



The Genron NPO

ANALYSIS PAPER:

The 17<sup>th</sup> Joint Public Opinion Poll

# Japan-China Public Opinion Survey 2021

In Cooperation With:

Japan: Public Opinion Research Center

China: The China International Publishing Group  
(CIPG), Horizon Research Consultancy Group

**October, 2021**

## Impact of the US-China Conflict on Chinese Public Opinion

### Analysis of the Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Poll 2021

**Yasushi Kudo**  
**President**  
**The Genron NPO**

In October 2021, The Genron NPO released the results of our 17<sup>th</sup> annual survey of public opinion in Japan and China, and one noteworthy result of the survey is the Chinese people's rapidly worsening impression of Japan and the Japan-China relationship over the past year. The sudden reversal of the impression of Japan among respondents in China, which had been continuously improving, is the first such reversal since the 2013 survey eight years ago, when there was a flare-up of tensions arising from the Senkaku Islands dispute. It is also the first time in five years that Chinese opinion of the Japan-China relationship has worsened.

Meanwhile, Japanese opinions of China have continued to deteriorate over the last few years, and this year showed no change in that trend. In addition, respondents in both countries believe that the US-China conflict is having an adverse effect on the relationship between Japan and China, and there is an increased feeling of anxiety and alienation concerning military activity by and disputes with the other country. One other peculiarity of this most recent survey is that regardless of worsening opinions, people in both countries still have high expectations for the future of the Japan-China relationship, and in fact have an increased desire for closer cooperation.

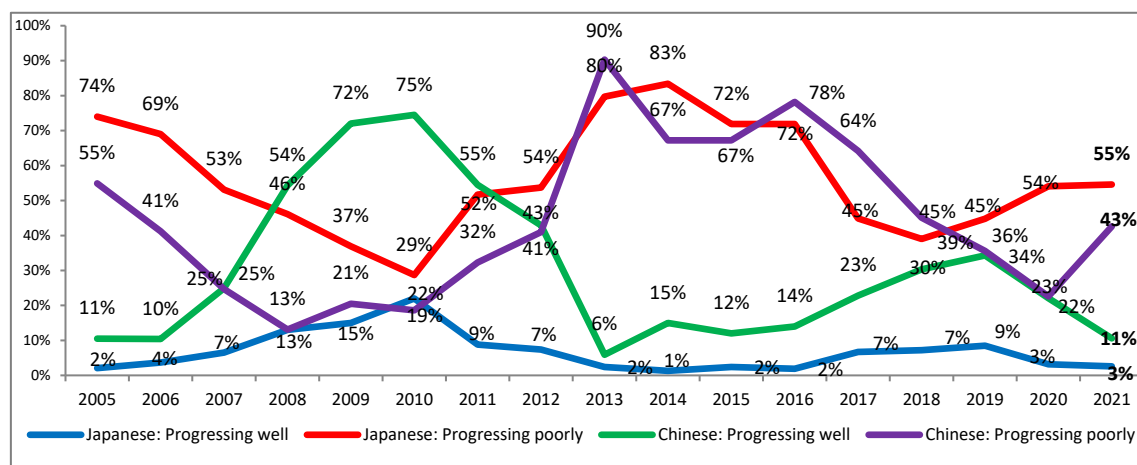
#### **No diplomatic activity or dialogue between the two countries over past year has left citizens feeling anxious**

The rapid worsening of opinion among Chinese respondents can be understood from two graphs below that illustrate changes in opinion over the last 16 years of conducting polls.

First, Figure 1 shows change of opinion over time of the current Japan-China relationship in both countries, and it can be seen that Chinese respondents who see the relationship as poor increased by

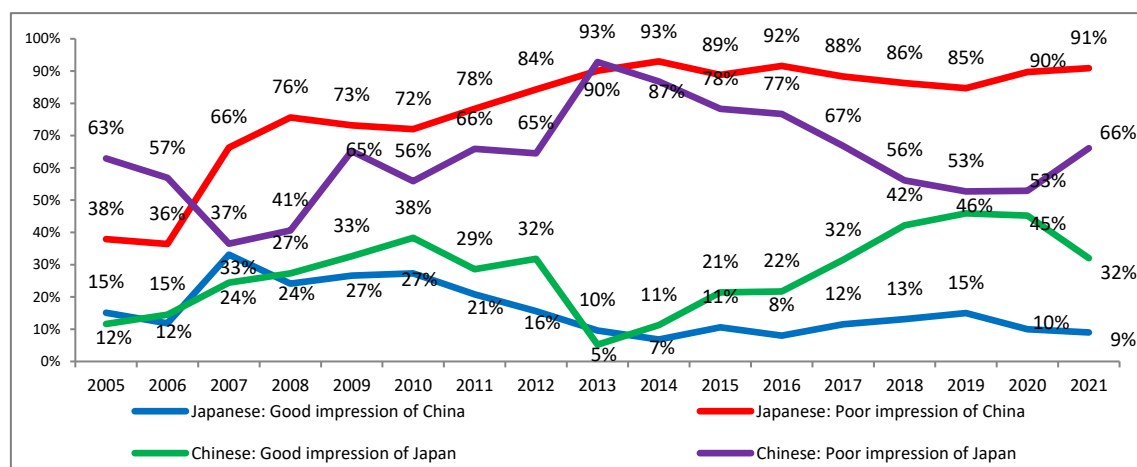
20 points over the last year from 22.6% to 42.6%. This is the first downturn in six years since that number had begun to drop in 2016.

Meanwhile, the percentage of Japanese respondents calling the relationship poor has been increasing since 2018, and that trend continued this year, now reaching 54.6% of Japanese respondents.



**Figure 1: How do you feel current Japan-China relations are progressing?**

Next, Figure 2 clearly shows a worsened impression of Japan in China, with 66.1% of Chinese respondents answering that their impression of Japan is poor, a year-on-year increase of 14 points from 52.9%. The ratio of Japanese respondents answering that their impression of China as a country is “poor” has been increasing since 2019, and now stands at 90.9%.



