

[This is an edited version of the interview published in *Chosun Ilbo* on January 15, 2015]

What do you think are the problems of history distortion in Japan? Please explain specifically.

**Bix:** Contemporary Japan's historiographical problems are wrapped up in disagreements about the Showa Emperor Hirohito's role during the first two decades of his reign, starting in Dec. 1926 and ending with Imperial Japan's capitulation on Aug. 15, 1945. The problems extend to Hirohito's actions in the post-surrender state and were raised recently by the release of the official version of his long life and reign. *Showa tenno jitsuroku* contains a trove of important documents, but fails to provide a clear picture of Hirohito documents that remain classified. For example, some of the emperor's exchanges with important foreign leaders are not included. Nor are all materials relating to the emperor's war leadership held by the Historical Bureau of the Defense Ministry. Furthermore, the *Jitsuroku* rests on the false premise that the emperor was a non-political, constitutional monarch, whereas Japanese scholarship accumulated over half a century has clearly established just the opposite: Hirohito was, in fact, an activist, dynamic emperor who participated with others in guiding Japan's wars from 1937 to Japan's defeat in 1945. Caught up in the fever of war, he was later persuaded to join the war party by selecting General Tojo Hideki as prime minister in late 1941, and thereafter extended the China war throughout the vast Asia-Pacific region. Critical works by independent scholars explain these realities of Japanese decision-making.

After World War II General Douglas MacArthur, who headed the Allied occupation, protected Hirohito, kept him on the throne, and guaranteed the monarchy's continued existence by writing it into the Constitution of Japan. At the same time the Constitution contains progressive features owing in part to input by Japanese Marxists and liberals. It strips the emperor of political power, redefines him as the nation's "symbol," and outlaws war as an instrument for settling disputes between states. Shortly afterwards, MacArthur immunized Hirohito from the war crimes trials. Not only was he not prosecuted but he was not even interrogated. It was during the first six months after Japan's surrender that contemporary problems of history distortion might be said to begin. But if we backtrack even further we can see that the ways in which the modern monarchy was constructed in Japan determined the very nature of the modern Japanese state itself. This formulation puts the spotlight on the complex Meiji system of oligarchic rule. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 defined the emperor as an absolute monarch. Religious myth grounded in state Shinto and in the notion of the emperor as the unifier of rites and governance strengthened his importance. So too did his special relationship with the Japanese military.

The problems inherent in the Meiji Constitution and other key documents of Imperial Japan came to the fore when ultra-nationalist military officers mounted the stage in the 1930s, calling for a "Showa restoration." The military leaders, the Court Group, and the Showa emperor all contributed to Japan's defeat in the war. The other half of the emperor problem was his post-surrender actions and the uses MacArthur made of him.

Both contributed to the U.S. failure to complete the occupation reforms, as did the Cold War.

After the occupation ended the Japanese people rebuilt their economy with U.S. help, while Japanese industries benefitted during the Korean War from the vast Pentagon special procurements system. Concurrently, American elites kept Japan subjugated through treaties and control of oil. Throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War Japan's leaders remained deferential to Washington's dictates and unwilling to take back their country from American control.

**Germany has deeply reflected about the crimes committed by the Nazi regime. Why do you think Japan did not?**

**Bix:** In comparing how Germans and Japanese reflected on war crimes and dealt with issues of accountability, we should first bear in mind that no nation stands on a pedestal in these matters--that includes of course the United States, notorious for its torture and drone murders, but also South Korea under its dictator, Park Chung Hee, who sent more than 312,000 soldiers to fight in Vietnam, where they, along with Americans from all branches of the military, committed widespread atrocities against Vietnamese civilians.

Second, leaders in occupied, divided Germany knew quite well that by formally repudiating Hitler and his Nazi regime, they strengthened their state and its acceptance by the nations surrounding it. That could not be done so easily in Japan because the occupation (i.e. GHQ) governed indirectly and needed Hirohito, who had legitimized Japan's wars of aggression, to legitimize MacArthur's "demilitarization and democratization." So Hirohito had to be spared from formal investigation that could have led to his indictment and trial.

