

Memories of War: The Second World War and Japanese Historical Memory in Comparative Perspective



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Japan and Pacific Asia: Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of World War II

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It does not sound particularly odd to hear Japan and Pacific Asia spoken of as if they existed separately. In Japanese minds, their country is part of Pacific Asia in one context, while in another it is not. When asked which group of peoples they belong to, many Japanese feel that they are Asian, but they normally stress at the same time that they are part of the Group of Seven major industrial countries.

Great Britain, too, intermittently resists being placed in the same category as continental Europe. Great Britain is a member of the European Union, but it does not like to see the European Union evolving into a federated Europe under a powerful European Central Bank or under a mighty Napoleonic Eurocracy. Thus a juxtaposition of the British Isles vis-a-vis the continent often sits comfortably in Great Britain. From another angle, Japan's relationship with Pacific Asia might be compared to the relationship of Switzerland and Europe. The history of Switzerland is arguably a history of a small isolated country fighting determinedly against submersion into Europe, whether it is economic integration or military conquest or cultural absorption. Too much engagement with Europe, the argument goes, could cause great trouble or even calamity to Switzerland.

And, indeed, in a national referendum, the Swiss rejected ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and thus membership in the European Union.

Japan's history, too, can be seen as a chronicle of ambivalence vis--vis the Asian continent, a saga of disengagement ostensibly required to consolidate national identity in the face of the predominant Chinese civilization. At the same time, the Japanese state had to consolidate the legitimacy of its rule by establishing a certain hierarchical relationship in diplomatic interactions with states on the Asian continent. Japan also has a history of absorbing ideas, institutions and technology from the Asian continent. Learning from other countries was stressed especially during the seventh and eighth, sixteenth and nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ninth-to-fifteenth and seventeenth-to-nineteenth were epochs of particularly intense endogenous cultural development.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the drive to learn from the West, especially the state's efforts to inculcate national identity, went to the extreme. It was a period in which Japan spiritually turned its back on Asia. The continent became, instead, a place for exploitation and expansion of colonies. Japan's relationship with Pacific Asia at this time was hierarchical and militarily oriented. In the latter half of the century, the process of learning from the West, especially the United States, went on. The state made strenuous efforts to maintain a resilient

national identity after the defeat in 1945 and amid the overwhelming Americanization of cultural life during the occupation years (1945-52). Gradually, interest in Asia revived, this time as a place where Japan could expand its economic activities, and its relationship again became hierarchical, though now largely oriented to the economic sphere.

Japan's orientation to Pacific Asia in this century has been neither happy nor healthy, but hierarchical and asymmetrical, whether dominated by military, economic or cultural priorities. Now that half a century has passed since World War II, it is crucial, therefore, that Japan strive to reconfigure its relationship with its neighbours in the direction of greater closeness and symmetry, basing its ties more heavily on grass roots-based interaction.

Debt, Disdain and Detachment

Three key words that can be used to sum up Japan's relationship with Pacific Asia in the twentieth century are: debt, disdain and detachment. By "debt" I refer to the historical debt to the region Japan has incurred through its colonialism and campaigns of expansion from the 1930s to 1945. It has been difficult for many Japanese to admit that the war in the Pacific was entirely wrong. Two of the foremost historians of modern Japanese history, Sato Seizaburo and Ito Takashi, refuse to call the war either the Greater East Asian War or the Pacific War. They agree that there is no better name than "that war."¹ The ambivalence many Japanese feel is at the root of the series of controversies ensuing from remarks reflecting personal views about the war made by cabinet ministers and behind the lengthy expiations serialized as special features in newspapers and magazines appearing almost every summer as August 15 approaches.