**Figure 2: Impression of the other country – Survey data from 2005 to 2021**

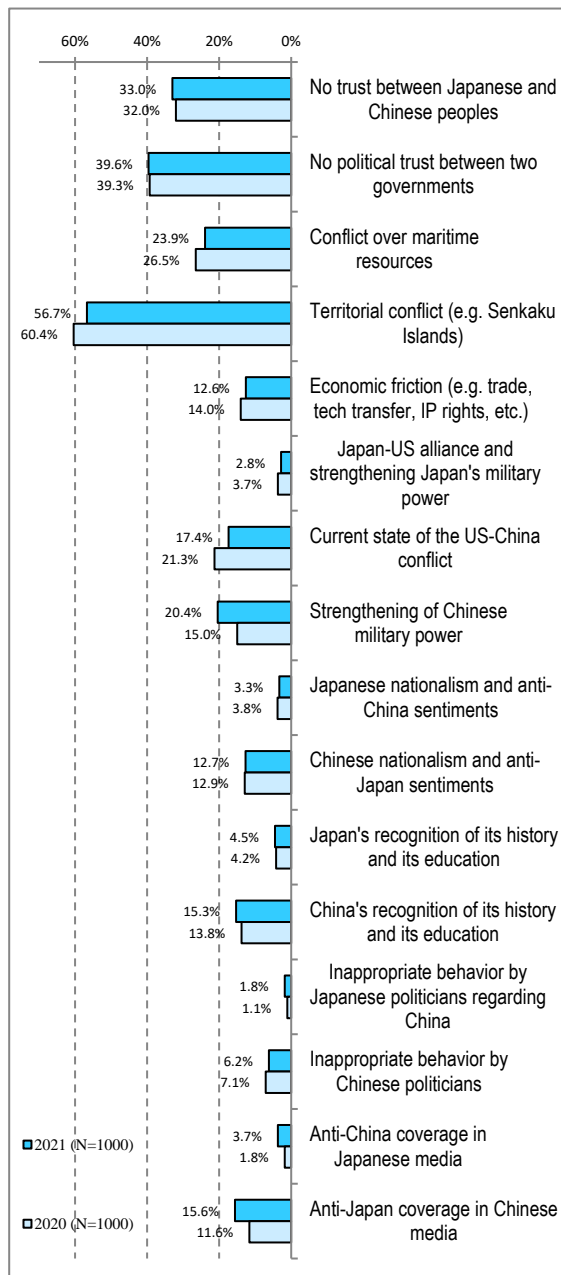
There are a number of reasons behind these changes. What first needs to be understood is that with exchange between the two countries essentially having dropped to zero, media organizations in each country are having a greater influence, and it is possible that the content of what is being reported is negatively impacting people's feelings toward the other country.

That trend can sometimes be particularly strong in China. One reason for the annual improvement in impressions of Japan among Chinese people was the fact that tourism from China to Japan had rapidly increased, and people's experiences in Japan were spread in China through mobile phones and other devices. This year, that effect was essentially non-existent. With the spread of COVID-19, the number of visitors to Japan in 2020 dropped to 1.07 million, roughly 10% of the peak in 2019, and 2021 was no different. A similar drop in Japanese visitors to China has been seen.

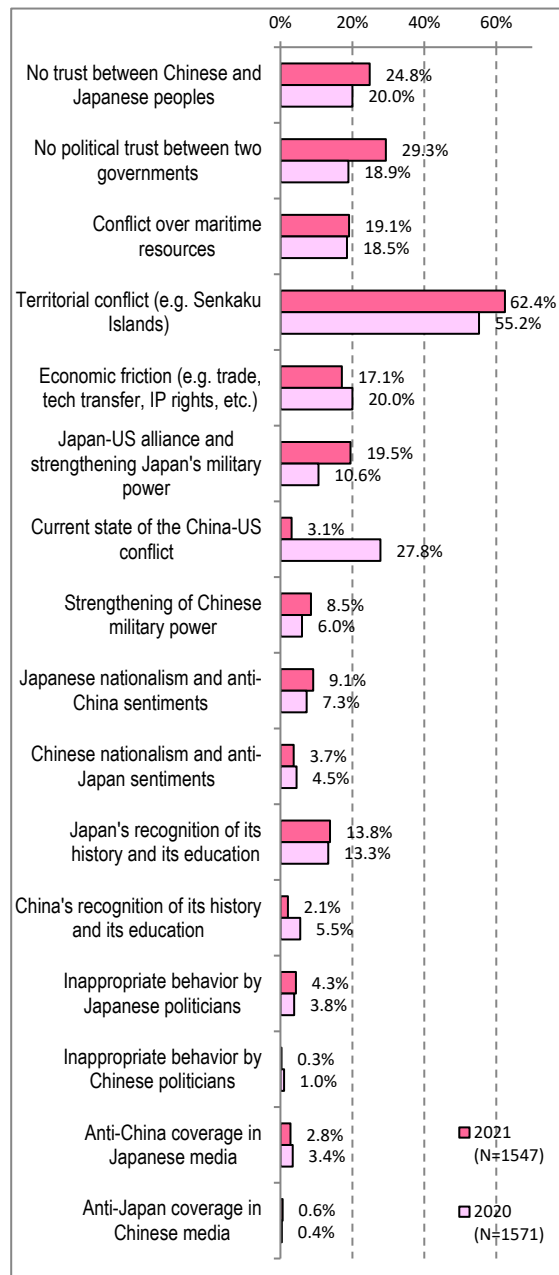
Moreover, the conflict between the US and China has increased uneasiness in both countries, and people in each country are experiencing an increased sense of security threat from the other country. Nevertheless, neither country's government has made any diplomatic overtures or engaged in dialogue, so the last year has been one of anxiety for people in both Japan and China.

These issues have resulted in the people of both countries deeming the current Japan-China relationship "poor". That can be seen in the question about what issues are hindering the development of the Japan-China relationship (Figure 3), to which the response "lack of political trust between both the Chinese and Japanese governments" saw the highest increase in the previous year with 10.4% more Chinese respondents selecting it. Among Japanese respondents, 39.6% answered that the two governments do not have a relationship based in trust.

