



Miss Takako Sakaki (left) on a visit to China

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### Japan's veteran of 'citizen-diplomacy'

*While Japan's Prime Minister Abe wrestles with improving relations in East Asia, Geoffrey Craig meets an 88 year-old Japanese who has made 80 visits to China.*

Within two weeks of becoming Prime Minister last September, Shinzo Abe made his first official visits: to China and South Korea. For good reasons. China's booming economy is increasing competition for resources and markets. Security concerns over North Korea and Taiwan are ever-present. Improving relations in the region is of prime importance for the world, especially as 20th century tensions between Japan and her neighbours have not been fully resolved.

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In March this year, just before Premier Wen Jiabao was to make the first State visit by a Chinese leader since 2000, Abe triggered a storm with his denials that the Japanese military had been involved in coercing up to 200,000 'comfort women' into brothels during World War II. Backing down, Abe repeated an earlier government's apology, admitting the military was indirectly responsible.

Though the Chinese visit went smoothly, Premier Wen Jiabao pointedly commented: 'Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for past history and wins over the trust of the people in Asia... can take greater responsibility in the international community.'

Some Japanese have tried. In 1996, on the 50th anniversary of Japan's surrender, the Socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama acknowledged that Japanese aggression had caused 'tremendous damage and suffering'. In 1999, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi offered an apology for its 35-year colonial rule of South Korea.

As early as 1950, Japanese parliamentarians spoke in both houses of the US Congress, saying they were 'sincerely sorry for Japan's big mistake' after visiting the Initiatives of Change conference centre in Caux, Switzerland.

Then there are numerous citizen initiatives for peace. Miss Takako Sakaki, for instance – a spry 88 year old. Having witnessed the devastation of war 60 years ago, her passion now is to see Japan serve and care for its neighbours.

She has made over 80 visits to China. Her first visit, however, had a completely different purpose. As a young woman, she travelled to Japanese-occupied Manchuria, carrying letters of encouragement written by elementary school children to the Japanese troops.

It was not till almost 40 year later – when diplomatic relations were restored in 1978 – that she could return.

In those intervening years, Sakaki had become a national trade unionist and a politician. When the National Railways Trade Union was established in 1946, Sakaki was appointed head of the Women's Section with around 100,000 members. In 1955 she was elected as a city councillor in Urawa City and in →



1971, a member of the Saitama Prefectural Assembly, north of Tokyo.

In 1957 she attended an international conference of Moral Re-Armament (as Initiatives of Change was formerly known) in America. It was a turning point. Mixing with people from around the world, she caught a vision of what Japan could contribute in service, friendship and care for other Asian nations.



But it was only on her return to China in 1978, that she 'realized the devastation caused by the War'. She had gone as a member of a delegation from the Saitama Assembly. Returning to North-East China, where she had been in 1939, she found some reconstruction taking place. 'But the effects of the War were still visible. While Japan had also been destroyed in the war, I knew that Japan had been the cause of this destruction in China. I felt most strongly that we must work to establish peace. In order to do this we had to establish real friendship with our neighbouring countries.'

Thus began her many visits to China. They led to a twinning relationship between Saitama Prefecture and Shanxi Province 25 years ago, and between Saitama City and Zhengzhou City.

## **'Many Japanese are still indifferent to foreigners. We have to change this...'**

As well as official delegations, Sakaki organized private exchanges. She believes good relations have to be established at the grass roots. With groups in Saitama, she raised money to build elementary schools in rural China. And she established a Japanese language school in her home city to cater for Chinese students.

'After normal relations were restored between Japan and China there was a boom in Chinese wanting to study Japanese. Some people here started schools just to make money. I wanted to make sure that Chinese students got a good education. When young Chinese come to Japan they face many difficulties: how to

find housing and make friends, the different customs and language, the high cost of living. We should not provide everything... but we should take care of them. I have established a network of friends who give support to these young Chinese.'

Many of them return to see her years later, having graduated from Japanese universities. Recently Sakaki was approached by a Japanese who offered a good price to buy her school, but she sold it to a Chinese buyer at a lower price, believing the school would be in better hands.

However, memories of the War with Japan go deep. Sakaki is candid about the opposition that she finds and goes out of her way to meet those who show it.

'Some years ago at a conference in Korea, a lady in the Chinese delegation was in the next room and did not seem keen to talk to me. (I discovered later that a relative of hers had been killed by the Japanese.) I decided to get to know her even though we could not speak each other's language. I met her again in China the following year – while others in my group visited a museum, we spent two hours communicating through written characters common to Chinese and Japanese. Our friendship deepened further. Through this experience I realized we have to continue giving our hearts to the Chinese people. Many Japanese are still indifferent to foreigners. We have to change this tendency.'

Today, Sakaki is inspiring a younger generation with her ideals and practices. She talks about a young mayor from Henan Province whom she met at a banquet during his visit in Japan. 'He was fascinated with my experiences and invited me to his city. I went. And he took me to some areas under development, asking my advice on certain points. I found out the following year that he had implemented all of them.'

Another young man she helped was the Chairman of the Shanghai Youth Federation. He has gone on to other leading positions but always makes time to see her whenever she visits Shanghai.

Younger Japanese also share her commitment to build better relations with other Asian countries. Kiyoshi Nagano, Executive Director of IofC-Japan has travelled with Sakaki to China. 'Wherever I go in Asia I meet people who have some negative feelings towards Japan,' says Nagano. 'However, I find that spending time with them with a humble attitude gives an opportunity to build bridges.'

Another travelling companion to China, Hisako Takahashi, is a Tokyo housewife and an IofC-Japan board member. 'We hope for a peaceful society,' she says, 'where people support each other in a generous spirit. We can bring this about by living true to ourselves and feeling the joy of loving others. And by passing this attitude on to our children.'