

# Book Review: Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations, Past and Present by June Treufel Dreyer

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*In Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations, Past and Present, June Treufel Dreyer reflects on the current fraught relationship between Japan and China by placing their long-standing rivalry in deep historical context. This well-researched book is highly recommended by Raj Verma to students, academics and policymakers looking to understand the past and present tensions between these two major powers and the wider political dynamics of East Asia.*

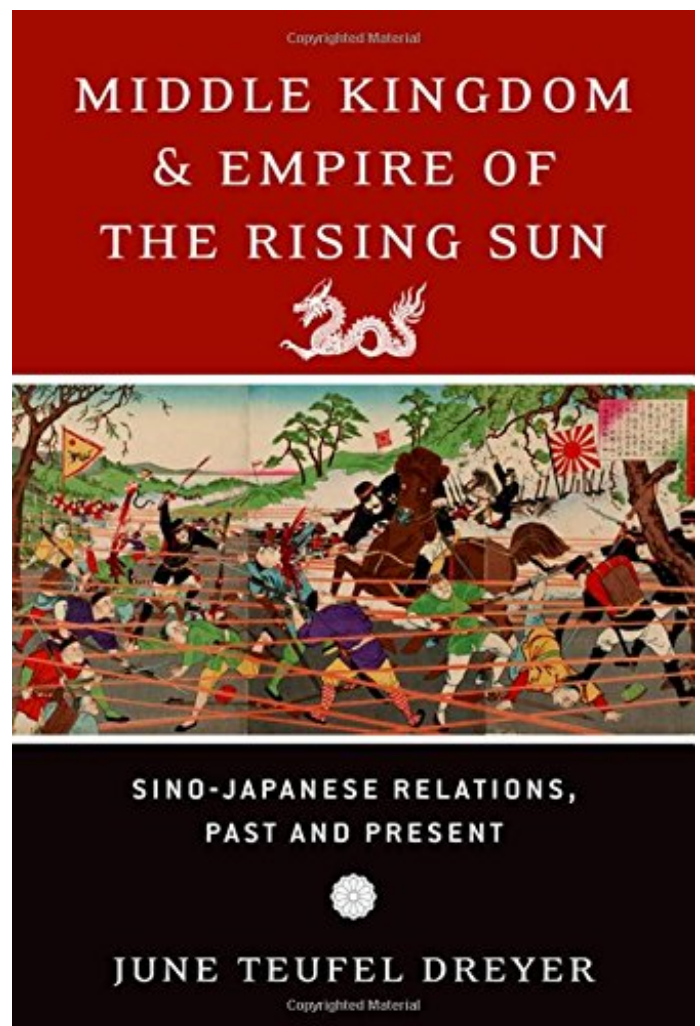
***Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations, Past and Present.* June Treufel Dreyer. Oxford University Press. 2016.**

Find this book: 

China has experienced rapid economic growth since 1978. The opening up of the country and subsequent reforms have resulted in it growing at an annual average of ten per cent from 1978-2012, with higher rates after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. As a result, China surpassed Japan in 2008 to become the country with the largest foreign exchange reserves and, in 2010, to become the second largest economy in the world. China's rise has therefore led to a renewed rivalry between East Asia's two great powers in the twenty-first century.

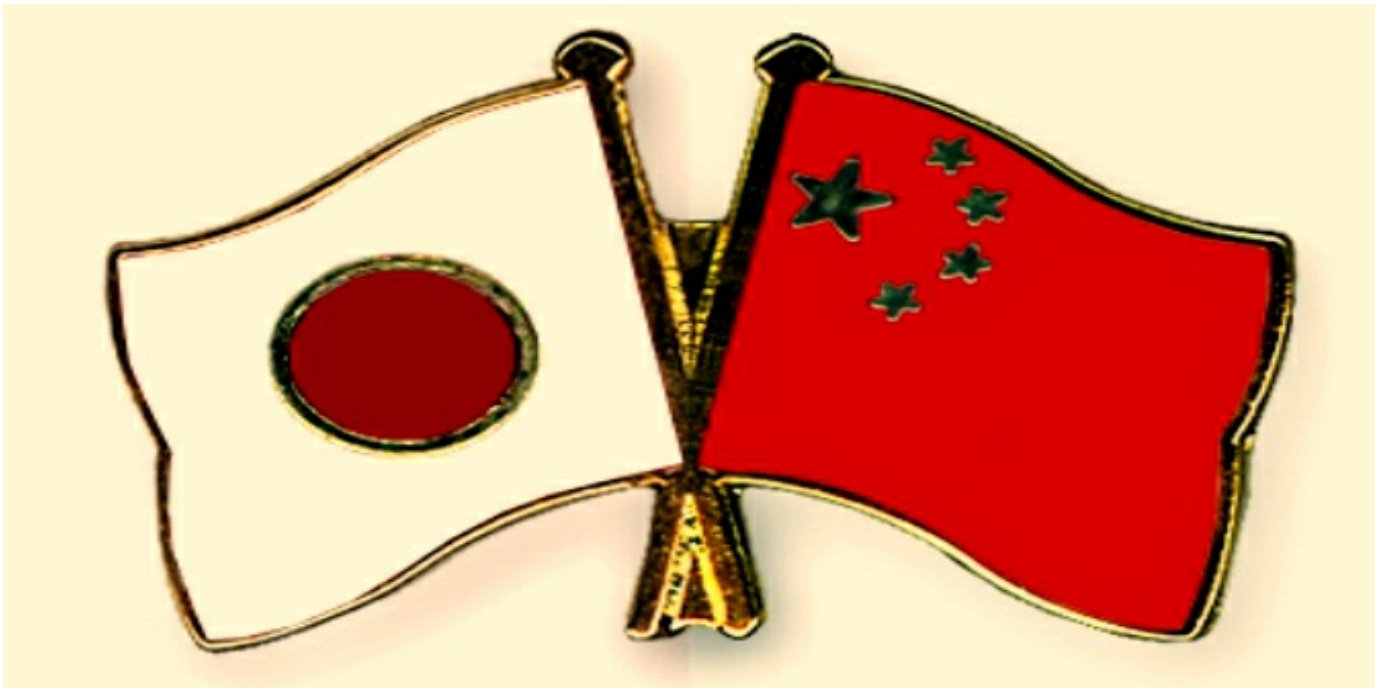
*Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations, Past and Present* focuses on the relations between China and Japan from around 7 AD – when the countries first came into contact with each other – until 2015. The central hypothesis is that the Sino-Japanese rivalry has deep historical roots, and that it will endure in the future because it is impossible to fully reconcile the differences, myriad issues and concerns affecting the bilateral relationship.

