

Japanese Fates in China and the Soviet Union from World War to Cold War: Notes on Our Collaborative Research into Soviet and Chinese Archives

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Abstract: *In these notes, we share our experiences of researching and co-authoring a recent article on the comparative treatment of Japanese residents and internees by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China in the first decade following World War II. This collaboration started from our surprising realization that despite their shared ideology and friendly relations, Moscow and Beijing adopted different approaches to dealing with Japanese citizens under their control. Here we recount the decade-long path our collaborative research took as we consulted multilingual government archives, survivor interviews, and memoirs to reconstruct the early years of Sino-Soviet cooperation and to argue for a more comprehensive, empirical approach to the evolution of early Cold War international relations in East Asia. The article, “[Japan Still Has Cadres Remaining](#)”: Japanese in the USSR and Mainland China, 1945-1956’, was published by the *Journal of Cold War Studies* in its Summer 2022 issue.*

Keywords: *China, Soviet Union, Russia, Japan, Cold War, World War II*



Figure 1. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai meeting in 1963 with Furumi Tadayuki. The photograph was provided by Furumi's son, Furumi Ken'ichi, to the authors in 2014 and is reprinted with his permission.

When we first met, a decade ago, at a conference at the University of Leeds, we were drawn to one another’s work because of our shared interest in the Japanese who were left behind in China and the Soviet Union at the end of World War II (WWII). As our conversations continued over the following months, we were quickly struck by what seemed to be profound differences in the experiences of these Japanese. While Sherzod recounted tales of suffering through starvation, bitterly cold winters, and back-breaking forced labor experienced by the 600,000 Japanese

prisoners of war (POWs) in Siberia, Amy instead spoke of Japanese doctors, nurses, and engineers who were highly paid and recognized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for their ‘meritorious service’ in helping to rebuild post-war China.

As we delved more deeply into the archives and the wider secondary literature, we became convinced that differences rather than similarities defined Soviet and CCP conceptions and treatment of the Japanese in their territories, but that these differences had gone largely unnoticed for two reasons. First, despite a now voluminous literature on the separate experiences of Japanese in China or the Soviet Union during and immediately after WWII, very few scholars had directly compared how the two communist allies dealt with the Japanese under their control. Second, the tendency in both history and International Relations literatures to view 1945 and 1949 as neat ‘ruptures’ obscured the fluid and uncertain decade of transition in East Asia from the end of WWII, to the resumption of the Chinese civil war, and to the onset and evolution of the early Cold War in Asia. In spite of a common socialist ideology and an alliance that made the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union ‘Brothers in Arms’ for the first decade of the Cold War, China and the Soviet Union had experienced very different trajectories from WWII to Cold War (Westad 1998). It was these different trajectories, we realized, that helped to explain the two countries’ distinct approaches towards the Japanese in their territories.

Divergences

In the Soviet Union, Japan had become cemented as an enduring threat in Soviet consciousness even after its defeat in WWII, owing to Japanese victories over Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and Japan’s occupation of Vladivostok and

‘intervention’ in the Russian Far East (1918-22). Memories of these conflicts, coupled with suspicion about the United States’ own intentions for Japan, strengthened Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s determination to preserve a lever of influence over post-war Japan. In August 1945, days after Japan’s Kwantung Army surrendered to Soviet forces, Stalin detained 600,000 Japanese nationals and forcibly removed them to Soviet labor camps in Siberia and other parts of the Soviet Union.

Japanese memoirs document the detainees’ experience of the Soviet system of POW camps, known for its brutal use of forced labor to build large-scale Soviet infrastructure and industrial projects. While US criticism later prompted Soviet officials to better regulate conditions for the most vulnerable, malnourished Japanese detainees, at least in the first year of internment there was little actual impact, as the Soviet economy could barely feed its own citizens. Still, the foreign POWs in Soviet custody, interned in the camps administered by the Chief Directorate for POWs and Internees of the Soviet Union’s Ministry of Interior, lived in conditions significantly better than those of Soviet inmates of the Gulag forced labor camps.

In China, the resumption of civil war between Communist and Nationalist forces in April 1946 prompted both parties to halt the Allied repatriation of some three million Japanese from China, and instead to retain tens of thousands of Japanese civilians and soldiers. Japanese military personnel were deployed by both the Nationalist and Communist sides of the Chinese civil war, while Japanese engineers, scientists, doctors, and nurses were valued by both the CCP and Nationalist government for their technical expertise. When the CCP consolidated its control over Northeast China in 1947, it recognized the importance of harnessing Japanese expertise in rebuilding post-war China and staffing its hospitals, factories, and mines. Rather than breaking

them physically through forced labor, the CCP instead ensured that the Japanese ‘kept back’ in Northeast China were afforded decent living and working conditions. Treating the Japanese well enough that they chose to stay behind in China was also, CCP officials argued, a sign of the success and legitimacy of the Communists as a governing force.