## Japanese Public Opinion



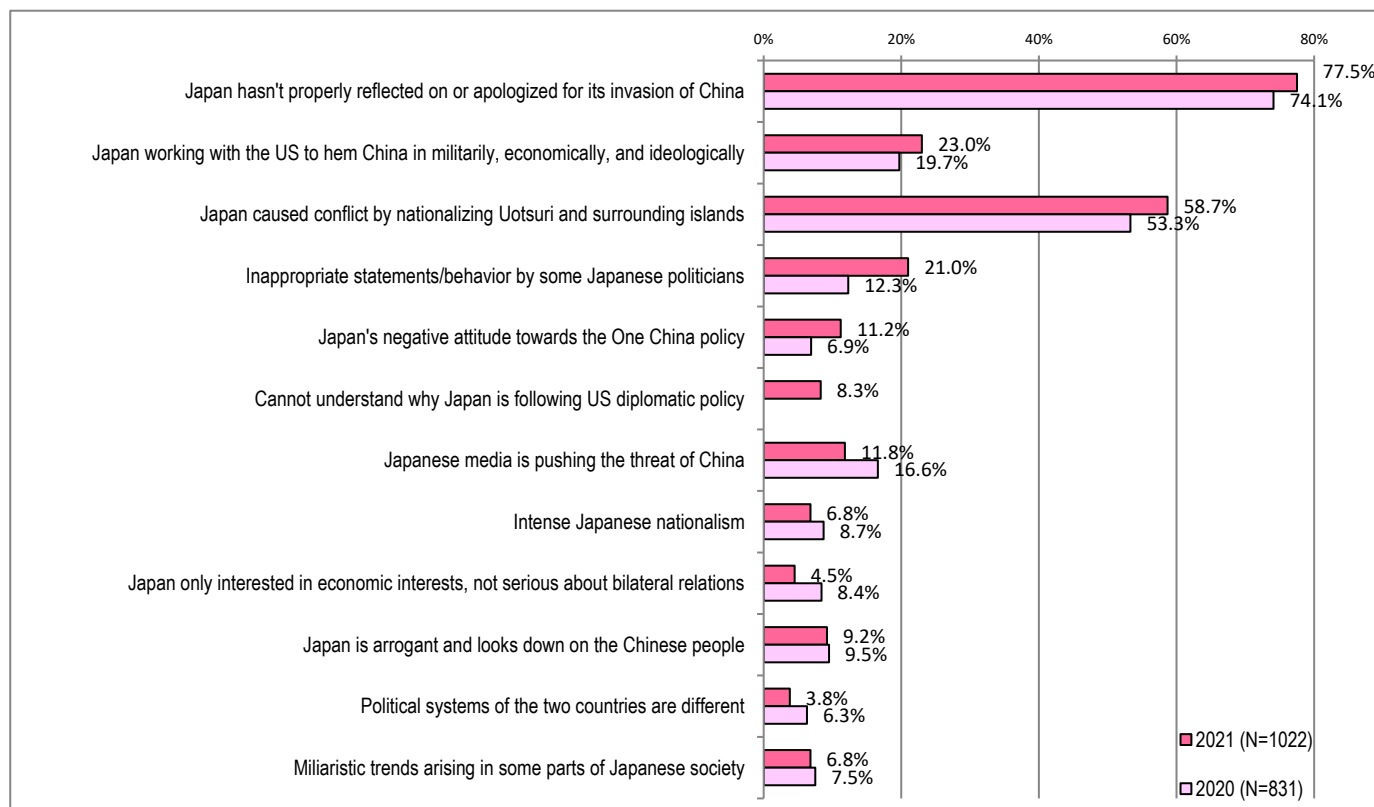
## Chinese Public Opinion



**Figure 3: What issues are hindering the development of the Japan-China relationship?**

The mutual deterioration in opinion about each other's country has been influenced by the complete lack of direct interaction and inter-governmental activity between the people of the two countries. However, we also see the appearance of a new factor.

This year's survey found a striking increase among Chinese respondents who answered that they have concerns regarding "inappropriate statements and behavior on the part of some (Japanese) politicians" with a 8.7-point rise from 12.3% to 21% (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Reasons for poor impression of Japan among Chinese people**

The Chinese section of the survey was conducted between August 25 and September 25 this year. Looking at Chinese domestic media reports from just before that period, the news had broken a Japanese cabinet minister had visited Yasukuni Shrine. Media outlets were discussing and heavily criticizing the possibility of an individual openly declaring their intention to continue visiting Yasukuni Shrine when that individual could become the next Prime Minister in the election for president of the Liberal Democratic Party.

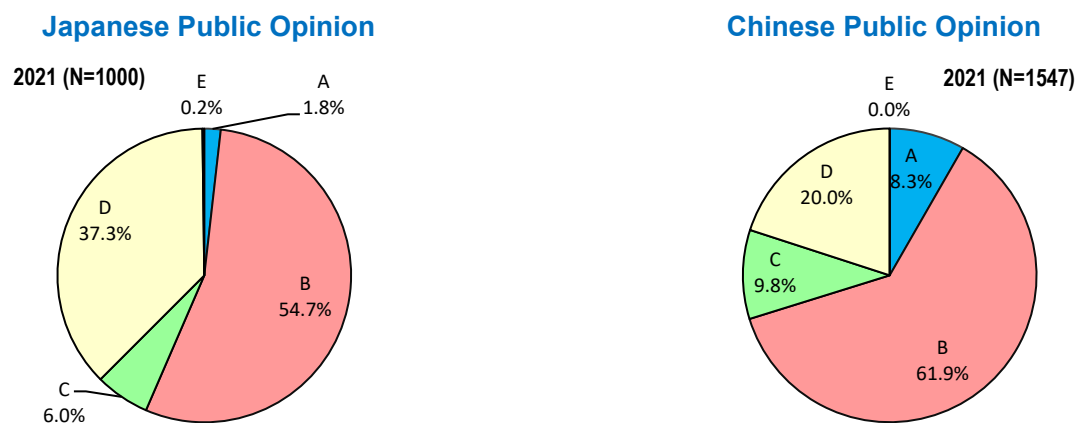
Among Chinese respondents, many in their 20s and 40s felt a worsening in their impression of Japan, however, a large percentage of people in those two age groups selected the behavior of Japanese politicians as the underlying reason for their poor impression of Japan, suggesting that this has become another factor.

### **Chinese are looking to Russia, but have no leadership expectations**

This year's survey revealed the impact of the conflict between the US and China on the opinions of

people in China and Japan from various perspectives.

First, as Figure 5 shows, 61.9% of Chinese respondents stated that the conflict was having a deleterious impact on the Japan-China relationship (from 52.1% last year), with 54.7% of Japanese respondents answering the same (from 44.4% last year), an approximately 10-point annual rise in both survey groups.

