

# The Franco-German reconciliation model does not correspond to the challenges of the Japan-PRC relationship

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## Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) recurrently uses the argument of the Franco-German model of reconciliation. Germany's "moral" position is systematically opposed to that of Japan, which is always denounced as the only party responsible for the lack of reconciliation with China.

This analysis is often repeated without distance outside China. However, behind this discourse, the reality is much more complex and the comparison of the two situations is particularly hazardous. The real question is indeed that of strategic incentives, which, from the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the present day, are divergent. This paper will look into the complexities of the reconciliation process, beyond an idealized Franco-German model.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) recurrently uses the argument of the Franco-German model of reconciliation. Germany's "moral" position is systematically opposed to that of Japan, which is always denounced as the only party responsible for the lack of reconciliation with China because—according to Beijing—it refuses to look back and apologize for its actions during the Second World War.

This analysis is often repeated without differentiation outside China, particularly in Western countries, both by non-specialist experts in Asia and by politicians. Thus, in his speech to the Diet during his visit to Japan in June 2013, President François Hollande of France was able to put forward the example of Franco-German reconciliation, without contextualizing it or making a distinction in the process between West Germany (formerly BRD) and East Germany (formerly DDR).<sup>1</sup>

However, the reality behind this discourse is much more complex and the comparison of the two situations is particularly hazardous. The real question is indeed that of strategic incentives, which, from the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the present day, are divergent. In the case of the Franco-German relationship, as we shall see, West Germany yesterday, Germany today, and France were both parts of the same liberal democracies grouping. In the case of the Sino-Japanese relationship, the People's Republic of China and its Party-State system have not shared Japan's interests and strategic vision since 1949. The onus is therefore on a China whose leaders have a direct interest in maintaining Japan in a state of subordination that limits its re-emergence on the international scene as a "normal" power. It is in this context that the impossible reconciliation between Tokyo and Beijing must be analyzed, and the main factor remains China's willingness—today non-existent—to accept a true permanent reconciliation with

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<sup>1</sup> "Statement by Mr. François Hollande on Franco-Japanese relations, June 7, 2013," speech delivered to the Diet, Tokyo at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/188124-francois-hollande-07062013-relations-franco-japonaises>

Japan after 1945. Indeed, contrary to a commonly accepted position, it is not the capacity to look back on a difficult history that precedes reconciliation but, as in the Franco-German or Japanese-American case, the will to reconcile that constitutes the first condition. In the case of Germany, France wanted this reconciliation for reasons that had little to do with the most recent past; all the more easily, no doubt, because France itself had difficulty, until the end of the 1970s, in coming to terms with its own experience as a collaborationist state under the regime of Marshal Pétain (1940–1944).

### **The Chinese position on taking Germany as a model**

For Beijing, this constant reference to the Franco-German model and Germany's just attitude is a valuable foreign policy tool, mobilized against a Japan whose legitimacy today is no more questioned in the whole of Asia except, for different reasons, in the PRC and the Republic of Korea. In 2013, China's ambassador to Germany published an op-ed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* denouncing Prime Minister Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine as a demonstration of revisionist nationalism as opposed to Germany's ability to repent.<sup>2</sup> China thus constantly uses the example of Germany as opposed to that of Japan, which is always denounced as solely responsible for the lack of "trust" and reconciliation between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> President Weizsäcker's speech to the German Parliament on May 8, 1985, is often cited as a model of acknowledgment of an inexcusable past.<sup>4</sup> However, the incongruity of this rapprochement by a regime that has made the expurgation of history and its most painful episodes a mode of social control is never mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

Like historians, Chinese editorialists condemn Japan by using this misguided comparison with Germany. For the *Global Times*, both Japan and Germany were defeated nations, but only Germany was able to completely liquidate its past Nazi crimes. The author emphasizes the role of the Franco-German axis as a factor of peace, prosperity, and stability in Europe, "an example of resolving disputes through compromise and cooperation." On the other hand, according to this article, Japan has not learned the lessons of its war of aggression; Tokyo must learn from Germany.<sup>6</sup>

### **Far from history: China's geostrategic motivations**

Several objectives explain this positioning of the PRC vis-à-vis Japan on questions of history. At the bilateral level, there is a twofold objective of legitimizing the Communist Party within China by constantly reactivating the memory of the war of resistance against Japan and by glorifying the role of the Communist Party during the Second World War. On the international scene, the PRC tries to deny Tokyo any legitimacy, particularly in its demand for reform of the UNSC. As a defeated nation like Germany in 1945, Japan, in the eyes of the Chinese leadership, must be maintained in this status. This is all the truer since the perception of the People's Republic of China as a source of opportunity is deteriorating globally, including in Asia.