With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, CCP and Soviet authorities began ratcheting up their use of propaganda towards and about the Japanese. Both sides sought to use propaganda as a way to strengthen anti-American sentiment among the Japanese, and to educate them about the ‘evils’ of US imperialism in Japan and Asia more generally. Yet, there were marked differences in Soviet and CCP visions for postwar Japan and methods of propaganda. In Soviet camp propaganda networks, Japanese internees were heavily surveilled and forced to demonstrate ideological support or otherwise face punishment. Underlying these measures was a general suspicion that Japan, as a newly established US ally, would pose a political and security threat to the Soviet Union. Soviet propaganda accordingly had a retributive dimension, designed to punish Japanese detainees for what the Soviet Union regarded as a half a century of Japanese aggression.

By contrast, the CCP took a far less coercive approach, instead viewing Japanese POWs and civilians as partners in their joint struggle against US imperialism, and as a channel for legitimacy and diplomatic recognition of the PRC. Like the Soviet Union, the CCP also used Japanese-language newspaper articles, discussion groups, and photographic exhibitions as a way to underscore the ‘suffering’ of Japanese citizens under the US occupation. Yet, in contrast with its Soviet ally, CCP authorities believed that treating Japanese POWs and civilians well was their most powerful form of propaganda. To that end, the CCP funded Japanese-language schools and

more than 100 Japanese civil society organizations as a way to provide Japanese in China with a sense of community and civic life, while ensuring that the nearly 1,000 Japanese POWs imprisoned in Northeast China received plentiful food, education, and clean living conditions. A testament to the success of this propaganda work, memoirs and interviews with Japanese family members who visited these detained POWs in China during the 1950s, underscore their surprise and gratitude towards the CCP of this magnanimous treatment of former enemy soldiers.

Navigating the Sources

Highlighting, documenting, and explaining the differences between the two powers’ treatment of Japanese citizens required consulting an eclectic range of primary sources in Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and English. We started discussing archives even before we agreed to co-author this research; there is a certain fascination with the sources among historians and historically inclined International Relations scholars that often serves as a conversation starter at conferences. This focus on sources is even more pronounced among scholars who must consult communist archives—Sinologists and Sovietologists—where a culture of secrecy and arbitrary access has persisted since the end of the Cold War, creating a fertile ground for anecdotes of ridiculous restrictions and temperamental (or sometimes unexpectedly kind!) archivists.

In the case of Russian sources, the inaccessibility of most archives and the prohibitive cost of staying in Moscow for extended periods of time were alleviated somewhat by the abundance of published document collections. Luckily for Sherzod, who was at the time of our first meeting writing his PhD dissertation on the Siberian internment system, the focus of this article meant that he could dip into the archival source he had

gathered for doctoral research. Similarly, Amy had unexpectedly come across a host of Chinese government reports on the thousands of Japanese left behind in China when she was undertaking research in the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives for her doctorate on post-WWII Chinese conceptions of Japan. Fortunate in having hand-transcribed these reports during the brief window of relative archival openness in China, Amy was able to draw on these reports for this article even after access to the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive was severely restricted in 2013–14 (King 2016).

The structure of the article did not come to us immediately—in fact, it went through numerous iterations throughout the writing process—but the more we discussed our sources, the clearer it became that we should each write our part of the story and alternate them around a chronological narrative that would showcase the impact of the different Chinese and Soviet trajectories from WWII to Cold War. Doing so would allow the differences in Chinese and Soviet approaches to the Japanese to come to the fore without excessive emphasis from us.

The first stage in developing this narrative required documenting the facts of the everyday lives for the Japanese citizens in the Soviet Union and China, which would in turn help highlight the differences in treatment. This part was relatively easy, as both authors were familiar with the circumstances on the ground in the Soviet Union and China and could resort to abundant facts documented in government sources or testimonies of witnesses and survivors. Sherzod chose to tell the complex history of Japanese internment in the camps of the Chief Directorate for POWs and Internees by combining Soviet government documents with the extensive survivor testimonies and memoirs in Japanese.

This cross-checking of witness testimonies against the background of archival sources helped unveil a surprising conclusion: despite

the overall unsatisfactory conditions of internment of foreign POWs in Soviet custody, Japanese POWs' experiences were not as bad as those of German, Italian, or other Axis prisoners in the Soviet Union. Still, even this more favorable treatment, conditioned no doubt by the fact that the Imperial Japanese Army had never invaded Soviet territory and by the plans of the Moscow government to use the Japanese POWs as bargaining chips in the coming Cold War relations with Japan, bore no comparison to the way in which China's newly victorious communist government treated its Japanese residents.