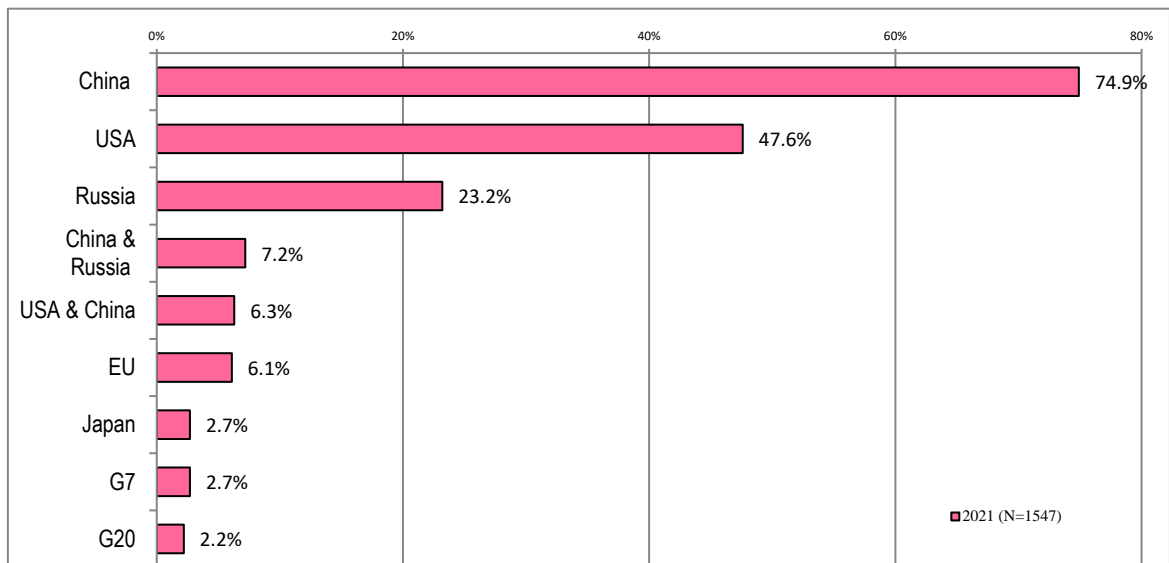


**Figure 5: Impact of the U.S.-China tension on Japan-China relations**

Anxiety regarding the US-China friction is driving a major transformation in the Chinese consciousness. For example, the overwhelming majority of Japanese respondents at 59.4% stated that they believe the most important country for their own country's future is the US. In comparison, more than half of Chinese respondents at 50.8% selected Russia as the most important country, a more than 10-point rise over last year's 39.6%.

Chinese respondents selecting the US stood at 22.4%, a relatively insubstantial change over the 23.6% selecting the US last year. That being said, while more than half of Chinese respondents see Russia as important, that did not necessarily lead to any expectations regarding Russian leadership in stabilizing the international order in the future. Regarding that topic, many Chinese respondents still expect the US to play a leading role.

In response to the question about who should be taking a leadership role in maintaining future stability within the international order (Figure 6), 74.9% of Chinese respondents selected their own country, China, and 47.6% selected the US. Russia was selected by 23.2% of respondents, and only 7.2% selected "China and Russia."

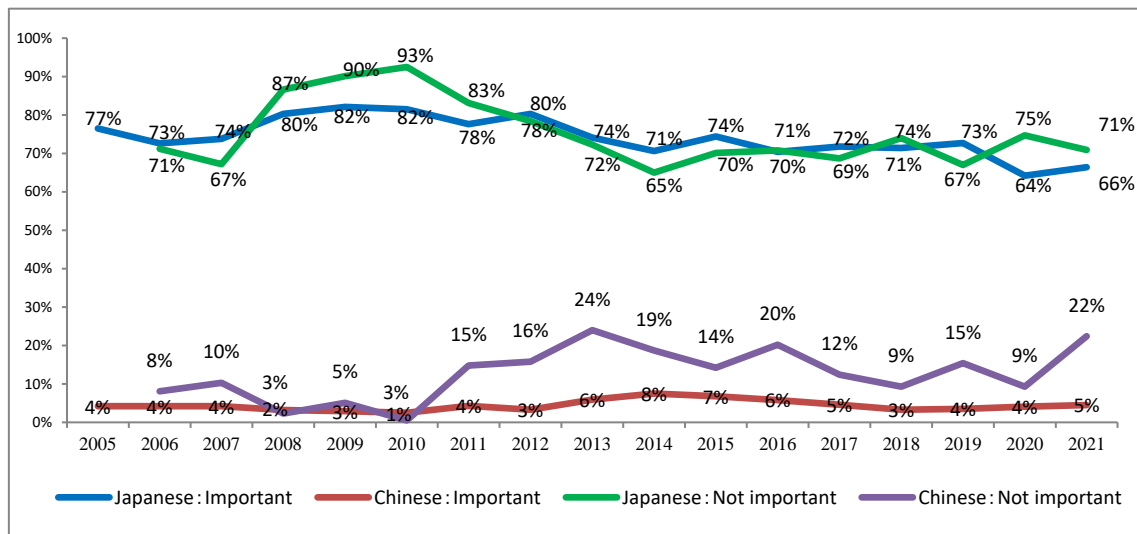


**Figure 6: Countries/regions that the Chinese people feel should take a leadership role in maintaining the stability of the international order**

**With the continued tension between the US and China, Japan's waning influence is reducing its presence in the minds of Chinese citizens**

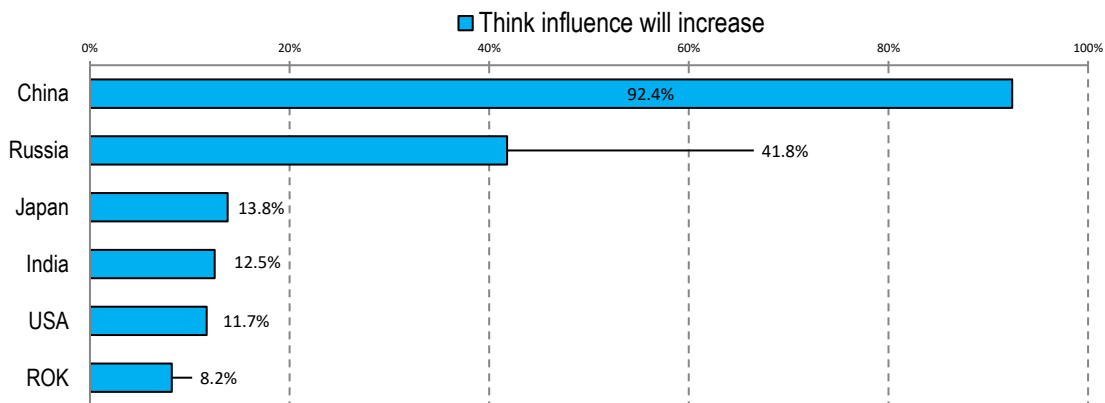
Here we focus on Chinese people's awareness of Japan. In the 2018 survey, 18.2% of Chinese respondents selected Japan as the country that had the most important relationship with their own. However, that was the highest Japan ever reached in this question, and it has continued to drop with this year's percentage being half that of last year at 5.8%.

