

Hirohito and History: Japanese and American Perspectives on the Emperor and World War II in Asia

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By **Herbert P. Bix**

For nearly 60 years many Japanese have been struggling honorably to come to terms with the China War and the Pacific War, and indeed their entire imperialist past. But their struggles never take place in a vacuum. Trends in history, politics, international relations, and even culture, shape them. During the occupation years (1945 to 1952) neonationalists who rejected the Tokyo Trial and justified the lost war seldom spoke out. At that time, Japanese who sought to grasp the war experience, end the era of irresponsibility, and develop a critical historiography went virtually unchallenged.

Regression from a critical to an affirmative view of the war began only after the occupation ended. In the late 1950s the trends became quite visible. Over the 1960s influential writers, including Hayashi Fusao, laid the basis for a comprehensive denial of war atrocities. His views were immediately challenged and ever since, the pendulum has swung back and forth. Today, Prime Minister Koizumi and like-minded conservatives in the LDP visit Yasukuni Shrine or approve history textbooks that whitewash the crimes committed in past wars, then insist that foreigners shouldn't criticize their actions

for they are essentially domestic issues. But Japanese historical consciousness about the lost war is not a matter solely for Japanese.

The stream of right-wing revisionism that runs down to the present, justifying Japan's wars in 1931, 1937, and 1941, has always been contested. But the conditions that favor the rise of these regressive views, or that make it feasible to express them publicly, are a product of changing international and domestic political conditions. And even when such views seem to dominate mainstream media discourse, that does not mean they are universally held.

Before and during World War II, a chrysanthemum taboo shielded the Japanese monarchy from view, making it extremely difficult to critically scrutinize Hirohito. After the war, the US occupation's laudatory and exculpatory view of Hirohito, one quite similar to that put forward by ruling groups in Japan, prevailed. Academic circles in the US and Britain either shied away from contemporary emperor studies or followed unquestioningly the official government line. The bilateral relationship determined their image of the emperor.

American public understanding of Hirohito's role in the political process was almost non-existent. The conventional wisdom held that he had been a mere figurehead. Passive and powerless, he acceded to, but never actively backed, the decisions of the militarists to wage all-out war in China in 1937, and to go to war with Britain and the US four years later. The conventional wisdom also described Hirohito as a pacifist, an anti-militarist, and a principled

seeker of diplomatic solutions to problems. Most of all, it insisted that he was both a normal constitutional monarch, and a courageous loser who in August 1945 had acted to take sole responsibility for what had happened.

The emperor was a complex, stubborn, conflicted, and nervous man. During the first two decades of his reign he gave full attention to protection of his imperial house and preservation of the Japanese empire. From early boyhood he had been educated in both Confucian and idealized samurai values. This worked its effects and the culpable political leader and supreme military commander — who led Japan on a disastrous course of empire and war — survived his mistakes. Thanks to the efforts of the US and Japan’s old guard leaders, rather than being deposed after Japan’s wartime defeat, he remained on the throne for the rest of his life, working to perpetuate Japan’s satellite relationship to the U.S. The decision to preserve the monarchy and retain Hirohito served US interests of preserving stability. But it delayed the Japanese people’s confrontation with their wartime past, contributed to the censoring and falsification of wartime history, and ultimately acted as a brake on democratization. The ghost of Hirohito still looms behind the misunderstanding and distrust of Japan that exists today in many Asian countries.



Hirohito inspects bomb damage on the verge of Japan's surrender

Hirohito assumed his role as commander in chief with the imperial army’s takeover of Manchuria in autumn 1931. Caught psychologically unprepared, he hesitated at first, uncertain of himself, but once the “incident” proved successful, his “realism” and opportunism asserted itself. He jumped on the military bandwagon, and quickly became the most important promoter of the new course of territorial expansion. Afterwards, by numerous calculated acts of commission and omission, he sanctioned the destruction of Taisho democracy and fostered indoctrination in militarism and ultranationalism.