Moreover, in assessing the different national responses of Germans and Japanese to war crimes a temporal displacement is involved. Many ordinary Japanese people upon learning the facts reflected on them. Unlike their ruling elites who considered the past a closed book, they confronted war guilt much earlier than most Germans who remained anti-Semitic, particularly those who had participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union and the Balkans. Initially Japan went further than Germany in accepting that their soldiers had committed massive crimes in the course of the war.

For the Japanese people the war crimes trials had a long-term, multi-sided effect on their political attitudes. Real regression on this issue, the open promotion of distorted history, did not occur until after the occupation had ended. The campaign was led from above by conservative ruling elites of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In 1957, when Japan was still experiencing its first wave of post-occupation nationalism, the book *Sanko* (Burn All, Kill All, Destroy All) appeared. Written by Japanese veterans of the fighting in China, it became a bestseller until right wing thugs forced the publisher to discontinue it. Other examples of how the Japanese people were discouraged from learning more about the war crimes their soldiers had once committed followed. In the early 1960s it

became more dangerous to criticize or even poke fun at the monarchy, as the publisher of the popular journal *Chuo koron*, Shimanaka Hoji, discovered on February 1, 1960, when a right wing assassin invaded his residence, murdered his maid, and severely wounded his wife. What ignited the attack was *Chuo koron*'s publication of a satirical attack on the "symbol monarchy" by the writer Fukazawa Shichiro. Taboos on criticism of the monarchy remained strong and the content of secondary school education continued ignoring the war years until the late 1990s.

German reflection on war crimes only surged ahead of Japan starting in the 1960s. It was younger generations of Germans who were the first to confront the crimes of their parents' generation. Yet even through the 1990s many Germans clung to the entirely mythical claim of a "clean Wehrmacht" that didn't participate in mass murders and the destruction of villages, towns, and entire regions behind the front lines. They were unprepared to accept that Hitler's Wehrmacht had committed crimes of historic proportions, as demonstrated by the controversy over the first Wehrmacht touring photograph exhibit of the years 1995-99. A few mislabeled photographs caused it to be closed down.

**Japan's distortion of history has accelerated under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Why is he leading the distortion of history?**

**Bix:** Abe understands that Japan is unique because of its war-renouncing constitution--a document he wants to change. He also understands that issues of war responsibility cannot be pursued in Japan without bumping against Hirohito's personal leadership during the war, and his rapid transformation afterwards into the nation's symbol. Abe's problem is to change Japan into a "normal" state capable of fighting wars in defense of geostrategic interests, which can only be done by changing the nature of Japanese style "democracy." At the same time he must avoid the Showa emperor issue, which is also a war crimes and impunity issue. All governments in postwar Japan have confronted this problem. But Abe's hawkish ideological inclinations, not to mention his genealogical background as the grandson of Kishi Nobusuke--wartime munitions minister in the Tojo Hideki cabinet, later imprisoned as an unindicted war crimes suspect--may make him feel the dilemma more acutely than his predecessors did.

Many of Abe's political acts, such as his visits to Ise Shrine and Yasukuni Shrine and his membership in the fundamentalist "Shinto Political League" (*Shinto seiji renmei*) that extols emperor-centered history, indicate his support for Shinto's growing influence in Japanese politics. He and most of his cabinet belong to the ultra-nationalist "Japan Conference" (*Nihon kaigi*) which seeks to build grassroots support for the elimination of Article 9 from the Constitution. Abe has implemented policies based on lessons from Japan's past that have led Japan's neighbors and many Japanese to conclude correctly that he sympathizes with discredited "traditional" elements and military priorities of the prewar imperial system.

