because Japan has never been in a position to totally objectivize China. In other words, China is too huge a neighbor for Japan to ignore and whatever the Japanese think and say about China partakes of the nature of self-image. Of course, this geographical and cultural proximity would render Japan's knowledge of China inevitably biased, or at least subjective, but that is a problem facing the contemporary world as well. Are not most people around the world interested in China because of the changes this country may impose upon them? Viewed in this tolerant way, prewar Japan provides an extraordinary case for us to see how traditional Chinese learning, modern Western scholarship, Japanese national interests, regional cooperation and conflict, and tense international relations all combined together.

Third, from the articulation above, it should be clear enough that the kind of examination conducted in this essay serves to complement both China-centered and West-centered views. The only caveat is that, as Japan has entered a new historical phase since the end of World War II, a separate essay exploring the postwar Japanese view of China is required, which should deal with a com-

pletely different combination of political, economic, cultural, and ideological considerations. Last but not least, as Kissinger [1994: 27] specified:

The study of history offers no manual of instructions that can be applied automatically; history teaches by analogy, shedding light on the likely consequences of comparable situations. But each generation must determine for itself which circumstances are in fact comparable.

In the face of a transforming world order, this statement best explains why dialogue between historical and international relations studies is so inevitable, notwithstanding all the difficulties. Furthermore, the applicability of history follows no scientific principles; it is still up to those who are concerned to choose whether, and how, to make use of historical knowledge in international politics.

Notes

- (Note 1) A detailed argument can be found in a Chinese article by the author. See Yu-Ting Lee, “Ershishijiwanqi yijiang de Zhongguo lunshu: guoguan yu lishi de duihua” (China Discourse from the Late Twentieth Century: A Dialogue between International Relations and History).
- (Note 2) The author is reminded by one of the reviewers that the term “transdisciplinary” needs clarification. In a cutting-edge sense, “transdisciplinarity” should transcend not only disciplinary boundaries but also those between academia and other social sections (<https://www.trafst.jp/journal/backnumber/8-1/p3-p4>). While in this essay the two fields under discussion, namely historical studies and international relations, are limited to the academic world, once more constructive dialogue is achieved between them, the knowledge thus acquired is applicable to understanding, and even improving, real-world politics. More precisely, it is out of the demand of understanding real-world politics that historical studies and international relations are being brought to close contact. Therefore, “transdisciplinarity” is addressed here in a broader sense as well.
- (Note 3) The transliteration of the book title is *Kindai Nihon no Chūgoku ninshiki*, and the two authors are Nomura Kōichi and Matsumoto Sannosuke. There are numerous books and articles in Japanese bearing similar titles, all dealing with the Japanese view of China in different historical periods, some of which will be referenced in this essay.
- (Note 4) Naitō has long been regarded as the supreme scholar of Chinese history or *Tōyōshi* (Eastern history) in early twentieth-century Japan. Among the many articles and books exploring Naitō’s extraordinary career, a notable edited volume is *Naitō Konan no sekai: Ajia saisei no shisō* (The World of Naitō Konan: The Thought of Reviving Asia). The author has also conducted an analysis of Naitō previously, with a different degree of detail and for a different purpose. See Yu-Ting Lee, “Wusishiqi kuawenhuashiyixia de Zhongguo: jianyu Riben bijiao” (China from a Transcultural Perspective in the May-Fourth Era: in Comparison with Japan). Yoshino was as a flag-bearer of the democratic movements of 1910s and 1920s Japan, and is considered by later scholars as an incarnation of Taisho Democracy. A book representative of this view is Mitani Taichirō’s *Taishō Demokurashī ron: Yoshino Sakuzō no jidai* (On Taisho Democracy: The Time of Yoshino Sakuzō).
- (Note 5) Beginning in the middle 1910s, the New Culture Movement proposed radical reform of Chinese tradition in all aspects. It later merged into the May Fourth Movement, which occurred in 1919 in protest against the decision in favor of Japan made at the Paris Peace Conference. Since then, cultural, political, and nationalistic appeals became increasingly intertwined in China.
- (Note 6) Needless to say, Naitō based his thesis on intimate understanding of Chinese materials, rather than merely putting

Chinese history on a Western Procrustean bed. For a brief introduction, see Chapter 3 of Okamoto Takashi's *Kindai Nihon no Chūgokukan: Ishibashi Tanzan, Naitō Konan kara Tanikawa Michio made* (Modern Japan's View of China: from Ishibashi Tanzan and Naitō Konan to Tanikawa Michio).

- (Note 7) For a detailed analysis and literature review of Yoshino's changing view of China, see Huang Tzu-chin's *Jiyie Zuo-zao dui jindaizhongguo de renshi yu pingjia: 1906-1932* (Yoshino Sakuzō's Understanding and Critique of Modern China: 1906-1932).

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