The majority of Japanese tend to think that there were two wars: one among the imperialist powers and the other against Pacific Asians. In the former, Japan was no more guilty of aggression and exploitation than the others. All were equally guilty. The difference was merely that Japan entered the imperialist game quite late and that Japan was the only non-Western player there. Regarding the latter war, Japanese will admit that they were guilty of causing great suffering for Pacific Asians. The "two wars" idea is at the root of the ambivalence that produces remarks like that of Hashimoto Ryutaro, then minister of international trade and industry, made in October 1994.²

Underlying this majority sentiment is a particular conception of national identity, according to which modern Japanese history is an epoch of strenuous efforts to acquire the ways of the West while holding tight to national identity in hopes of achieving a high level of Westernization and at the same time national solidarity. Despite "that war" - which is frankly admitted to have been a great disaster and mistake - Japanese tend to believe that they have been largely successful in achieving both goals. In the view of history, Japan's national identity is thoroughly embedded in the continuity and purpose of the modern history of the nation. To interpret the war as severing that continuity - in other words, to deny the modern history leading to the war as purposeless - would be tantamount to denying the national identity.

This is why many Japanese find it difficult to dismiss "that war" as totally wrong. They invariably feel some reservations in relation to their conception of national identity and the collective memory of modern history. This is the reason that, while we have heard repeated

apologies expressed almost every summer for the past decade at the official level, at the grass roots there is a vague but widespread absence of genuine repentance. That lack seems to stem from a sense of scepticism about unilateral Japanese guilt for the war, and from the fact that Japanese sympathy for those who suffered from the war has not been elevated to compassion for human beings in general. Japanese have thus been very slow to dispel the suspicions of neighbours and other countries regarding their true intentions.

The disdain many Japanese feel deep down toward the rest of Asia is the product of modern history. Japan was the only non-Western nation that grew strong in the twentieth century without being made excessively dependent on the West. Its first major victory in a modern war, against the Chinese in 1895, was a major source of the disdain Japanese began to nurture vis--vis Pacific Asians. Their victory in 1905 in the war against czarist Russia, a Western power, further boosted their pride as a member of the Western-dominated imperialist powers and by default their disdain toward other Pacific Asians.

The Japanese sense of superiority was reinforced by the economic success attained after the war. Japan was at its nadir in 1945, its per capita income estimated at among the lowest among Pacific Asian countries. That of the Philippines was among the highest in the immediate post-war years. Yet Japan regained the momentum in economic development that had begun in the 1930s but had been suspended during wartime and the early post-war eras. By the early 1960s, Japan's achievements were noted in *The Economist* and a few years later it joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a club made up of nations of the industrialized world.

In the mid-1980s, popular commentator on the business world Hasegawa Keitaro published a book entitled *Kasumigaseki to Yumenoshima* [Kasumigaseki and "Dream Island"], in which he likened the contrast between Japan and Pacific Asia to the differences between Kasumigaseki, the district of Tokyo where the national government and ministry offices are concentrated, and one of the artificial islands created in Tokyo Bay with fill from the city's garbage, euphemistically called Yumenoshima - "Dream Islands." His images do not necessarily reflect the majority view of the relationship between Japan and Pacific Asia, but they do testify to the feelings of superiority the Japanese subconsciously entertain toward their neighbours.

The third characteristic of the Japanese relationship with Pacific Asia, detachment, derives from ambivalence. The profound cultural debt to China has nurtured a certain obsession with keeping that country at arm's length. Kokugaku, the tradition of nativist thought known as National Studies that developed during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), was one such manifestation of Japan's endeavour to develop its *own* distinctive system of thought. It contains a few elements that were later to lead the Meiji state to mobilize all the nation's resources for *fukoku kyohei* ("enriching the country and strengthening its arms"): namely, nationalistic reaction to the then-dominant school of classical Chinese learning of the *Four Books* and *Five Classics of Confucianism*, nativistic appreciation of allegedly "genuine and righteous" classics of ancient Japan (the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*), and assertion that Japan is a supreme, divine country. The reinterpretation of Japanese history using Shinto traditions and myths in the early Meiji era is another.

