Phi Alpha Theta Pacific Northwest Conference, 8–10 April 2021

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Abstract: The *Zenrin gakusei kaikan* incident (善隣学生会館事件) in 1967 was a major street fight between left-wing student rioters from the Japanese Communist Party and the ethnic Chinese community in Tokyo. The open fighting lasted three days and at its peak involved upwards to seven hundred people from both sides. In the grand scheme of the global “long 1968,” this one particular brawl perhaps did not amount to much, and is generally forgotten in today’s scholarship. However, it is unique as a point of intersection between three separate historical processes: Japan’s student movement, China’s Cultural Revolution, and the diplomatic normalization between the two countries. By situating this incident as the centre of the story instead of the periphery of these larger movements, this paper is an exercise in transnationalism, hoping to illustrate the impressive degree of exchange of people and ideas between China and Japan, even in the most seemingly improbable times.

Bad Neighbours: The 1967 Zenrin Student Hall Incident
And Transnational Student Radicalism in China and Japan

Jesse Du

Underneath the chill, sunny sky of a March afternoon sat the drab five-story building of the “Good Neighbour Student Hall.” The fluttering slogan banners and red drapes hanging out from the upper-story windows could not conceal the fact that this was a structure woefully behind the times. Technically it had five stories, but the fifth was really just the top of a corner tower jutting above the main building, which only had four floors. The overall construction could be aptly described as a giant chunk of reinforced concrete, with a comically small traditional East Asian roofing slapped on top almost as an afterthought. Clearly, the original architect was trying to copy the Imperial Crown Style of eclectic architecture popular before the war. Perhaps, when it was first completed, the building had once commanded some degree of respect, but now, in the spring of 1967, it could do nothing more than silently bearing witness to the impassioned folly of youth.

“Long Live the Great Helmsman Chairman Mao!”

“Be resolute, fear no sacrifice, and surmount every difficulty to win victory!”

From within the barricaded building came rhythmic chanting of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*. The walls of the entryway were plastered with portraits of the Chairman and big-character posters condemning the evils of imperialism, revisionism, and reaction. Outside, the student hall was surrounded by hundreds of rioters armed with two-by-fours and metal bars, who shouted back slogans such as “Great power-ism get out!” A line of police officers stood by in the distance, almost helplessly, and did nothing as a group of helmeted youth suddenly sprang forward from the besieging crowd and rushed the building’s front entrance. At the same time, another group had been climbing into the building through first-floor windows in the back. The commotion from this coordinated assault quickly drowned out the chanting. The tables and other furniture acting as makeshift barricades in the entryway were

smashed and overturned, but the attackers were immediately met with frantic blasts from water hoses and fire extinguishers. The battle soon descended into close-quarters mêlée within the tight hallways of the building's ground floor. Nothing more could be seen from outside as the crowd swarmed the entrance. From within the concrete building came the cacophony of shouting, cussing, metal and wood clashing, and painful screaming.

Such scenes were by no means uncommon in 1967. Just a little less than a year earlier, the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution had begun in China and quickly descended into chaos as ideological students flowed onto the streets of Beijing, eager to defeat the elusive "enemies of the revolution." By March 1967, the entire country had fallen into anarchy as radical Red Guards overthrew local governments and communist party organizations; the resulting power vacuum often led to brutal fighting between rival Red Guard factions. Compared to later years, this early period of the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1968) featured the most intense outburst of collective violence and caused profound direct damage to all aspects of Chinese society and politics.[1]

However, the opening scenes at the drab little building did not happen in communist China, but on the streets of Tokyo, Japan, the heart of capitalism and Cold War liberalism in Asia.

The Cultural Revolution in China, the 1960s' student movement in Japan, and the diplomatic normalization between Beijing and Tokyo — these are all well-studied subjects by themselves, but what are the relations between them? At a first glance, there seems to be none, other than the mere chronological fact that they all took place somewhere between the mid-1960s

and early-1970s. The great social upheavals in China and Japan, although both championed by idealist young students, were driven by very different catalysts and carried very different dynamics. The normalization of relations between the two countries, on the other hand, was largely facilitated by pragmatic diplomats and businessmen, much removed from the ideological turmoil on the streets. However, upon closer examination, the mutual impact and influence between these seemingly disparate historical processes become obvious. At times, their powerful interplays even collide into one another, reaching ferocious climaxes and resulting in unexpected ramifications.

