Japan’s Militarist Past: Reconciliation in East Asia?

BY DANIEL NAGASHIMA

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, including his most recent on August 15, 2006, have infuriated Japan’s East Asian neighbors, where many people view the visits as evidence of Japan’s rising “jingoistic nationalism and militarism.” Massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in both China and South Korea—including those in April 2005—highlight the deep mistrust and anti-Japanese sentiment emerging in East Asia today. This mistrust is tied not just to Koizumi’s Yasukuni visits, but also to Japan’s tendency to emphasize its role as victim rather than aggressor in the Pacific War. Although Japanese officials have continuously expressed remorse for their country’s regrettable past, Japan’s contradictory behavior continues to adversely affect the development of trust between Japan and its East Asian neighbors.

In addition, Japan’s controversial history textbooks reinforce the absence of both war guilt and responsibility. Japan’s reluctance to acknowledge its role as aggressor is symbolic of its unwillingness to genuinely face its past. To comprehend the mistrust that has developed toward Japan, it is critical to reflect on the Japanese memories not only of its victimhood in the war, but also its role as an aggressor since Japan’s militarist and expansionist past still generates resentment among the nations that were its victims. Although relations between Japan and its neighbors have remained stable because of their mutual economic interdependence, unless Japan as a nation genuinely expresses a heartfelt apology and adequately atones for its militarist past, tensions over Japan’s past will continue to obstruct more amicable relations in the region. To improve relations with its East Asian neighbors, Japan must eliminate the contradictions that characterize its memory of World War II.

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War and National Identity

The failures of Japan’s militarist regime and the deep scars left by atomic weapons generated a strong anti-militarist culture in the post-war years. Indeed, Eugene Matthews asserts that in the aftermath of World War II, Japan most feared itself. Political scientist Thomas Berger argues that the disastrous results of the Pacific War led Japan to adopt an anti-militarist culture which continues to serve as a buffer against the revival of Japanese militarism. He further contends that Japan’s anti-militarist culture is attributable to its memory of being victimized by both the West and its own militarist regime, which “dragged them into a war that rationally could only end in tragedy.” Its suffering during World War II produced profound distrust of the military and caused many Japanese citizens to shun rearmament at all costs. Independent of the U.S. occupation, Japan’s nuclear allergy was an additional motivating force both for demilitarization and disarmament. Scholars thus argue that a militarist revival in Japan would be unlikely and that the memory of victimhood has survived their more positive post-war experiences.

Through traumatic experiences of victimization, members of a community are able immediately to link and bond with one another as an ethnic group. Historian Joshua Fogel claims that although grounded on superficial premises, such negative events in a nation’s history serve as a means of forging a national identity. In Japan, the typical image embedded in the memories of middle school students is one of victimhood: “I always associated the war with Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” said one such student. “I could only think of Japan as the loser in the war.” And Berger claims that the Japanese have felt victimized not only by its own militarist regime, but also by the imperialist and hegemonic objectives of the West.

However, this sense of victimhood has placed Japan in a dilemma: as both victim and aggressor, Japan has had difficulty developing its own national identity, especially during the reign of Showa emperor Hirohito. Although Emperor Hirohito bore responsibility as the “supreme leader of the country, commander of the armed forces, and absolute executive power,” Hirohito was not indicted during the Tokyo Tribunal. Instead, fourteen military commanders including Tojo Hideki were prosecuted as “heroes” for sacrificing their lives for both the emperor and the nation. Until Hirohito’s death in 1989, discussing Japan’s war guilt was considered taboo because any acknowledgement of Japan’s responsibility for the war would be regarded as a direct attack against the emperor. His death allowed Japan’s wartime role to be discussed more freely, and as a result the desire among Japanese to understand Japan’s responsibility slowly increased. On the one hand, progressives such as Ienaga
Saburo emerged and began advocating a more impartial understanding of Japanese history in textbooks. Simultaneously, numerous revisionists appeared, denying that Japan had been an aggressor and asserting that much of the controversy surrounding the brutal acts of Japanese military, such as the Nanjing Massacre, was fabricated by foreigners. Thus, to comprehend Japan’s position in terms of its responsibilities during the war, it is necessary to understand the concept of kagaisha ishiki, or victimizer’s consciousness.