In addition, while 70.9% of Chinese respondents still believe the relationship with Japan is important (Figure 7), the number of respondents who believe it is unimportant rose from 9.3% last year to 22.4% this year. This is the highest ratio for this response since it reached 24% during the Senkaku Islands dispute in 2013. In contrast, 66.4% of Japanese respondents see the relationship with China as important, a slight increase from 64.2% last year.



**Figure 7: Importance of Japan-China Relations – Survey data from 2005 to 2021**

Asked which country would expand its influence over the next decade (Figure 8), 92.4% of Chinese respondents answered that their own country would increase its influence, while 13.8% selected Japan, and only 11.7% selected the US. In fact, 48.1% – the most common answer – believe that US influence will fall.



**Figure 8: Countries that the Chinese people think will increase their influence over the next decade**

The slight decline in the importance of Japan to the Chinese people is thought to be a reaction to Japan's increased cooperation with the US as it clashes with China, and Japan's lack of distinctiveness and loss of influence in Asia. Another factor is thought to be that it hides behind the US in policy-making, making it difficult for Chinese people to see what Japan is doing. The impact of the US-China conflict has drastically reduced Chinese affinity towards the US over the last year, but when comparing the importance of the Japan-China and US-China relationships, the percentage

of Chinese people seeing the Japan-China relationship as more important has halved from 14.8% last year to 7.4%, while the US-China relationship is seen as more important to slightly more people than last year, rising from 22.2% to 25%.

### **Increased threat from Japan rooted in US-Japan attempts to hem in China**

Here we clarify what people in both countries think about the US-China conflict and where their concerns lie.

First, 81.8% of Chinese people see the US as the cause of the conflict between the US and China, a percentage that remains unchanged since last year. In comparison, 43.8% of Japanese respondents see both China and the US as being at fault, this being the most selected answer, with the next highest being China at 32.8%. Those selecting China rose 10 points from 23.2% last year.

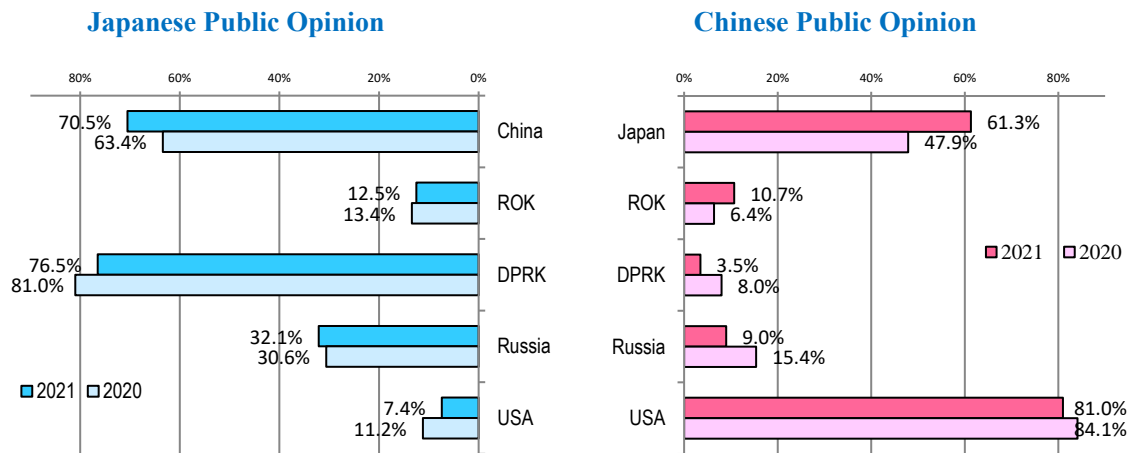
Regarding the future of the US-China conflict, fewer people in both countries answered optimistically that they believe it will be resolved soon. More took the pessimistic view that the conflict will be prolonged, with 31.9% of Chinese respondents and 23.4% of Japanese respondents selecting that response, making it the most selected answer in both countries.

However, less than 10% in either country see the conflict overall as being on the same scale as a “new Cold War.” There is a slight difference in temperament regarding the impact of the US-China conflict on the world order, with 50.6% of Chinese respondents expecting that US-China cooperation will recover or that the two countries will be able to co-exist under common rules even if the conflict continues. This demonstrates a slightly more optimistic take than in Japan, where 39.3% of respondents selected the same answers. Also, while 22.4% of Chinese respondents answered “I don’t know” regarding the impact, 32.8% of those in Japan answered the same.

It is in national security that people’s anxiety is rising in respect to the structure of the US-China conflict. The widespread view in China is that as the conflict continues, Japan will cooperate militarily with the US.

In both Japan and China, we do not see a dramatic increase since last year in the percentages of people who answered that they see another country as a military threat (Figure 8), with 68.9% in Japan and 51.1% in China, but in both countries, the sense of overall threat felt towards the other country has increased. In Japan, 70.5% of people see China as a threat, an increase over 63.4% last year. This is the first time this response has passed 70% since the question was introduced in 2015, and it is close to the 76.6% of people who see North Korea as a threat.

In last year's survey, there was a large drop in people who saw Japan as a threat, this number having fallen to 47.9%, but this has rebounded this year, with the percentage now at 61.3%.