The events that took place at the drab little building in early 1967 is the perfect example of such a transnational collision. For a brief while, the "Good Neighbour Student Hall Incident" — in Japanese as *Zenrin gakusei kaikan jiken* and in Chinese as *Shànlín xuéshēng huìguǎn shìjiàn* — occupied headlines in newspapers across Japan and China, and even came onto the CIA's radar.[2] At a time when the free movement of people did not exist between communist China and capitalist Japan, this extraordinary street fight somehow saw the direct involvement of Chinese Red Guards, Japanese communists, young students of both nationalities, and the two countries' governments. This unique incident was the combined result of all three historical processes mentioned above, and would go on to play a nontrivial role in each one's development. However, its significance was eclipsed by the madness of the Cultural Revolution in China and a series of much higher-profile civil unrests in Japan later that year. Then, just as suddenly as it erupted, the conflict over a student dormitory soon faded into the background of a turbulent, so-called "long 1968." As a story that straddles the national histories of both China and Japan, it cannot be easily delineated through the perspective of just one, and is thus conveniently silenced by both. Today, it is nothing more than a footnote in most Japanese histories of the 1960s'

student movement, and essentially absent in Chinese books on Cultural Revolution-era diplomacy. The fascinating story of the Zenrin Student Hall is only one of the many victims of the nation-centred historiography dominant in East Asia. By rediscovering this forgotten tale, this paper hopes to illustrate the impressive degree of transnational exchange that exists between China and Japan, even in the most seemingly improbable times.

The effect of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society and politics is without question comprehensively devastating, but the Cultural Revolution was not merely a domestic affair. The diplomatic service, while relatively sheltered from the Red Guards' violent uprisings, was not at all exempt from the revolutionary fervor that swept through the whole country. Under the policy of "exporting revolution," the Chinese government for much of the late-1960s actively sought to foment Maoist subversion in foreign countries and openly "struggled" against foreign governments it labelled as "reactionary." While such extremist policies generally led to the deterioration of China's foreign relations and Chinese isolation from the international stage, in Asia — especially Japan — it was not without momentary success.[3]

From its very beginning, the student movement in Japan was heavily influenced by Maoism and saw the adoption of many Chinese political concepts, practices, and even slogans, so much so that it is sometimes inappropriately referred to as the "Japanese Cultural Revolution."[4] Today, Japanese historians generally agree that Japan as a nation was one of the most heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution.[5] At the time, even while the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) officially denounced the Cultural Revolution launched by its Chinese counterpart, many prominent leftists in Japan still expressed their loyalty to Beijing as the new centre of world communism. Young students, many disillusioned with the social fallout of

Japan's rapid economic growth and urbanization, were in particular attracted to the radical anti-establishment alternative offered by China, even if they understood little of Chinese politics and society.[6] Indeed, when university students stormed and occupied their campuses across Japan in 1968, it was not Miyamoto Kenji's portrait that was hung atop the main gates, but that of Mao Zedong. By rejecting the established communist party leadership and advocating for a return to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, these radical student activists would later collectively become known as the "New Left."[7]

Of course, the "Old Left" in Japan also did not sit idly by as its followers jumped ship. Despite the rise of New Left organizations that explicitly opposed it, the historic communist party still held some considerable sway among the student population. Its youth wing, the Democratic Youth League of Japan or *Minsei* for short, boasted more than two hundred thousand members nationwide in 1966.[8] Although the JCP had nominally abandoned militant action as party policy, it still maintained the right to "self-defence." Throughout the late-1960s, Minsei and its various New Left enemies in the Japanese student movement would engage in open conflict, both through rhetoric and with wooden clubs. As the ideological battlelines were being drawn, caught in between were the police, the socialists, the semi-official Chinese trade office in Tokyo, and the ethnic Chinese community. A confrontation was simply waiting to break out. The Cultural Revolution was coming to Japan.