<sup>2</sup> In Stanley Crossick, "Can China and Japan ever Forgive and Forget?" *Politico*, 09-11-2015.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Colin, Claire Demesmay, *Franco-German Relations Seen from Abroad, Post-war Reconciliation in International Perspectives*, (Springer, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Speech by Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny on 8 May 1985 at the Bundestag.

<sup>5</sup> In China, topics such as the Tiananmen Square massacre cannot be discussed and there is a crime of "historical nihilism" which condemns any criticism of the ruling Communist Party.

<sup>6</sup> 孙海潮, "中日关系愈发的关系比较"(Comparison between Sino-Japanese relations and Franco-German Relations), 环球网, 30-04-2019.

Defending the Party's image of dominance, especially against Japan during the Second World War, is in effect contributing to the Party's posture of power today. To control and rewrite the history of the anti-Japanese struggle before 1949 is also to mask by an abundance of discourse on this period the total absence of authorized critical discourse on the history of the post-1949 period, which was particularly painful and costly in human lives for the Chinese people. The contemporary legitimacy of the Communist Party's undivided power has been increasingly based since the end of the 1980s on historical reconstruction.

This instrumentalization of history in China takes place at various levels, notably in the writing of school textbooks and in the commemoration and promotion of memorial sites, the list of which has grown very recently.

In France, attempts by the Parliament to "guide" the history curriculum in 2006 sparked a heated debate that led to the withdrawal of the contested project. Contrarily, Yang Dongliang, former head of the Ministry of Education's expert committee on Japanese issues, believes that "all countries in the world encourage young people to study history to nourish their patriotism."<sup>7</sup> These are two radically different conceptions of history education that demonstrate the ideological gap that continues to exist with the Chinese system.

The rules governing the writing and selection of authorized textbooks in China, especially history textbooks, are defined by the Communist Party authorities, who are exclusively responsible for ideological control, and their implementation is entrusted to the PRC's Ministry of Education. The mission of the Ministry is thus officially "to analyze and present educational materials used in elementary and secondary schools, to organize the review and approval of such educational materials."<sup>8</sup> In 1986, taking into account the policy of reform and the opening up of the country, the production of history textbooks was decentralized, but the requirement to respect the principles defined above was maintained. The textbooks are no longer composed by a single centralized commission but by provincial or municipal departments of education, by educational institutions themselves, and by individual experts or scholars. The system of text review and post-proofing by a "state textbook review and approval commission" has been maintained to take into account "the ideological content, scientific spirit and suitability of the textbooks for the relevant audience." History, as it is taught to children and youth today, and more so under Xi Jinping, is thus an instrument of official control and mobilization in the hands of the Chinese powers-that-be.

A textbook used in secondary schools in accordance with official guidelines is particularly illuminating in this respect.<sup>9</sup> The chapter on "the war of resistance against Japan" highlights several essential and recurrent points in the process of constructing an eternally guilty Japan.

The presentation intends to highlight the "immense heroism of the struggle against the Japanese aggression."<sup>10</sup> The chapter on the "heroic actions of the 8th Route Army (Communist forces)" stresses the major and leading role of the Communist Party alone in the struggle and victory over the "Japanese oppressor." It is thus repeatedly noted that the Party was the driving force of the struggle against Japan, that it constituted the main element, and above all that it

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<sup>7</sup> *Xinhua*, 17-05-2005.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Guex, "Les manuels d'histoire chinois vus du Japon," *Ebisu*, Année 2008, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Renmin jiaoyi chubanshi kecheng jiaocai yanjiusuo lishi kecheng jiaocai yanjiu kaifa zhongxin (History Curriculum Materials Production and Study Center of the Institute of Curriculum Materials of People's Educational Publishing), *Lishi* (History), (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyi chubanshe, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

was by winning this victory thanks to the Communist Party that China took its place alongside the great powers at the end of the conflict, conflating the Communist Party with the Republic of China. This was also the main theme of the 2015 parade organized for the first time to celebrate the victory against Japan in China.

The chapter on the war of resistance against Japan also includes paragraphs, accompanied by graphic photographs of war crimes, whose sources are never indicated.<sup>11</sup> With such images, forgiveness is impossible, and the aim seems to be to maintain in the youth an imprescriptible feeling of hatred.

The aim is also to demonstrate, through these schoolbooks, the legitimacy of the leadership role of the Chinese Communist Party “which has awakened the country to the urgent need to build a united front of national unity.” The Chinese authorities thus proceeded to equate “China” with the Communist Party, even though the role the latter played at the time was far from the centrality it is given today in official mainland history.

