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To Politicize or to De-politicize:

Understanding Fluctuations in Sino-Japanese Relations

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Abstract

From the late 1990s to the late 2000s, scholarly literature and media analysis shifted from representing the Sino-Japanese relationship as generally “good,” to portraying it as generally “bad,” and then back to describing it as generally “good” again. This article aims to make sense of what could thus be construed as “fluctuations” in Sino-Japanese relations and Japan’s China policy, through employing discourse analysis as foreign policy theory. The aim is operationalized by analysing Japanese China discourse as it has played out in the Diet. The article demonstrates that there is a fault line between a “radical representation,” epitomizing further politicization of a prevalent Japanese sense of insecurity about China, and a “moderate representation,” reflecting de-politicization of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, it shows that in the period examined (a) China has come to be discussed more frequently, and (b) a greater variety of aspects of the relationship has reached the political agenda. Together, these two changes have been conducive in altering the relative position of the two representations; in 2008 the moderate representation was still dominant, but less so than in 1999. The main argument of this article is thus that recent fluctuations in Japan’s China policy—and by implication Sino-Japanese relations—can be understood in terms of an increasingly “open” Japanese China discourse.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese relations; fluctuations; Japan’s China policy; insecurity; Japanese Diet debate; discourse analysis
