

CUS

emperor

gise?

dark period of history between the two countries.

And it is the worry that he may be forced to make a humiliating apology on behalf of his late father that has prompted Japanese conservatives to oppose the visit.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry is understood to want to use the trip to bring the curtain down on an unsavoury episode in history and open a new chapter in bilateral relations.

But analysts say that there is a question mark over the sentiments of the Chi-

nese people towards the visit.

"Even though the Chinese leadership appears to be positive about the trip, the reaction of the Chinese population is not clear," says Professor Mitsuyuki Kagami of Aichi University.

Indeed, Japanese officials need not be reminded that the visit by the emperor — and the statements he is expected to make while in China — will be monitored with great interest throughout Asia.

Prof Kagami warns that it is fallacious for Tokyo to presume that the trip could turn the page on Japan's wartime atroci-

ties in China.

Although, as with other Asian countries, Japan has long since legally settled the issue of war reparations with the Chinese government, Beijing has not discouraged civilian claims for compensation against Tokyo.

Compared with the question of peace-keeping operations, however, public debate in Japan over the proposed visit has been relatively muted.

Despite this, Professor Mineo Nakajima, a noted China scholar, thinks that the split in public opinion over the visit may be even deeper than the one over the dispatch of Japanese troops on United Nations peace-keeping operations.

Prof Nakajima, who teaches at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, believes that many Japanese have not given their blessings to the trip.

"It is a diplomacy in which Japan has been trying its best not to irritate China. This is what the Japanese find highly unsatisfactory," he writes in the latest edition of Chuo Koron, a respected journal.

In the past, each time Beijing voiced its objection, Tokyo rushed to pacify China's leaders. This occurred in the 1980s when Japanese history textbooks glossed over the wartime misdeeds and when the then Premier Yasuhiro Nakasone made an official visit to a Shinto shrine in central Tokyo to honour the war dead.

Beijing's insistence that Japan's military activities in China be described in the textbooks as an "invasion" rather than an "advance" continues to be seen by many Japanese as interference in the nation's domestic affairs.

Mr Miyazawa and other senior leaders in the ruling party have said that they support the emperor's visit but only if the Japanese people are not unhappy about it.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato, the Premier's right-hand man, spent two days recently listening to the views of the country's eminent China scholars and opinion leaders. His purpose, said the Japanese press, was to try to win doubters over to the government's side before Mr Miyazawa's announcement on Tuesday to accept the invitation.

Professor Tadao Ishikawa, who heads a private panel at the Premier's request to review Japan's foreign policy towards Asia, was among those who met Mr Kato.

President of one of Japan's top private tertiary institutions, Keio University, Prof Ishikawa said the fact that Mr Miyazawa had delayed making a decision on the visit for so long showed that the government had weighed the consequences carefully.

"The choice was a difficult one. Now the government's job is to minimise the demerits and maximise the merits of the visit," he added.