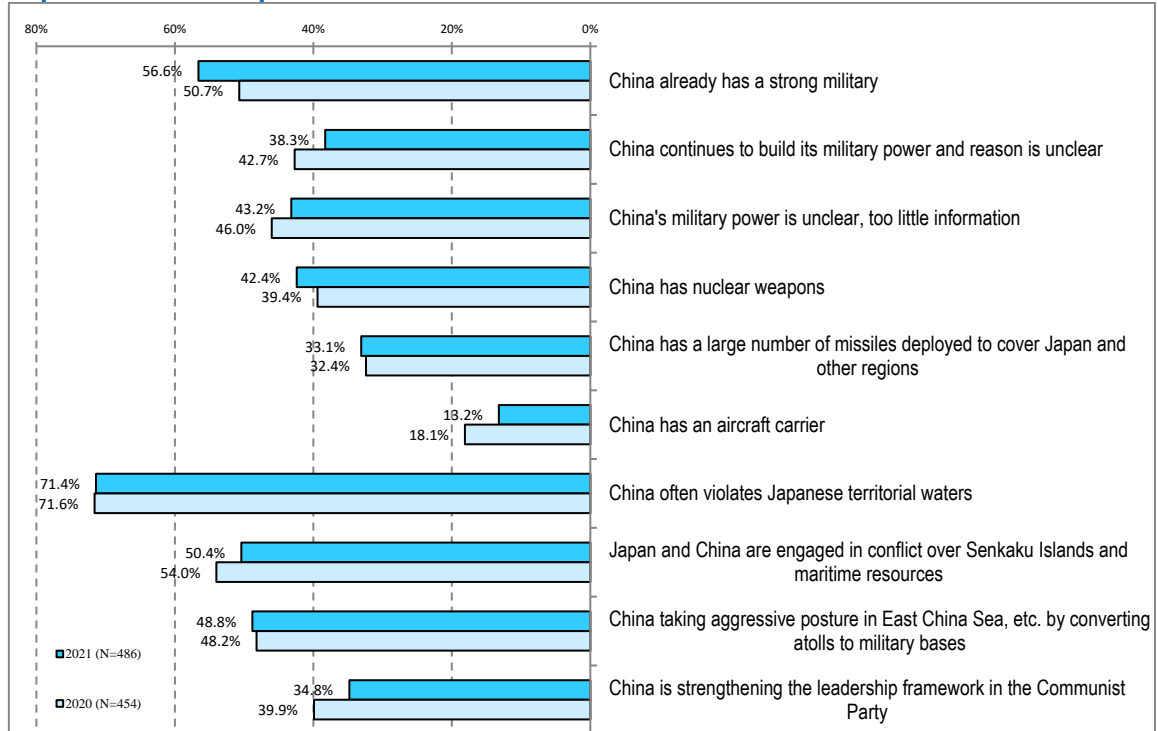


**Figure 8: Which country is a threat? (Among respondents who see another country as a threat)**

The most selected reasons why Japanese people see an increased threat in China were China's incursions into territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, etc. and the strength of Chinese military power, following by the lack of clear information from China, and a lack of understanding of China's objectives (Figure 9).

Meanwhile in China, the idea that Japan is cooperating with the US to hem in China was the most selected reason for the increased sense of threat from Japan at 70.3%, an increase from 64.9% last year.

## Japanese Public Opinion



## Chinese Public Opinion

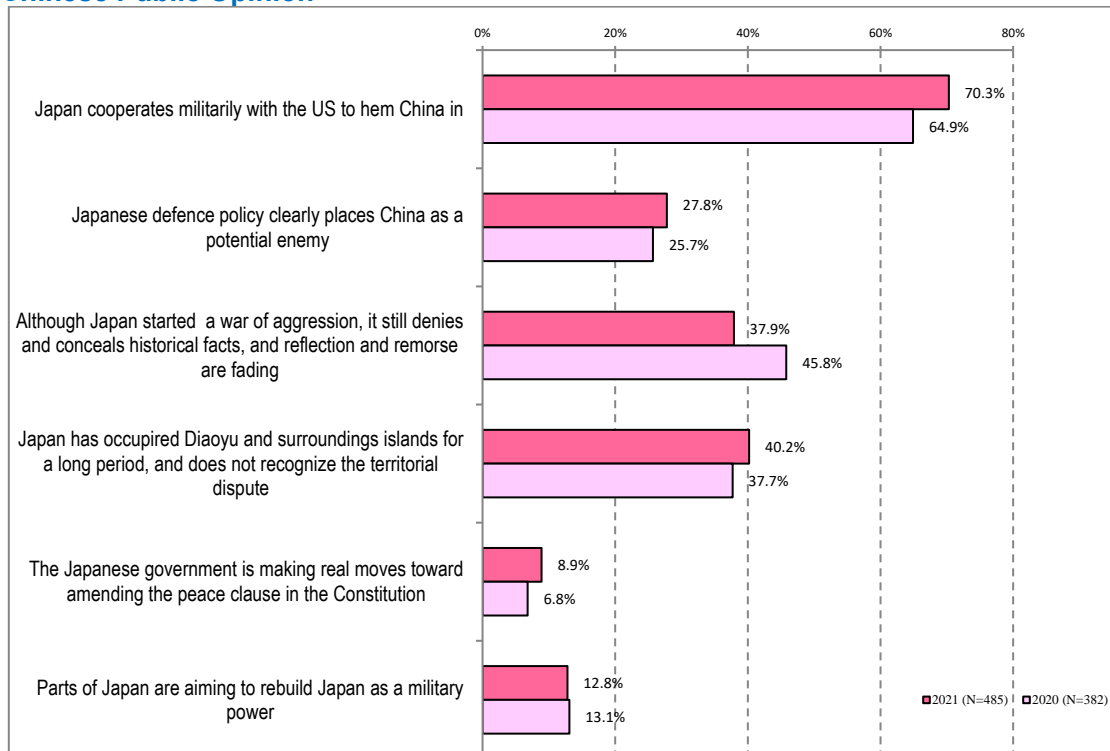


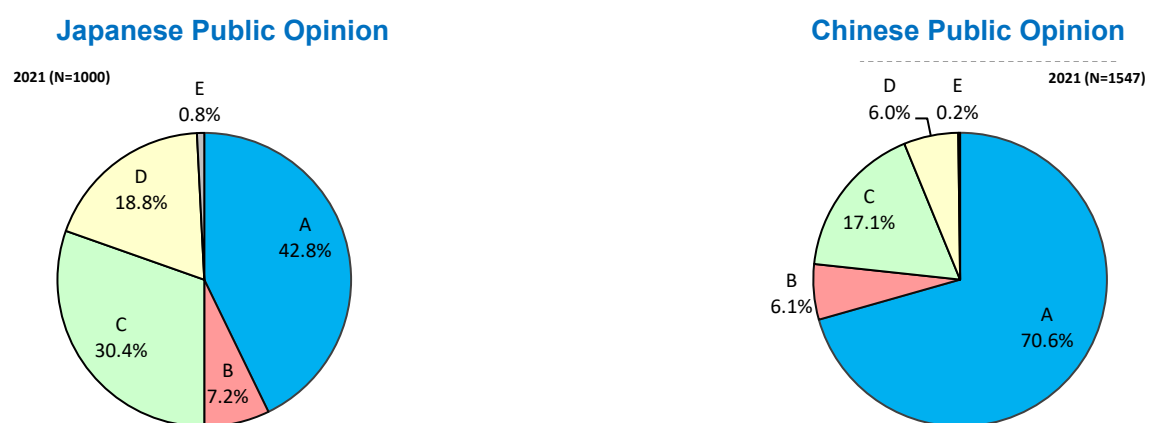
Figure 9. Reason for perceiving military threat in other country

Finally, the percentage of people who see the Taiwan Strait as a potential hotspot for military conflict in East Asia has rapidly increased over the last year, rising to 13.4% of Japanese respondents (from 6.6% last year) and 39.6% of Chinese respondents (from 35.6% last year.) However, when asked if they believe that conflict in the region is imminent, those who answered in the affirmative stood at 30.1% in China and 22% in Japan. While that is an increase over the numbers in Japan for last year (at 18.6%), it shows a drop in China (from 34.4%).