The political debt incurred to other Pacific Asians during World War II - which can be the source of considerable mental distress - has led Japanese to distance themselves from the issue whenever possible. They can play down the importance of the issue by arguing that wartime debts have been settled on the government-to-government level by peace treaties and other international agreements. And they can defer the salient issues by insisting on the need for more objective historical research and assessment. These feelings of debt, disdain and detachment dominating attitudes towards Pacific Asia add up to a strong complex on the part of Japanese over relations with people of the region. If we are ever to establish healthier, more genuinely harmonious relations with other Pacific Asians, we need to resolve this complex.

Overcoming the Old Asia Complex

The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II provides a good occasion to seriously rethink the debt-disdain-detachment syndrome that plagues Japanese attitudes towards other Pacific Asians. To overcome this situation, I suggest that Japan undertake significant steps in the following three areas: (1) joint projects for writing of history; (2) student and community exchange; and (3) joint non-governmental organization participation in global issues such as the environment, human rights, peace-keeping and humanitarian assistance. Let me explain each of these in somewhat more detail.

(1) *Writing History*. It does not come as much of a surprise to learn that Pacific Asians do not know much about their regional history. This is in part because modern history has tended to be overshadowed by Western colonialism. In current texts, ironically, the history of their respective countries is portrayed as having more in common with the colonial power that controlled them than with each other. This distorted view and lack of knowledge is unfortunate, particularly when one thinks of the overall path of history and the common predicaments they face today. It should be possible to increase awareness of the commonalities and differences, and one way would be to launch a project for the joint writing of the region's history by specialists of the region. Through participation in such a project, perhaps, Japanese might be able to overcome their chronic complex.

A similar project was undertaken in Europe to write a joint history textbook for the entire region and the twelve member countries in particular. It culminated in a remarkable work covering the entire history of the subcontinent from ancient to modern and thorough contemporary times, within a common overall framework and accompanied by a good balance of country/culture-specific details.³

Some might argue that Europe has important basic commonalities such as Christianity and the Enlightenment, while Pacific Asia does not seem to have such compelling sources of unity. The only viable theme one might think could be found is resistance to colonialism. I would argue, however, that the nations of Pacific Asia have two main themes that tie their histories together. One is the aspiration that "they in the East could realize the superior Western values on a larger scale by performing a "cultural rollback" over the West," as expressed by intellectual historian Takeuchi Yoshimi. Their commonality, therefore, does not stem from the global penetration of Western cultural values imposed upon them, but through attempts within Asia to further

universalize and deeply transform the inevitably parochial Western cultural values by injecting elements from Eastern cultural values.⁴

Pacific Asia cannot afford to revert to parochial cultural values, whatever they might be. As I argued in an essay a few years ago,⁵ I believe that the future of the region will be brighter if it finds a way to build beyond specific cultural loyalties, by broadening and deepening the values introduced from the West. I thoroughly agree with Takeuchi.

At a symposium on United Nations Peace-keeping Operations held at the United Nations University in Tokyo, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Li Zhaoxing, remarked that the success of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) under the leadership of Akashi Yasushi in bringing about peace and democracy in Cambodia does a great credit not only to the United Nations but to Asian civilization. The audience widely and strongly applauded this remark, and I found myself joining in.

The second commonality that Pacific Asian countries could share would be the potential for injecting communitarianism into Western cultural values. I realize that the West does have its own communitarian tradition, which even in the United States - often seen as the bastion of individualism - has been strong and growing steadily stronger in the recent past. The communitarianism that is needed is not that nurtured in local communities or confined within given national boundaries, but conceived on the higher level of a "global neighbourhood."⁶

Pacific Asia is in an advantageous position for cultivating this idea of global communitarianism, for the region is, in a sense, too small for itself. Without global market access, it cannot hope to continuously prosper in peace. Pacific Asia has to develop close relationships with its market partners not only in terms of business but also in terms of sharing and reshaping more universal cultural values.⁷