In early 1967, as both the Cultural Revolution and the Japanese student movement were gearing up to escalate into their most intense phases, in the heart of old Tokyo right outside Koishikawa-Kōrakuen Garden, a simple four-story building would become the site of the first explosion of violence. The *Zenrin gakusei kaikan*, "Good Neighbour Student Hall," was a

dormitory for Chinese overseas students in Tokyo, but its story would prove to be anything but what the name suggests. First built in 1935 sponsored the then-Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, ownership of the student hall fell into question after the Second World War. Eventually, a decision was reached to keep the upper floors for the Chinese students who still remained in Japan, while the lower floors were refurbished as business space promoting Sino-Japanese cultural exchange. One of the tenants was the Japan-China Friendship Association (JCFA), whose national headquarters office was located in the west end of the first floor. However, when the JCP officially denounced the Cultural Revolution and entered into opposition against communist China, the once seemingly perfect arrangement in the building suddenly became problematic.

Most if not all of the Chinese students were ardent supporters of communist China and its Cultural Revolution, but the Friendship Association was run by the Japanese Communist Party. The awkward neighbours finally turned into violent neighbours on 28 February 1967, when an JCFA employee — allegedly — torn down one of the Chinese students' big-character posters (*dàzìbào*, a type of large-sized, handwritten political wallposters popular in China during the Cultural Revolution) in the building's entryway. Sometime after eleven o'clock, a dozen or so Chinese students came to the front door of the JCFA office and demanded an apology. Before anyone had figured out anything, a fistfight broke out. Either by pure circumstance or perhaps premeditation (as both sides would later accuse the other of), the fisticuff soon escalated into something much more serious. Both sides called in their reinforcements and simply refused to back down. The JCFA office phoned the JCP who quickly mobilized Minsei student troops armed with construction helmets and wood staves, while Japanese New Left allies came to the Chinese students' aid.[9]

By nightfall, barricades were set up, and the building was sieged, leading to the chaotic scenes described at the paper's opening. The incident lasted more than two days, with twenty or so participants injured, but its repercussions was much more far-reaching, and the number of parties involved almost disproportionate. At its peak, the number of Chinese students and their Japanese New Left allies inside the building totalled one hundred fifty, while the JCP had almost five hundred Minsei paramilitary members outside; two companies of riot police were called in; senior leaders of the JCP were on scene, and so was the head of the Chinese LT Trade Office in Tokyo.[10] For months after the incident, the two sides engaged in a fierce war of propaganda, with the Chinese government bringing the full force of its state machine to support the Chinese students. As the students and JCFA retreated to their respective floors, hostile confrontation between the neighbours continued for three more years as a lengthy legal battle ensued. In 1970, a settlement was finally reached between the JCFA and the student hall management whereby the former agreed to move out of the building.[11] Even today, key details in this incident still remain mysteries as the two sides maintained different narratives on what exactly happened. Who threw the first punch? Was the fight purposefully instigated by any side? The world will likely never know.

The fighting ended on the night of 2 March, but that was not the end of the story. In fact, the Zenrin Student Hall Incident, as it had quickly become known, would only go on to serve as the beginning of many stories. The incident marks the complete breakdown of relations between the Chinese and Japanese Communist Parties, and by extension the collapse of all previous efforts at rapprochement between the Chinese and Japanese governments. Within a solely Japanese context, the Zenrin Student Hall Incident is also notable for its role in the country's student movement, seeing the student activists mature and radicalize in their violent tactics as

they went into the year 1968. Many Chinese students involved in this struggle would later become prominent figures in the Overseas Chinese Youth Struggle Committee, an ethnic Chinese organization that would play its own crucial role in the history of Japan's New Left movement.