### People in both countries still have expectations for bilateral relations even with the ongoing US-China conflict

The conflict between the US and China has led to increased anxiety and tension, but although the situation remains unstable, respondents in both countries still have expectations for future Japan-China relations and cooperation between the two countries. This is another characteristic of this survey that has appeared from the many questions asked.

For example, one question (Figure 10) asked whether Japan and China should build a new relationship based in cooperation in order to stabilize the world economy and bring peace to East Asia. An overwhelming majority of Chinese respondents, 70.6%, answered yes, and this answer was also most selected in Japan at 42.8%.

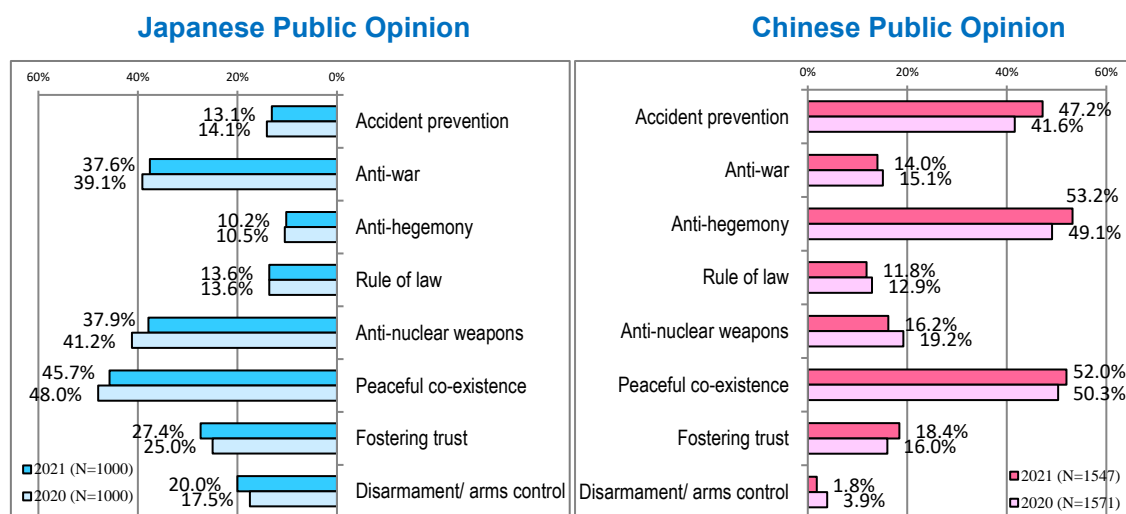


**Figure 10. Should a new partnership be built in order to achieve a stable order?**

Asked whether Japan-China economic cooperation would be important for the future of their own country, 75.4% of Chinese respondents and 69.8% of Japanese respondents answered in the affirmative.

A majority of people in both countries agree that Japan and China should cooperate in handling Asian issues, at 56.5% in Japan and 76.2% in China. They are also in agreement about the challenges that the two countries should work together to face for the future of East Asia. Peace and cooperative development were the two most commonly selected goals that people in both countries feel that Japan and China should share and work to achieve. In Japan, 53.8% of respondents selected peace, with 54.6% selecting peace in China, while cooperative development was selected by 33.1% and 55.8% of Japanese and Chinese respondents respectively.

In Japan, the top three perspectives seen as being needed to avoid conflict and achieve sustainable peace in Asia (Figure 11) were “peaceful co-existence” at 45.7%, “anti-nuclear weapons” at 37.9%, and “anti-war” at 37.6%. In China, “anti-hegemony” stood at 53.2%, “peaceful co-existence” at 52%, and “accident prevention” at 47.2%. This year’s survey revealed that although the situation in Northeast Asia is tense, people in both China and Japan hope the two countries can achieve peaceful co-existence, prevent accidents, and avoid war.



**Figure 11. Agreements and policies needed for sustainable peace in Northeast Asia**

The survey also that 71.6% of Chinese respondents and 42.5% of Japanese respondents believe a multilateral framework is needed to discuss conflict avoidance and other issues facing Northeast Asia. Moreover, 43.4% of Japanese people and 37.7% of Chinese people believe that the Japan-China Maritime and Air Communication Mechanism established in 2018 is insufficient.

## People in both countries seek cooperation rather than conflict as the US-China friction continues

What we should be considering is how Japan and China should respond to the current bilateral situation as the US-China conflict continues. This essential question was asked last year and this year as well.

First, we asked respondents how, as the impact of the US-China conflict increases, how should Japan and China approach the situation (Figure 12)? In Japan, those who responded that Japan should “act in concert with its ally the US” rose to 21.5%. While 33.6% of people responded that they did not what should be done, we still find that almost 45% of Japanese respondents hope for increased cooperation between Japan and China, with 33.7% wanting to promote Japan-China cooperation while minimizing the impact of the US-China conflict, and 11.1% hoping to increase Japan-China cooperation regardless of the state of the conflict between the US and China.

There is a similar range of opinion in China. Almost a third of Chinese respondents, 30.4%, think that Japan should act in concert with the US, while almost half, with a combined total of 48.4% believing that China should promote and increase cooperation with Japan, either through minimizing the impact of the US-China conflict or disregarding it altogether.

