

Aug 18, 2010

Wary neighbours getting close

Young Chinese are warming to Japan, although relations are still fragile

By Charissa Yong

BEIJING: For the first time in years, more Chinese people now think of computers, cars and cherry blossoms than of the Nanjing massacre when Japan is mentioned.

A new joint survey by the two East Asian countries suggests that the Chinese and Japanese are gradually warming to each other after decades of animosity - a grassroots indication of the improving ties between the two governments.

However, experts said that this detente is a fragile one, dependent on stable relations between both nations.

The survey was jointly conducted by China Daily and the Japanese think-tank Genron NPO for the sixth year running. It polled 1,617 people in China and 1,000 in Japan, with university students forming the majority of the respondents.

Of the Chinese polled, 70 per cent feel Sino-Japanese relations are 'good', a remarkable rise from 51.2 per cent two years ago.

Most of the Chinese form their opinions based on Japan's official actions, explained Peking University's international studies professor Liang Yunxiang, and these improved from 2006, after Japan's former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi ended his term.

During his days in office, Mr Koizumi paid annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine where Japanese war criminals are venerated, a move which irked the Chinese government and earned the ire of its people.

In contrast, on the 65th anniversary of the Japanese surrender in World War II on Sunday, Japan's Cabinet ministers refrained from visiting the controversial shrine for the first time in decades, a decision which was well received in China.

While history remains a sore point between both countries, the younger generation is more willing to look beyond the past, said Professor Zhou Yongsheng, a Japanese studies expert at the China Foreign Affairs University.

'Older Chinese who have been victims of Japan's past aggression in World War II still hold painful memories, and are unlikely to fully let go of their grievances. But the younger generation is more balanced in its views,' he said.

Yet the ground sentiment here, while improving, is not spectacular: Only 36.9 per cent of the Chinese surveyed think of Japan as 'good', slightly less than the 37 per cent who think that Japan is 'bad'.

Some six in 10 Chinese students polled also see Japan as an important military threat, second only to the United States.

And nearly 90 per cent of the Chinese surveyed do not think Japan should become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Prof Liang noted that the feelings of the Chinese towards the Japanese, while carefully built up, can be easily broken.

'It is very dependent on current affairs. For the moment, China and Japan are moving closer together economically and immigration between both will increase, but there are other problems that can flare up very easily,' he said, citing territorial disputes, military build-ups and the issue of Taiwan as potential snags in Sino-Japanese relations.

Defence matters, in particular, may take precedence over economic issues. Both countries have been touchy about parts of the East China Sea, where China held a military exercise in April, even though both agreed last month to speed up a treaty to jointly develop its underwater gas fields.

'Security is a very touchy topic for this region. If China sees its security as being threatened, both the government and the people will react angrily,' noted Prof Liang.

To this end, China has set some measures in place. It proposed setting up a maritime emergency hotline with Japan to prevent military and civilian clashes in troubled waters, reported state media yesterday.

'Both sides have many problems which are very hard to solve, but as long as they don't flare up, Sino-Japanese relations should continue favourably for the foreseeable future,' said Prof Liang.

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Cabinet's shrine boycott provokes mixed feelings

By Kwan Weng Kin, Japan Correspondent

TOKYO: Japan's Democrat-led government scored a first when none of its ministers went to pray at the infamous Yasukuni Shrine on Aug 15, the day marking the end of World War II.

The shrine, which honours ordinary soldiers as well as Class A war criminals, is seen as a symbol of Japan's past militarism by neighbouring countries.

So visits to Yasukuni in the past by ministers, and especially prime ministers, had angered China, South Korea and other Asian nations that were victims of Japanese military aggression.

In previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments, at least one minister a year would show up at the shrine on Aug 15 as if to snub the government's official vow to never again go to war and its official apology to the victims.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Sunday apologised for the suffering caused during the war.

'We caused great damage and suffering to many nations during the war, especially to the people of Asia,' he said at an annual memorial service for the war dead at Budokan Hall in Tokyo.

'We feel a deep regret, and we offer our sincere feelings of condolence to those who suffered and their families,' said Mr Kan of the Democratic Party of Japan.

His Cabinet also decided to give Yasukuni a miss not only out of consideration for bilateral ties with neighbouring countries, but also to show that it is different from previous LDP governments.

But the Kan Cabinet's total absence from Yasukuni does not necessarily stem from personal convictions.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshito Sengoku revealed that ministers, as well as deputy ministers, were 'asked' to 'voluntarily refrain' from going to the shrine.