Some of this relatively magnanimous Chinese treatment was the culmination of having trained Japanese soldiers to fight alongside Chinese communist forces in the Chinese civil war, for which several hundred Japanese earned the status of 'international class brothers'. Yet, reports from CCP officials based in Northeast China also made clear that they viewed Japanese technical expertise as pivotal in rebuilding China's extant industrial base and creating a modern, successful nation. These reports, combined with Japanese biographies and Western sources, revealed how the CCP worked hard to achieve these ends by monitoring and improving the diet, salaries, schooling, and community life of Japanese living under their control.

The second stage required engaging sources that would help explain the differences in treatment of the Japanese and shed light on the reasons behind them. This task required digging deep into the records of Sino-Soviet negotiations for clues about the priority that each side assigned to the issue of Japanese in their territory, and maybe even evidence of cooperation or consultation between the two powers on this issue. While the latter evidence was not readily available, here too we found surprising proof that pointed to the different approaches of the two governments with regards to their treatment of Japanese and

their use in future international negotiations.

The episode in question concerns almost 1,000 Japanese former officers, bureaucrats, intelligence personnel, and other prominent civilian or military officials transferred by Stalin to the PRC in July 1950. The Soviet documents that mention this group of Japanese identify them as those who had ‘committed crimes against the Chinese people’, and who thus should be tried in Chinese courts. From there, the archival trail had to give way to personal recollections; we relied on the memoirs of several Japanese former officials, chief among them Furumi Tadayuki (1995), who had been a top bureaucrat in the government of the Manchukuo puppet kingdom, and who vividly recounted his time as a Soviet and Chinese prisoner. Furumi and his companions on the train from the Soviet Union to China were initially apprehensive, thinking that severe—maybe even capital—punishment awaited them in communist China, but were surprised to be treated with generosity and leniency.



Figure 2. Sherzod Muminov with Furumi Ken'ichi, July 2022. Photo provided by the authors.

Through two interviews conducted eight years

apart in Tokyo with Furumi Tadayuki’s son, Ken’ichi, Sherzod discovered that the son shared his father’s appreciation of Chinese magnanimity. In 1956, Furumi Ken’ichi had visited Fushun, where his father had been imprisoned as a war criminal at the time, and returned to Japan greatly impressed by the warm welcome provided by the Chinese. As we explain in the article, this benevolent treatment of the former enemy by the PRC reflected the young nation’s foreign policy priorities and objective of building bridges with Japan.

It became clear to us, both through the recollections and writings of Furumi Tadayuki, and the detailed narrative of his son reminiscing about his own China trip, that the benevolence of the PRC officials and people lived long in the memory of the Fushun inmates, some of whom became friends and advocates of amicable relations with China in postwar Japan. Prior to Furumi Tadayuki’s repatriation in 1963 following five years in a Soviet camp and 13 years as a prisoner of China, he was even invited to a meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai, who discussed the importance his government assigned to relations with Japan. Furumi Ken’ichi shared with us a photograph of this memorable meeting, which we published in the article.

Lessons for Today

When we first began discussing the ideas that eventually resulted in this article nearly a decade ago, we could not have predicted that its eventual publication would occur in the midst of what, to many, appears to be the re-emergence of a dangerous authoritarian alliance between Russia and China. Commentators have pointed to China’s tacit support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s economic leverage over Russia following that invasion, and the two countries’ determination to disrupt Western values, institutions, and the very liberal international

order (see, for example, Williams 2022; Tisdall 2021). Yet, the simplicity of these alliance narratives belies a more complicated story about the distinct interests, histories, and international ordering ideas held by these two powers. As our article demonstrates, even at the height of their Cold War alliance, China and the Soviet Union held very different ideas about Japan and the Japanese in their territories, as a result of their very different experiences of the fluid and unpredictable international order transition from WWII to Cold War.

The world is currently in the midst of another international order transition, whose end point remains uncertain. While it is tempting to rely on simple narratives that pit alliances of authoritarian states against the liberal West, we suggest that such dichotomies obscure more than they reveal. As our article demonstrates, the differences in Chinese and Soviet approaches toward the Japanese in their territory cannot be explained by a Cold War alliance narrative. Instead, we need to look to longer historical interactions, and to relationships that sat outside conventional Cold War boundaries, to understand how China and the Soviet Union differently conceived of Japan and these Japanese, and how they navigated this changing international order.

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