This reconstruction of history, this insistence on highlighting the major, almost unique role played by the Communist Party during the anti-Japanese war, is, in fact, all the more vital for the government since, for the Communist apparatus that took refuge in Yanan in 1937, the priority seems to have been, on the contrary, to conform to the strategic interests of the USSR in the war against Japan and to give priority to the fight against the nationalist forces of the Republic of China.

Thus, to preserve the legitimacy of the Communist Party, historical “nihilism” is denounced; the “justice” of past struggles must be prolonged in the present through a delegitimization of today’s Japan, which implies the constant reminder of “past crimes” that prevent any long-term reconciliation whatever the number of excuses expressed by Tokyo.

The perpetuation of the past in the service of the interests of today’s Chinese regime is also nourished by the multiplication of monuments and commemorations, all phenomena which are relatively recent in scope. The three “stations” of Chinese martyrdom against Japan—Shenyang, the capital from 1931 of Manchukuo, a protectorate of Japan at the head of which the last emperor Pu Yi had been installed; the Marco Polo Bridge, the site of the “incident” of July 7, 1937, which marked the beginning of the offensive by Japanese troops towards the south; and finally Nanjing, the capital of the Chinese government abandoned by government troops after a siege of a few weeks and also the site of the 1937 massacre—have only relatively recently been provided with huge museums. The “Memorial for the Patriotic Victims of Japanese Militarism” in Nanjing dates from 1985 and was restored on a larger scale in 2005. The Marco Polo Bridge Museum was conveniently built in 1989 as an instrument of national harmony after the events in Tiananmen Square and renovated in 2005 to even greater dimensions, with the aim of “refreshing visitors’ memories of the war” by highlighting “courage, heroism, resistance, patriotism and atrocities” which should not be forgotten. As elsewhere in the museum, an engraved plaque placed at the entrance in August 2005 once again proclaims the leading role of the Communist Party in the war of resistance against Japan and the anti-fascist war.<sup>11</sup>

To maintain this memory and a sense of revenge, new websites were also created with the blessing of the authorities in a vast movement of “web nationalism.” With the same objective, dozens of television programs, films and war series are constantly aired.

Japan cannot, therefore, cease to be confronted—in the terms defined by China—with its history and no apology can be sincerely accepted despite Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 call to look to the

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<sup>11</sup> This is also the case in museums where no source is indicated, fuelling Japanese critics who denounce the fabrication of documents.

future. Japan is also asked to “translate its remorse into action so that the feelings of the Chinese people will never again be violated” and “to adopt a conscientious and serious attitude towards history.”

### *Denouncing a “Cold War mentality”*

Behind this desire to maintain Japan in a status of illegitimacy also lies the Chinese ambition to weaken the system of bilateral alliances around the United States in Asia, of which the Japan-US alliance is the cornerstone. The PRC constantly denounces a system “inherited from the Cold War” that could be replaced by a Chinese-centric regional system. Beijing therefore denounces the “Cold War mentality” displayed by both the media and political circles in Japan when discussing defense issues, which is always equated with a so-called rise in “militarism.” Similarly, the greater interest shown in Japan in strategic issues since the beginning of the 2010s, which has not disappeared with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is also the subject of constant criticism in the People’s Republic of China.

### **The Franco-German reconciliation: A counterexample**

The process of reconciliation between France and Germany, far from being the model that China puts forward, appears on the contrary as in a mirror, the reverse of the situation that characterizes the relationship between Japan and China. The reconciliation between France and Germany after 1945 was only possible because of a dual will in Paris as well as in Berlin, despite a particularly difficult history. Since the end of the 19th century, Germany had been considered by France the “hereditary enemy” and, after France’s defeat in 1871 ending the Franco-Prussian War and leading to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, it was the motive of all nationalist discourses in France. This tension continued during the first half of the 20th century with the two world wars. However, after the German defeat in 1945, a complete reversal of this situation took place.

The movement in favor of reconciliation with Germany manifested itself early after the Third Reich’s defeat in France. This movement, contrary to what one often hears, far preceded the movements to re-evaluate history and responsibilities both in Germany and in France. It is only from the 1970s onwards that, in both countries, real questioning of the compromises and responsibilities during the Second World War occurred, notably in Germany with the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (*Coping with the past*) movement and in France with the shock provoked by the publication of Robert O. Paxton’s book, *La France de Vichy*, in 1973.

Unlike the PRC, Gaullist France sought this Franco-German reconciliation. The first meeting between General de Gaulle, who had just been appointed President of the Council on June 1, 1958, and Chancellor Adenauer, who initiated the process of Franco-German reconciliation, took place on September 14, 1958, when the German chancellor was symbolically invited to La Boisserie, General de Gaulle’s private residence. The stated objective was to try to reverse the course of history, to reconcile the two peoples, and to combine their efforts and their capacities. We find on both sides, and particularly on the French side, the same desire to establish direct and preferential relations in all areas. This meeting marks the reconciliation between the two countries and the beginning of a cooperation that led to the Elysée Treaty signed on January 22, 1963. When he went to Germany, where he gave ten speeches in German in September 1962, de Gaulle did not insist on a necessary apology but a necessary reconciliation.