June Treufel Dreyer argues that the economic, political and military rivalry cannot simply be explained by events between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, such as the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895 which led to the occupation of Formosa (now Taiwan) by Japan; the Japanese occupation of Manchuria from 1931-45; the second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45; the Nanjing massacre and other Japanese atrocities committed in China; the issue of 'comfort women' (women who were forced into prostitution to serve the Japanese Imperial Army);



China's protests against Japan's historical revisionism; tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (controlled by Japan but claimed by China); or visits to the contentious Yasukuni Shrine – which honours fourteen Class A war criminals – by Japanese Prime Ministers and government officials, among others.

Instead, the genesis of the historical rivalry is shown to be the unwillingness of Japan, the 'Empire of the Rising Sun', to be considered subordinate to China, the 'Middle Kingdom'. Although Japan has been culturally influenced by China, the nation never considered itself inferior. For instance, Treufel Dreyer cites a letter written by Prince Shotoku on behalf of Empress Suiko to the Sui emperor in China in 607 AD, which greatly offended the latter due to the tacit assumption of equality between the 'barbarian' princess (Empress Suiko) and the 'son of heaven' (the Sui emperor), as well as later correspondence between the Ming emperor in China and the Wa emperor in Japan from 1376-82.



**Image Credit: (Xiaobin Liu CC BY SA 2.0)**

This refusal to be considered inferior also manifested itself from 1970 until the beginning of the twenty-first century when Japan became the second largest economy in the world and it was even forecast that it would surpass the USA in the 1990s. In the 1970s, a survey of Japanese people revealed that they considered themselves superior to all countries apart from Germany. This is something that the 'Middle Kingdom' could never accept because, for more than 5000 years, China has considered itself the centre of the world and as the most advanced and superior civilisation in East Asia. Other East Asian countries paid tributes to the Chinese emperor as part of the tributary system and were considered by China as being either barbarians or uncivilised. The feeling of cultural superiority and of being an ancient civilisation is therefore shown to be deeply engrained in the Chinese psyche.

Treufel Dreyer provides a comprehensive discussion of various aspects of the contemporary bilateral relationship by dividing the book into two parts. Part One is divided chronologically and provides a thorough analysis of both the bilateral relationship and those with other countries: for instance, China and Japan's struggle for influence over Korea and the complicated and convoluted China-Japan-US trilateral relationship. Part One also sheds light on the former Soviet Union's relations with Japan and China, including attempts by both China and the USSR to influence Japan. A key feature of Part One is the sense of Japan having felt abandoned by the US when relations between the two were at a low or when the US tried to improve relations with China as in the 1970s, including the US recognition of the nation in 1979.

Part Two is divided thematically, focusing on economic relations and rivalry (Chapter Eight) as well as military and security apprehensions of the two countries both towards one another and in East Asia generally, especially with respect to Taiwan and North Korean nuclear and missile tests (Chapter Nine). It also has a separate Chapter Ten on China and Japan's relations with Taiwan. Like Part One, Part Two illustrates the Chinese foreign policy of realist pragmatism: for instance, the Chinese government's crackdown on anti-Japanese protesters to ensure continued investment and transfer of technology from Japan. It also highlights Japan's realist mercantilism: that is, using trade, foreign aid, loans and foreign direct investment in countries in East Asia, especially the ASEAN countries, to achieve foreign policy objectives.

This well-researched book has its limitations. The book discusses in some detail how domestic politics in Japan affect the Sino-Japanese relationship; however, the role of domestic politics in China is not generally explored beyond a cursory mention. The book also fails to mention that Russia and Japan are still technically at war because Japan and USSR never signed a peace treaty after the end of World War Two. Moreover, Treufel Dreyer states that China agreed to support India's but not Japan's bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC). While it is true that in 2015, after years of oscillation, China agreed to support India's candidature, the book does not fully comprehend the dynamics of UNSC reform. China is well aware that India and Japan are part of the G4 group of countries seeking permanent seats with veto power. The support is therefore an attempt by China to draw a wedge between India and Japan – both have territorial disputes with China and are wary of its rise – and, if Japan is unable to get the seat, none of the G4 countries will.

Despite these minor limitations, the book is a must-read for students, academics and policymakers who want to get a firm grip on Sino-Japanese relations and the international politics of East Asia.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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