Then in late summer of 1937, all-out war between Japanese and Chinese nationalist forces began. Only then did Hirohito begin to find his stride as a supreme commander actively intervening in military decision-making. For four years he supervised the deadlocked conflict in China, living his commander-in-chief role day and night. He became more willing to run risks with Britain and the United States, and more accustomed to making operational interventions, more persuaded by the rhetoric of the “new international order” that Japan sought to create in East Asia. Finally, in October 1941, he ignored opportunities for peace — such as appointing a cabinet headed by a member of the imperial family — and he elevated General Tojo Hideki to the prime minister because he supported Tojo’s policies.

The US authorities who controlled occupied Japan wanted to maintain the monarchy and protect Hirohito as a means to insure his support for occupation reforms. But they would do so only after stripping him of all political power and subject to his cooperation in reforming Japan. General MacArthur and the Truman administration calculated that they could use the emperor to demilitarize Japan, change the Meiji political structure, and pursue democratizing reforms. The first was easy to accomplish because Japan’s ruling elites had already decided to demilitarize and get the jump on MacArthur before he even arrived. But the democratization goal proved difficult and after a few years American officials prematurely abandoned thoroughgoing democratization in order to wage a cold war with the Soviet Union.

Keeping Hirohito on the throne until he died led to the falsification of history. Forging his credentials as a pacifist when, in fact, he had been a staunch imperialist and had exercised leadership in support of war, did enormous damage both in the short and long term. Because Hirohito said there was a national

emergency, young Japanese men served as loyal soldiers, invaded other countries, and felt justified in killing the enemy. The great “project” of nation building in Manchuria had been his project, so too the China War (1937-45) and the Pacific War (1941-45).

The great postwar cover-up of Hirohito’s role, the whitewashing of history that it entailed, sowed distrust of Japan in China, Korea and other lands that had suffered Japanese occupation and colonization. Japan’s political elites of course participated energetically in the cover-up, but it went unchallenged by other leaders, too, such as Stalin, Chiang, and Mao.

In helping legitimize a “symbol emperor system” predicated on new historical myths, American policymakers acted on the idea that the monarchic principle and Western-style democracy were compatible. That very premise, however, blunted the full potential of the democratic revolution that Washington had just initiated. The reformed Japanese monarchy, which the United States supported, immediately tilted the struggle for democracy in postwar Japan in favor of the “moderate” politicians who had shared in the failures of the old regime. These men still saw the lost war as a just war for self-defense and for the prosperity of the peoples of Asia.



Hirohito with MacArthur early in the Occupation

Unlike many of his leading generals and officials, Hirohito was never investigated and tried judicially, so that the medieval principle of *legibus solutus* — the ruler is above the law — still stands, and must be combated afresh by every generation. The US, to its great discredit, saw to that.

Usually the setting of national holidays is a domestic matter and seldom provokes foreign criticism, except where the commemoration of wars are concerned. In this case, pressure from conservative politicians to change “Arbor Day” in honor of the environment, to “Showa Day” in honor of Emperor Hirohito, increased during the 1990s. Even so, in 1997 the bill failed to pass. But the conservatives persisted and it finally became law. Should we not see this as another attempt to whitewash history?

Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro in 1993,

and Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi in 1995 had acknowledged that Japan fought wars of aggression. But rather than following through on their international pledges by conducting public investigations of the war and engaging in historical reflection, the LDP whipped up a backlash against a shared understanding of the lost war. For example, Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Aso Taro went to work on behalf of the right-wing “Association to Write New History Textbooks” (Tsukurukai), a purveyor of whitewashed textbooks. Nakagawa Shoichi, currently Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry is a supporter of Tsukurukai, as is Tokyo governor and writer Ishihara Shintaro. The current LDP Secretary-General Abe Shinzo, has lobbied for revision of the 1947 Basic Education Law in order to place more stress on “patriotic education.” In these and various other ways, neonationalist LDP politicians simultaneously support an end to the teaching of the darker side of Japan’s national history, while they prepare the ground for a future revision of Japan’s peace constitution. Their ultimate aim is to break down popular support for the uniquely internationalist peace norm written into Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan.

Interestingly, in 1994, the Chinese government also began emphasizing “patriotic education,” centered on teaching the history of the “Anti-Japanese War.” So the possibility exists that neonationalist currents will feed off one another. Peace groups everywhere need to understand the politics of the Northeast Asian nations and work to prevent that from happening. Never has the need for historical reflection on World War II in Asia been greater.

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