China's Cultural Revolution, Japan's student movement, and the peculiar diplomatic relations between the two countries — without any of these three happening the way it did, there would not have been a Zenrin Student Hall Incident. Just as the incident itself was the aggregated result of all these disparate processes intersecting, unsurprisingly then, it would take on different significance in each as they again diverged into their own paths. Such is the nature of history: on a grand scale, no single event is ever the result of a single cause. Instead, historical phenomena are usually the outcome of "multiple local, contingent, and conjunctural processes and happening jointly [coming] together."[12] The Zenrin Student Hall Incident is unique in that it is also markedly transnational. It is not situated solely within either Japanese or Chinese history, but bestrides both. On one side of the conflict is an internationalist party embroiled in the bitter division of world communism, while on the other is a people essentially stuck between two nations. Faced with such a story that defies traditional nation-state borders, one simply cannot fully understand the nuanced motivations for each side without devoting time and effort to study the various contextual processes behind them. This is no easy task, even if disregarding the obvious language barrier. This paper, in its rambling twenty thousand words, has only managed to outline the most basic course of events. Despite the micro-scale of the subject at hand, there exists a great depth of materials and perspectives that this paper simply cannot entirely cover. This remarkable incident simply involves so many distinct actors and groups across China and

Japan, each deserving their own separate analysis. It is perhaps impossible for any one person to have all the answers.

This is a particular dilemma of transnationalism, especially in the region of East Asia. The Zenrin Student Hall Incident is a part of both China and Japan's histories, but only on both of their peripheries. In a field where historiography has traditionally been defined by nation-state borders, those that exist on or near the border area, the periphery, are often left out of focus. From a nation-centred perspective, it is often difficult for the historian to observe the periphery clearly — one has to squint pretty hard to see what is going on over there. And good luck trying to look beyond the border, for those are no longer "your" history. There be dragons. Sadly, such phenomenon is especially common in East Asia, where the fabled "transnational turn" is still yet to arrive in its full force. Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, when East Asia turned to nationalism as the answer to Western imperialism, the study of history was transformed accordingly in service of the new nation-state.[13] Almost two hundred years later, the nationalist tradition still remains strong. Compared to other fields, East Asian history is woefully lacking in terms of transnational studies. In fact, the very concept of an "East Asian history," as opposed to, say, Chinese history or Japanese history, is relatively new.[14] In China, Japan, and Korea, the degree of interaction and dialogue between scholars of national histories is limited, while public understanding and education is still very much based around nation-states.[15] Despite rising interest in global history since the 1990s, nation-state-centred — and sometimes downright nationalist — historical outlooks still remain dominant.[16] The result is that unique transnational histories like that of the Zenrin Student Hall, instead of becoming subjects for both Chinese and Japanese histories, get ignored by both.

Ultimately, after more than fifty years, nobody really cares who threw the first punch when. Just as the fight was never really about the torn down poster, the incident at Zenrin Student Hall is worthy as a case study not for its significance in paramilitary history (although it did play a role in it), but for its part in the greater history of transnational student radicalism between China and Japan. At the intersection of histories, a tangle of storylines, events such as the Zenrin Student Hall Incident are testaments that ideas and actions, even if taking place only inside one building, are constantly receiving and generating reverberations across nation-state borders, and indeed across different historical processes. The transnational lens has long been used to examine the global student movement of the long 1968, but even though Maoism's influence on Japan is widely acknowledged, little work has been done to review the interactions between the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Japanese student movement. One may not think that there was much going on, in a time of severed relations and frozen contact, but transnationalism is not merely defined by physical movement. Hopefully, this paper has demonstrated that the late-1960s was in fact a period of intense cross-border influence between China and Japan, featuring interactive social transformation in different arenas, and deserving of its own place in the history of Sino-Japanese relations.

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[6] Oguma Eiji, "What Was and Is '1968'?: Japanese Experience in Global Perspective," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 16, no.11 (2018), https://apjjf.org/2018/11/Oguma.html.

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[13] Q. Edward Wang, “Re-Presenting Asia on the Global Stage: The Rise of Global History Studies in East Asia,” in *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice Around the World*, ed. Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 45–66.

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