Long Division

Since Hirohito’s death, Japanese officials such as former prime minister Hosokawa Morihiro have come forward to candidly express their remorse for Japan’s bellicose past. In his 1993 inaugural speech he expressed deep regret for the “unbearable sufferings caused to so many by Japan’s aggressive behavior and colonial control,” and thus offered the first official acknowledgment of the suffering caused by Japan during the war. Hosokawa’s apology seemingly reflected a Japan that recognized itself not as a victim, but as an aggressor. Likewise, when the Socialist Party seized leadership from the Liberal Democratic Party in 1995, Socialist Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi submitted a Diet resolution on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Japan’s unconditional surrender that aimed at apologizing candidly and formally to the victims of Japanese aggression. However, right-wing objections to a direct apology for Japan’s colonization and aggression led to a compromise resolution that used hansei, meaning “deep remorse,” instead of shazai, or “apology.” The resulting resolution represented an attitude contradictory to Hosokawa and Murayama’s sincere demonstration of honne, authentic sentiments which are often camouflaged or hidden in accordance with the principle of tatemae, which places normative restrictions on behavior.

Yet right-wing nationalists and government officials, including former minister of justice Nagano Shigeto, have expressed a contrary view. A year following Hosokawa’s candid apology, Nagano brusquely asserted that the Greater East Asia War was a defensive war necessary to liberate the Asian nations and colonies from the European powers. He even went so far as to claim that the Nanjing Massacre was an outright fabrication and that comfort women were merely hired prostitutes. Such historical views clearly contradict Prime Minister Hosokawa’s stance. Similarly, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro, who is also a leading figure in popularizing the emerg-
ing Japanese historical nationalism, claimed that the Nanjing Massacre was a story and lie “made up by the Chinese” to tarnish the image of Japan. The rising popularity of neonationalists like Ishihara, who contradict the apologies of officials like Hosokawa, has alarmed the victims of Japan’s past historic bellicosity. Thus, foreign nations have come to view Japan’s apologies as mere tatemae to Japan’s honne—remorselessness camouflaged by formal repentance. The perceived insincerity has become a source of persistent frustration for these former victims. Furthermore, the refusal to express forthright apologies to their neighbors clearly reflects that the “continuing struggle over how Japan’s role in World War II should be interpreted,” has yet to be resolved.

The recent emergence of neonationalism in Japan, sustained by politicians such as Prime Minister Koizumi and Governor Ishihara, suggests the revival of a particular brand of right-wing conservatism in this contest over the interpretation of Japan’s past. Similar to the opinions expressed by the imperial regime during World War II, this new nationalist conservatism portrays Japan as fundamentally different from other cultures and asserts that it possesses “a unique cultural advantage” over them. The idea of an exceptional Yamato race, in conjunction with Japan’s successful modernization efforts during the Meiji Restoration, provided the basis for Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere initiative during the Pacific War. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalism has continuously been used as a means to bolster and unify the nation. Journalist Nicholas Kristoff argues that the rise of nationalism also results from ignorance on the part of Japanese, who “firmly believe their country did nothing particularly bad.” In fact, because of the controversial Japanese history textbooks, which omit evidence of the aggressive expansion of Japan’s militarist regime, the victims of that previous expansionism view Japan not only as oblivious, but as “genuinely ignorant of what there is to repent.”

