Abstract

The People’s Republic of China’s foreign policy toward Japan has undergone considerable changes after the diplomatic normalization. Though we may have a tendency to believe that China’s attitude toward Japan is one of hostility, in reality it is necessarily cooperative and competitive. This dissertation aims to examine and understand the main drivers of China’s foreign policy toward Japan. By combining International Relations with social theories, this research constructs a theoretical model of China’s foreign policy toward Japan. To test the model empirically, this dissertation presents a case study that chronologically analyzes the People’s Republic of China’s reactions to specific historical conflicts beginning in the 1970s up until 2013.

From the case study in 1970s, this dissertation finds that China’s interest in foreign policy can be defined according to the international balance of power. The case study which examines the 1980s supports the assumptions of the constructivist-pessimists, indicating that identity can cause friction. Then, the end of the Cold War structure put China’s existing identity as a communist state in question. This identity crisis caused domestic and political turmoil. Consequently, it increased sensitivity toward the outside world. Later, in the 1990s, the government tried to take a moderate attitude toward Japan backed up by the multilateralism. However, the people of China did not allow their leaders to put their historical issues aside. It implies that ideational factors, such as identity and norms, are powerful drivers of foreign policy. The case study suggests that Chinese leaders are pragmatic enough to maximize China’s power position, but at the same time, they do not always place priority on material gain. Rather, they sacrifice material gains when matters touch the victimized identity which was constructed after the Opium War. This dissertation concludes that identity is a main driver of China’s foreign policy towards Japan. China's modern identity has been characterized by a sense of “victimhood,” arising from its turbulent
interactions with Japan and Western Powers. If Chinese leadership showed weakness toward foreign countries, especially when those issues are related to past humiliations, the importance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would be marginalized.

China is a country of great pride, trying to gain recognition of other major world powers. They want to bring back their status to its “rightful” place in the world system. This study found that the CCP shows the flexibility necessary to respond to external structural changes. At the same time, the CCP gives first priority to matters of identity. This is characteristic of China’s foreign policy towards Japan.