After annual visits to Yasukuni by then premier Junichiro Koizumi from 2001 to 2006 soured ties with China and South Korea, prime ministers after him have learnt to avoid Yasukuni so as not to upset Japan's neighbours.

But once out of office, many ex-premiers head to Yasukuni without any qualms. What they do in their private capacity, they believe, is their own business.

They see no inconsistency between vowing there will be no more war in their official capacity and praying to their country's dead military leaders in their private capacity.

Former premier Shinzo Abe was at Yasukuni on Sunday and even accused Mr Kan of trampling on the rights of his ministers to visit the shrine, arguing that it was a religious choice.

Also at Yasukuni were LDP president Sadakazu Tanigaki and even Mr Shinjiro Koizumi, the lawmaker son of the former premier. Conservative politicians like these no doubt use Yasukuni to appeal to Japanese voters who see no reason why their leaders should not pay respects at the shrine where 2.3 million war dead are remembered.

Some Japanese are eager for the country's leaders to pray at the shrine as they want to continue believing that their loved ones did not die in vain on the battlefield. But visits by politicians to Yasukuni only serve to reinforce suspicions in neighbouring countries that the Japanese may be less than contrite.

It is telling that it took 50 years after the end of World War II before a Japanese prime minister could issue an official apology to his country's wartime victims.

And that statement came not from an LDP leader, despite the party being in power almost continually for over 50 years, but from a Socialist prime minister who happened to be in power at that juncture.

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Wary neighbours still bitter

Colonial history mars S. Korea-Japan ties

By [Lee Sun Young](#), For [The Straits Times](#)

SEOUL: South Korea and Japan are the closest neighbours in North-east Asia. It takes about two hours to fly from one capital to the other.

Economic and cultural exchanges have been expanding, with bilateral trade amounting to US\$71 billion (S\$96 billion) last year.

The Japanese are among the biggest fans of South Korean pop culture and vice versa. Just over three million Japanese visited South Korea last year compared with about 1.6 million Korean tourists to Japan.

However, despite their geographical proximity and cultural similarities, the two neighbours remain divided by a bitter history which has sown mistrust and resentment among their people.

On Aug 29, 1910, Korea was annexed and came under Japanese imperialist rule. This lasted until Japan's surrender in World War II in August 1945.

The Korean peninsula was split into the communist North and capitalist South after the 1950-53 Korean War.

Office worker Lee Jong Yong, 30, enjoyed reading Japanese manga when he was a schoolboy and is now a big fan of Japanese anime films. While he readily admits to being fond of Japan, he says

he has a problem with its attitude towards its war-time actions. 'I can't help but feel anger when I think of Japan's attitude towards its imperialist past,' Mr Lee said. 'They say they are sorry about what they had done to us, but their actions tell a different story.'

During the 36-year colonial rule, Koreans were forced to work as slave labour and some women as sex slaves for Japanese imperial troops.

A survey jointly conducted last month by the two countries' national broadcasting stations - KBS in Seoul and NHK in Tokyo - showed that Mr Lee's resentment is shared by many other Koreans.

Asked to name the first Japanese that came to mind, 20.8 per cent of Korean respondents picked Ito Hirobumi. He was the first prime minister of Japan, and later resident-general of Korea, who masterminded the country's aggressive policy towards Korea. He was assassinated by a Korean independence fighter just months before Korea was annexed.

In stark contrast, 20.8 per cent of the Japanese respondents named actor Bae Yong Joon, the star of Korean TV drama Winter Sonata, which was a mega-hit in Japan.

Many South Koreans demand a 'sincere' apology from Japan as well as official compensation from the Japanese government as a show of remorse.

South Koreans are especially angry when Japanese Cabinet ministers make a visit to Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine, which honours Japanese war dead, including 14 top war criminals. For the first time in about 25 years, no government ministers went to the shrine on Sunday, the 65th anniversary of Japan's surrender. On the other hand, many people in Japan feel frustrated by South Koreans' repeated demands for an apology, although their political leaders have said sorry many times. The latest apology came from Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Aug 10. It was Tokyo's first acknowledgement that it had annexed and occupied Korea by force.

South Korean President Lee Myung Bak said on Sunday that he had taken note of Japan's effort, which represented 'one step forward'.

Analysts say that South Korea and Japan face similar challenges such as the rise of China, a global trend of forming regional economic blocs and the nuclear threat from North Korea. The two countries would need to cooperate at a new level in response to the changing dynamics in North-east Asia and the world, said Mr Park Joon, a researcher at Samsung Economic Research Institute in Seoul.