(2) *Student and Community Exchange.* As interdependence in terms of economic and security affairs deepens among Pacific Asians, government-to-government exchange has been steadily increasing in such forms as regular bilateral and multilateral consultative mechanisms. In terms of grass roots-level exchange, much remains to be desired. In student and community exchange, for instance, there is far greater activity between Pacific Asia and the United States than within the region itself. It will be difficult to mitigate mutual prejudices, remove ignorance and deepen mutual understanding until a solid basis for grass roots-level regional exchange is built. The asymmetry of student exchange is clear: of about 50,000 Japanese students studying abroad as of 1991, roughly 90 per cent are in the United States, whereas roughly 10 per cent are in Asia, especially China and Korea. Of all foreign students studying in Japan, the opposite tendency is observed: of roughly 50,000 foreign students studying in Japan, as of 1993, 90 per cent are from Asia while 10 per cent are from other regions (5 per cent from the United States). Approximate symmetry is desirable in all directions. Walter Mondale, former United States ambassador to Japan, repeatedly said that Japan has to enlarge the number of US students studying in Japan. And no less importantly, Japan has to increase the ranks of its young people studying in Asia. Community exchange is much more favourable to Asia, however. Of 93 exchange programmes arranged by prefectural governments with foreign counterparts as of 1993, 41 are in Asia. Of 352

programmes arranged by municipal/town/village governments with foreign counterparts, as of 1993, 223 are with counterparts in Asia.

(3) *NGO Participation in Global Issues.* Joint Pacific Asian endeavours to tackle global issues - environmental protection, human rights, peace-keeping and humanitarian operations - should be strongly encouraged and enhanced. It may be argued that such efforts have already been increased considerably, but there is much more that can be done.

Environmental protection, for instance, must now be made a high-priority issue if the high growth rates (now the highest in the world) in Pacific Asia are to be sustainable. In view of very high demographic and energy-consumption growth estimates, sustainable development may be impossible unless cost-efficient and welfare-conscious strategies are worked out and executed on the regional as well as global level. China's two-digit growth already poses a nightmare for Japan with its high emissions of sulphur and nitrogen gas from power stations, factories and automobiles heavily concentrated in coastal areas. Skies polluted by these emissions are already dropping acid rain on Japan, causing widespread devastation of its forests.

Given the scientific and intellectual resources available in Pacific Asia, it should be possible for the region to avoid the mistakes made by the industrialized nations and make an important contribution to global efforts at protecting the environment. By working together to resolve global issues like this, the peoples of Asia can become a community of a stronger kind. By tackling such issues as human rights in a credible manner, Pacific Asia could earn for itself a respectable place in the global community. So far, it is not known as a human-rights-friendly region, but rather for its "developmental authoritarianism." In order to dispel the impression in other parts of the world that its leaders do not respect human rights, the issue should be taken up among nations within the region with a view to devising better practices. The growing number of people devoted to human rights causes is an encouraging sign. Amnesty International Japan, for example, has more than 3,000 registered members - a not insignificant number.

Pacific Asian joint participation in UN peace-keeping and humanitarian operations would also be helpful in demonstrating that the peoples of the region are no less compassionate about the sufferings of people in other parts of the world. Setting up region-wide training centres for peace-keeping and humanitarian aid using local resources would do a great deal to boost the credibility and respectability of Pacific Asia. Again, the growing number of people devoted to this work is a hopeful sign. The Médecins sans Frontières Japan, for example, has more than 9,000 registered members.⁸ Concentrating energy on activities such as the three described above, I would argue, will do much more to raise the consciousness of Japanese than all the barrages of unilateral criticism heard from other Pacific Asians, Americans or Europeans. Through closer cooperation, they would realize more acutely the suffering Japan brought to the rest of the world before and during World War II and develop a sense of commitment to overcoming the wrongs of history through greater compassion and understanding. Cultural exchange in the broadest sense of the term can play a decisive part in achieving an awareness of the human community. Toward that end, Japan and Pacific Asia need more face-to-face interactions and more active participation in joint undertakings on regional and global issues.

References

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8. François Jean of the Médecins sans Frontières in answer to a question at the symposium cited in note 6 above.