Selective Collective Memory

Adhering to a principle known as kentei, the Japanese Ministry of Education plays an active role in preparing, screening, and publishing history textbooks: the ministry censors any content it deems to be irrelevant or not useful, and after the ministry accepts several textbooks, each of the 542 local school districts, or kyouiku-iinkai, independently determine which textbook to use. Although the central government offers the school districts some choice, recent scholarship argues that official manipulation of Japanese textbooks has produced “a collective amnesia in which most Japanese find it impos-
sible to comprehend why the rest of Asia looks on them with suspicion and hatred.” For example, in 1982 the Ministry of Education tried to replace the word “invade” with “advance” when referring to its role in East Asia during the Pacific War. In essence, this has served to soften the images of Japan’s past aggression and has thereby fueled the current rise in nationalist sentiment.

Because of such government massaging of Japanese history, historian Ienaga Saburo has questioned the constitutionality of the kentei system and filed lawsuits against the Ministry of Education, claiming that the ministry rejected his textbook due to his depiction and delineation of Japan as an aggressor during World War II. The ministry responded to Ienaga’s description of the war as an act of “aggression” by stating that the term “…contains negative ethical connotations. In the education of the citizens of the next generation it is not desirable to use a term with such negative implications to describe the acts of our own country. Therefore an expression such as ‘military advance’ should be used.” The conflicting views of liberal educators and conservative officials in the Ministry of Education have been a source of tension in creating a coherent national memory of the war in Japan.

The Ienaga Trials prompted individuals like Fujioka Nobukatsu to carp at the “masochistic” and “anti-Japanese” trends in post-war education. In 1997, Fujioka established Atarashii Kyoukasho wo Tsukuru Kai, or the Society for Creating a New History Textbook, with aims to promote the creation of patriotic history textbooks that would “reestablish the Japanese sense of self respect and love for the country.” In the ensuing years, controversial texts emerged, including four texts in 2001 which substituted “Nanjing Incident” for “Nanjing Massacre.” Right-wing advocates amplified the controversy, claiming that Japan had “a right to interpret their history in their own way, and pass down that interpretation.”

Numerous factors help explain Japan’s contradictory interpretations of its violent history. Despite Emperor Hirohito’s death, any formal acceptance and recognition of its militarist past would ultimately make him accountable. As Japan’s national and cultural symbol, this would not only malign Japan’s traditional and enduring imperial system, but also jeopardize the validity of modern Japanese history since the Meiji movement. If Japan were to take full responsibility and genuinely acknowledge its wrongdoings, the achievements of modern Japan would come into question.

A personal and emotional fear of vilifying and condemning the millions of soldiers and victims of Japan’s military regime further augments this reluctance to question modern Japan’s character: government condemnation
of the militarist regime would inevitably question the deaths of millions of deceased soldiers and citizens and possibly degrade the value of their lives. By upholding the deaths of their loved ones as both noble and necessary for Japanese success, relatives and family members find value and meaning in the lives of the deceased. Thus, avoiding the issues of its militarist past allows Japan to “grop[e] for ways to keep the memory of loved ones secure against the threats of pain, forgetfulness, or worst, condemnation.”

Prime Minister Koizumi’s consistent visits to the Yasukuni Shrine reflect this consciousness. Koizumi maintains that his visits to the controversial shrine are not intended to sustain Japan’s militarist past, but to honor the countless individuals who sacrificed their lives for the country’s pacifist successes. In addition, domestic pressures from conservative interest groups such as the Nihon Izoku Kai, or the Japan Association of Bereaved Families, play a critical role in LDP officials decisions to visit the Yasukuni Shrine: these officials appease their domestic supporters rather than proactively seek amicable foreign relations with Japan’s neighbors.

Moreover, an increasing sense of national insecurity, prompted by the rise of a potentially hegemonic China, is also playing a role in Japan’s increasingly jingoistic interpretation of its past. In addition, Japan is suffering from what Michael Green has called increasing “apology fatigue,” whereby Japan directs its frustration at the increasingly powerful Chinese government for incessantly invoking the contentious history in order to manipulate foreign relations. For example, during the 1998 summit between Chinese president Jiang Zemin and Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi, the Japanese public was infuriated when Jiang repeatedly criticized Japan for its failure to apologize for its past. Many Japanese citizens believe that after sixty years of pacifism and democracy, Japan is now a different country.