### *The weight of strategic interests*

The situation between the PRC and Japan was also mirrored by the strategic stakes and the role of the United States beyond the French desire for reconciliation. For President Truman and George Marshall in the United States, it was a question of not repeating the errors of the Versailles Treaty (1919) and risk precipitating a move by the new “West Germany” into the communist camp while

the Cold War was taking hold in Europe. France as well as the Federal Republic of Germany were part of the same “camp” and this has been a crucial factor in the reconciliation between the two countries. The Franco-German cooperation treaty, known as the Elysée Treaty, signed on January 22, 1963, provides for quarterly meetings between the ministers of defense, bi-monthly meetings between the chiefs of staff, and consultations on all matters relating to defense and important foreign policy issues “to reach a similar position” on East-West relations, European cooperation or NATO as well as on all armaments issues.<sup>12</sup>

At the level of civil society, exchanges were encouraged through the teaching of German in French high schools, school trips, and later the creation of a Franco-German television channel, Arte, in 1991.

### *The role of NATO and European construction*

West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), like France, was also a member of NATO, which anchored their membership in the same alliance despite the Gaullist desire to preserve France’s strategic autonomy. The Federal Republic of Germany joined NATO on May 6, 1955, one year after the Paris Agreement, which put an end to the occupation of Germany by the Allied powers.<sup>13</sup> It is within this framework, and within that of the European construction, that all the debates on the rearmament of Germany took place, contrary to the situation that prevails in Asia, where the People’s Republic of China and Japan are not part of the same bloc, neither during the time of the Cold War nor since the fall of the USSR.

At the same time, the process of European construction, inaugurated in 1952 with the Communauté européenne du charbon et de l’acier (CECA) that had been proposed by Robert Schuman to Konrad Adenauer as early as 1950, then followed by the Treaty of Rome (March 25, 1957) that created the European Economic Community on January 1, 1958, bringing together Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, also facilitated the process of reconciliation between France and Germany. The objective at the European level was “to establish a closer union” between the European peoples and to uphold, by the constitution of this set of resources, the safeguarding of peace and freedom in the context of a world divided into two blocs.

The Franco-German reconciliation and friendship is therefore taking place within the framework of multilateralism and European construction, which does not exist in Asia, where the People’s Republic of China, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear, shares neither the values nor the strategic objectives of Japan and its allies. On the other hand, despite these irreducible differences, the choices made by Beijing at the end of the 1970s for economic reform and the Sino-Soviet conflict were able to mask these fundamental differences and give the illusion of a possible reconciliation, forgetting that, until the reunification of the two Germanys, East Germany, which was part of the Warsaw Pact, had never been involved in this process.

On the other hand, the Treaty of Peace between Japan and the Republic of China (ROC) signed in Taipei on April 28, 1952, can be compared to the reconciliation process between France and West Germany in the 1950s. The text of the treaty indicates “a mutual desire for good neighborliness given their historical and cultural ties and geographical proximity.”<sup>14</sup>

When Japan decided to recognize the PRC in 1972 and then to sign the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, Beijing was very much in favor of this rapprochement, again for strategic reasons, particularly in the face of the Soviet threat perceived as existential in Maoist China, but also for economic reasons. Japan contributed massively to the economic development of the PRC

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.france-allemande.fr/Traite-de-l-Elysee-22-janvier-1963.html>

<sup>13</sup> Reunified Germany joined NATO on October 3, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/taipei01.htm>

by participating in the strategy of opening up launched by Deng Xiaoping. The PRC was then little concerned with the past, officially refusing, as the Republic of China had done, to claim any reparations.

Unlike the situation between France and Germany, though, any progress can only be regarded as tactical by the Chinese regime and can be called into question according to Beijing's strategic priorities. As such, any rapprochement can only be temporary, depending on the priorities defined by the regime in Beijing and not on a real desire to resolve the tensions inherited from history as seen in Europe.

In this respect, the Franco-German reconciliation cannot serve as a model for a hypothetical reconciliation between Japan and the People's Republic of China. Japan must also agree to revisit its history, notably by encouraging an education system that is conducive to a more critical spirit, including on historical issues. It must develop an approach that takes into account all perspectives, as do the history books published in France and Germany, without seeking refuge in a form of neo-nationalism that is very far from the orientation of the great contemporary democracies. However, the primary responsibility for the tensions that remain lies with China, ruled by a regime for which history is not an object of study but an instrument, a weapon at the service of its strategic interests and its survival.