Summary

This study presents a reinterpretation of Japan’s official responses toward China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue from 1985 to 2007.

In the current literature of Sino-Japanese relations, the Yasukuni controversy has often been regarded as being influenced by unique factors within the bilateral relations. It is generally taken for granted that Japan’s official responses to China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue are determined by individual, social-ideological and foreign strategic factors. This study emphasizes that these conventional interpretations do not provide a forward-looking and internally consistent account to the variation of Japan’s responses to China’s pressure over the issue. The author particularly seeks to answer why some Japanese Prime Ministers, such as Nakasone Yasuhiro, Hashimoto Ryutaro and Abe Shinzo, who had consistently advocated the official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, complied with China’s pressure after they took office, but not Koizumi Junichiro, who had not been enthusiastic over the Yasukuni visits prior to taking office.

This study introduces an alternative interpretation of Japan’s official responses toward China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue by applying a political survival approach. It argues that the domestic political legitimacy of an individual leader or the ruling party is a vital factor that determines Japan’s official responses to China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue. I demonstrate that such a fundamental rational
calculation on how to respond to China’s pressure, by spontaneously calculating the cost-benefit utility, with regard to office-seeking in domestic politics existed within the Nakasone administration in 1985-86. A stable domestic support to the Nakasone administration constituted a precondition for Nakasone to make decisions based on his individual preference. I also demonstrate that such a calculation existed within the Hashimoto administration in 1996. As the central executive of a coalition government, Hashimoto faced furious objections from both ruling parties: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). A concession toward China’s demand would not undermine Hashimoto’s political survival in the domestic table, but would contribute to the stability of the coalition government and the LDP’s campaign for the upcoming election. Finally, I demonstrate that both the Koizumi and Abe administrations between 2001 and 2007 responded to Chinese pressure over the Yasukuni issue based on a similar domestic calculation with a more assertive approach. Suffering from weak support within the LDP in terms of traditional faction power at the beginning of his term, Koizumi strategically utilized the Yasukuni issue gradually by demonstrating a resolute stance against China’s pressure. This stance, in return, helped Koizumi seek potential political allies within the LDP and maintain high levels of public support. The Yasukuni problem was politicized and linked to the political survival of Koizumi and his long term blueprint on domestic structural reform. Similarly, Abe strategically utilized the Yasukuni issue for consolidating the foundation of his domestic political survival. By complying with China’s demand in an ambiguous manner, Abe was able to improve the deteriorating bilateral relations caused by Koizumi’s annual Yasukuni visits. This policy change, in return, helped avoid liberal criticism within the LDP during the presidential election in 2006 and helped him consolidate his superiority within the LDP by gaining further public support.

This study’s findings also demonstrate the broader applicability of the political survival approach developed in the theoretical field of international relations (IR) studies. Japan has often been treated as a unique country in terms of historical and cultural characteristics. This study, by contrast, implies that Japanese prime ministers act just like national leaders in any other countries, responding toward foreign pressure by calculating costs and benefits in terms of domestic political survival.

**Thesis Supervisor:** Prof. Amako Satoshi