ANGER OVER PAST

'I can't help but feel anger when I think of Japan's attitude towards its imperialist past. They say they are sorry about what they had done to us, but their actions tell a different story.'

Office worker Lee Jong Yong

WARMING TIES

Relations are improving, according a recent annual survey of more than 2,500 respondents in China and Japan.

For the first time, the Nanjing massacre is not the first thing that the Chinese cite when Japan is mentioned.

2008

- Nanjing massacre
- Electrical appliances
- Sakura blossoms

2009

- Nanjing massacre
- Electrical appliances
- Sakura blossoms

2010

- Electrical appliances
- Nanjing massacre
- Sakura blossoms

NOTE: *Figures do not add up to 100% as either respondents did not respond or picked other answers.



Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing, China.

What do you think of relations between China and Japan?

CHINESE SAY	2008	2009	2010
Very good	3.1%	0.9%	4.4%
Good	51.2%	70.1%	70.1%
Hard to say	31.7%	NA	NA
Bad	12.5%	19.4%	17.1%
Very bad	0.6%	1.1%	1.5%

JAPANESE SAY	2008	2009	2010
Very good	0.6%	14.5%	21.3%
Good	12.4%	48.1%	48.8%
Hard to say	40.6%	34.8%	27.1%
Bad	41%	2.1%	1.6%
Very bad	5.1%	0	0.5%

Key obstacles to better ties.

- Territory issues
- Competition for resources in oceans
- Distrust

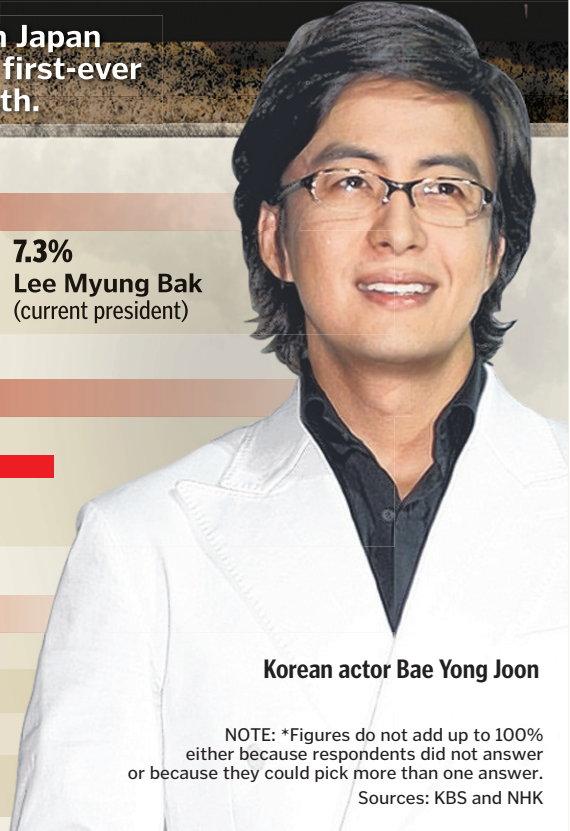
Sources: CHINA DAILY and GENRON NPO

FROSTY TIES

Relations are still tense between Japan and South Korea, according to a first-ever joint survey conducted last month.



Former prime minister
Junichiro Koizumi



Korean actor Bae Yong Joon

Who is the first Korean / Japanese person that comes to mind?*

KOREANS SAY		JAPANESE SAY	
20.8%	9.7%	20.8%	7.3%
Ito Hirobumi (first prime minister)	Junichiro Koizumi (former prime minister)	Bae Yong Joon (actor)	Lee Myung Bak (current president)
	8.4%	7.6%	
	Asada Mao (figure skater)	Kim Dae Jung (former president)	

What do you think of bilateral relations?*



What are the areas that need to be worked on?*

KOREANS SAY		JAPANESE SAY	
Sovereignty dispute over Dokdo or Takeshima	62%	Political dialogue	37.1%
Disparities in perceptions towards shared history	34.4%	Economic exchanges	28%
Japanese government's compensation for victims of its wartime crimes	26%	Cultural and sports exchanges	27.6%
Political dialogue	22.3%	Disparities in perceptions over shared history	27.4%

NOTE: *Figures do not add up to 100% either because respondents did not answer or because they could pick more than one answer.

Sources: KBS and NHK