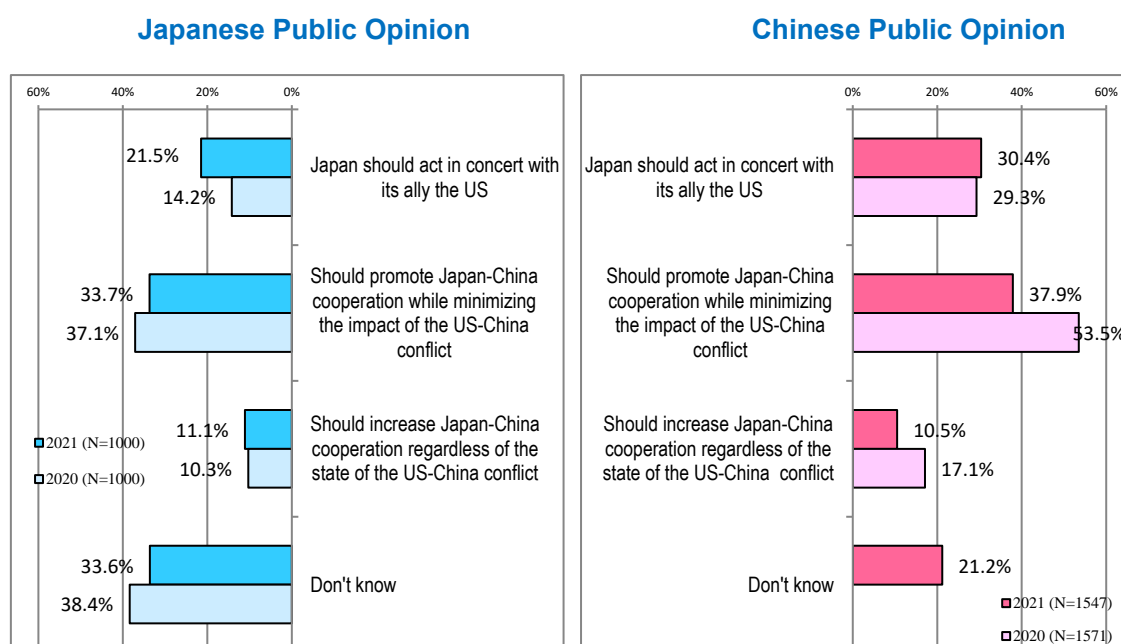
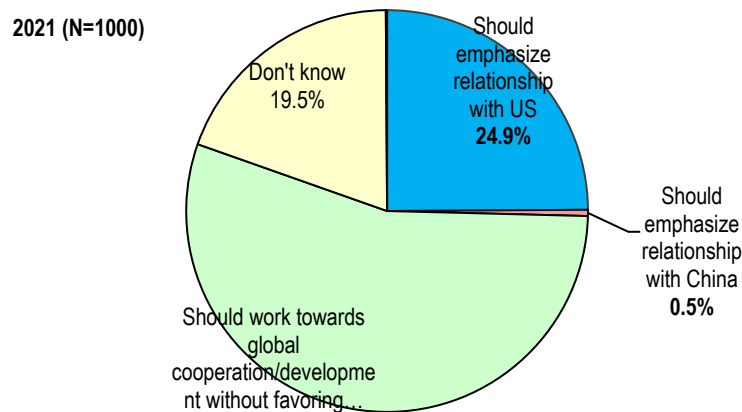


Figure 12. – Japan-China cooperation under the ongoing US-China friction

As with last year, we are only hearing about the Japanese position under the US-China conflict through Japanese surveys. There, 24.9% of Japanese respondents believe it is important to emphasize the relationship with the US, an increase from 20.3% last year (Figure 13).

Again, this year's survey mirrored last year's, with the most common response being that Japan should work towards global cooperation and development without favoring either the US or China, with 55% of respondents (compared to 58.4% last year.)

What this year's survey shows is that, under the shadow of the friction between the US and China, people in both Japan and China are looking more towards cooperation than conflict.



**Figure 13. What should Japan's position be under the continued US-China conflict?**

### **With next year being the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of Japan-China relations, both countries must find a path towards the future**

The actions of both Japan and China have a decisive impact on peace and prosperity in Asia. It is for this reason that, with increased change and tension in Asia due to the US-China conflict, both countries must find the path they can take to find a better future. However, there is currently no diplomatic dialogue working towards such efforts, and each country sees the other only in terms of the military threat to national security, which has led to the current volatility in public opinion.

Next year will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. If both governments do not attempt to build a new bilateral relationship before then, and if they do not work towards creating goals to achieve that, public opinion in both countries will remain uncertain.

## Survey Methodology

The Genron NPO and China International Publishing Group conducted joint opinion polls targeting the citizens of Japan and China late August to mid-September in 2021. This survey has been administered annually since 2005, when Japan-China relations were at its worst. This year marks the 17th year that this poll has been conducted. The objective of the survey is to continuously monitor the state of mutual understanding and perceptions of the Japanese and Chinese public towards one another as well as the changes that ensue over time.

The opinion poll in Japan was administered through the placement method (in which the survey was hand-delivered to homes and then collected) between August 21 and September 12, targeting men and women in the age of 18 or more. A total of 1,000 valid responses were obtained. Respondents were 48.6% male and 51.4% female. The age range consisted of 2.5% under the age of 20, 11.8% between the ages of 20 and 29, 14.9% between the ages of 30 and 39, 17.3% between the ages of 40 and 49, 14.8% between the ages of 50 and 59 and 38.7% over the age of 60. The educational background of respondents were 5.2 % junior high school diploma and under, 48.4% high school diploma, 19.8% junior/technical college diploma, 23.6% bachelor's degree, and 1.8% master's degree or higher.

The opinion poll in China was administered through individual interviews between August 25 and September 25, targeting men and women in the age of 18 or more in 10 cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Shenyang, Wuhan, Nanjing, Xi'an, Qingdao and Zhengzhou. A total of 1,547 valid responses were obtained. Respondents were 49.8% male and 50.2% female. The age range consisted of 1.9 % under the age of 20, 22.3% between the ages of 20 and 29, 21.6% between the ages of 30 and 39, 26.8% between the ages of 40 and 49, 9.9% between the ages of 50 and 59, and 17.5% above the age of 60. The educational background of respondents were 12.7% junior high school diploma and under, 25.3% high school/technical high school diploma, 28.2% technical college diploma, 31.9% bachelor's degree, 0.2% double degree, and 1.7% master's degree or higher.

\*Percentages may not add up to 100% in some cases as the numbers here are rounded off to one decimal point and non-responses are not included.

About The Genron NPO

In Cooperation With:

Japan: Public Opinion Research Center

China: The China International Publishing Group (CIPG),  
Horizon Research Consultancy Group

**Edited by**

Yasushi Kudo      President, The Genron NPO

**Editorial Assistant:**

Yuho Nishimura      Director, The Genron NPO

< Please send all inquiries about this survey to the address below >

**Authorized Non-profit Organization, The Genron NPO**

LAUNCH 5F, 3-7-6 Nihonbashiningyocho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo Japan 103-0013

[info@genron-npo.net](mailto:info@genron-npo.net)