Conciliation and Reconciliation

Yet for Japan’s foreign relations, coming to terms with its past has been and continues to be a key factor in developing trust with its Asian neighbors. However, developing such trust is difficult when conservative right-wing constituents resolutely assert the need to develop a Japanese nationalist identity. Whereas right-wing Japanese nationalists concern themselves with national pride and self-identity, the rebuilding of trust with Japan’s East
Asian counterparts must come from a more universal and comprehensive recollection of war memories, including Japan’s role as both aggressor and victim. To construct amicable and healthy relations for both the present and the future, it is crucial for Japan to clearly confront its past, rather than adamantly uphold its narrow nation-bound memories. Instead of desperately clinging to the memories of victimhood, Japan must acknowledge and genuinely express its apologies and remorse as aggressor by avoiding the contradictory acts that many conservative officials and history textbooks have. As Inoguchi Takashi argues in *Distant Neighbors? Japan and Asia*, Japan must first accept that, although no less guilty than the West, it is plainly guilty for its actions against its neighboring countries.  

By way of reconciliation, Prime Minister Koizumi stated in his speech commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II that it was “necessary to work hand in hand with other Asian countries, especially with China and the Republic of Korea...to maintain peace and pursue the development of the region.” He followed by stating that by facing its past and “rightly recognizing history,” Japan must aim to build a “future-oriented cooperative relationship based on mutual understanding and trust with Asian countries.” To develop such trust and move toward amicable foreign relations in the twenty-first century, it will be necessary for Japan to clearly come to terms with its history, despite how difficult and painful it may be. Indeed, an apology may dishonor the descendants who fought not only for the country, but also for the emperor. Nevertheless, apologies must be resolute and sincere, and must come through both words and actions.

On the other side, it is equally imperative to avoid labeling Japan solely as unapologetic and irresponsible, an image depicted by individuals like Iris Chang and her widely read *The Rape of Nanking*. As Fogel reiterates, it is necessary to begin by “dropping facile characterizations based solely on nationality” and forge more amicable relations between Japan and other East Asian nations. To overcome such differences, it will take cooperation, and resolving the history issue will need to have support from both sides. China must show a willingness similar to that exhibited by the former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung in his 1998 “future-oriented partnership” with Japan, which inspired Japan to write an official apology.
There have been other positive signs as well. The debate that has emerged since the death of the Emperor Hirohito in 1989 has led to a wider range of discussion regarding the issues of how and what each nation has remembered about the war. Although the issue of war guilt and responsibility has to some level led to a distortion of history, the process and development of objectively understanding Japan’s past has also deepened. Thus, continuing the discussion will indeed be crucial to develop a deeper understanding on the memories of the war—the building block of genuine trust in East Asia. Japanese historian Obinata Sumio speaks most lucidly when he states that “unfortunately, the facts [of pre-war Japan] include something that we can’t be proud of….Faithfulness to the facts naturally means inclusion of both the good and the bad….The factual record includes some bitter parts, but they’re historical facts.”

NOTES

15 Thomas Berger, “From Sword to Chrysanthemum,” 124.
17 Ibid., 41.
18 Hugo Restall, “‘Opposing the Sun’: Japan Alienates Asia,” Far Eastern Economic Review, April 2005, 12. The Japanese method directly contrasts with the Chinese and South Korean methods, in which a single interpretation of history is presented through a standard history textbook issued to every school district.
22 Roger Jeans, “Victims or Victimizers?” 188.
23 Ibid., 190.
26 Michael J. Green, Japan’s Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 94.
29 Joshua Fogel, The Nanjing Massacre, 8.
30 Roger Jeans, “Victims or Victimizers,” 187-188.