For rightist politicians the issue of "comfort women," i.e. the sexual enslavement of Korean, Chinese, and Southeast Asian women by wartime Japan's military, is

particularly salient. When Abe succeeded Koizumi Junichiro in September 2006, he revised the liberal 1947 Fundamental Law of Education so as to strengthen state control and cope with the deepening social divisions exacerbated by neo-liberal economic policies. The amended education law allows the teaching of religious education, curtails teachers' freedom of expression, and could be interpreted as promoting mystical "Japanese-ness." But Abe also wanted to undo the impression widely held abroad that the imperial armed forces had once forced women into sexual slavery--a charge he feels besmirches Japan's honor. His one-year in office did not permit him to really address this issue. Returning to power five years later in December 2012, he tried again. Now, Abe is fighting an ideological battle to restore the "honor" he thinks Japan lost due to the legal and educational reforms of the occupation and to the San Francisco Peace Treaty that forced it to accept all the judgments of the Tokyo War Crimes tribunal. His method has been explicit denial of the historical responsibility of the Japanese military for the sexual exploitation of women and girls in a system which often used civilian brokers to lure women into prostitution in a system maintained and policed by the military.

The issue of sexual slavery was first brought to world attention by the former "comfort woman" Kim Hak-sun in 1991. Thereafter other survivors of the Japanese army's system stepped forward with their stories. A quarter century ago Uemura Takahashi, a retired *Asahi shimbun* investigative journalist, told the story of an unnamed Korean "comfort woman," understood to be Kim. Now, right-wingers accuse Uemura of disseminating "Korean lies." They brand him a traitor and threaten him with violence. Not only did the *Asahi* editors fail to defend Uemura, he also lost a university teaching job as a result of neo-nationalist criticism and threats to both the school and his family. Undaunted, Uemura has fought back, launching a libel suit against his defamers: the Bungei Shunju Company and Nishioka Tsutomu, a professor of Korean peninsula studies. It is striking that Abe and Japanese rightists fail to grasp how radically out of step they are with women's rights movements outside of Japan.

**Abe's ruling party had a huge victory in the last general election. How are we to understand the widespread support he received?**

**Bix:** Although the parliamentary elections held on December 14, 2014, yielded a clear victory for Abe's party, the LDP ran unopposed by a strong candidate and the party actually lost four seats. Abe's coalition partner, the Komeito, won only 4 new seats. After the vote the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) remained in disarray but gained new leaders. Japanese voters abandoned the tiny extremist fringe parties. In contrast to the two governing parties, a big winner was the Japan Communist Party (JCP), which stuck to its principles, advocating the return of land confiscated by Americans for military bases and opposing the LDP's extreme neoliberal economic agenda. Half of Japan's eligible voters did not even bother to vote. Abe's victory needs to be qualified.

Although Abe's historical revisionism is important for him and he uses it to foster nationalism, his primary objective is to insure that Japan remains internationally competitive. It is the economic policies of the second Abe cabinet that produced these recent election results. Abe's historical revisionism, however, may have contributed

indirectly to the unprecedentedly high voter abstention rate and to the turning away from the small fringe parties.

### **Why was the crime of “comfort women” not addressed at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal?**

**Bix:** An authority on this matter is Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki who wrote a book on the subject. (See Satoko Oka Norimatsu, “Reexamining the Comfort Women Issue: An Interview with Yoshimi Yoshiaki,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, No. 1, Jan. 5, 2015 <http://japanfocus.org/-Yoshimi-Yoshiaki/4247>). Even though human trafficking was proscribed under international law, crimes against women were not taken seriously at that time. Now in our radically different times they are taken seriously. Abe can improve Japan’s international reputation by changing the way he addresses this problem.

### **What can be the solution to deterioration in Korean-Japanese relations and China-Japan relations? Washington is also concerned about the conflicts between these two key U.S. allies.**

Relations between the two Koreas and Japan, and China-Japan are of course fluid, not fixed. The solution of conflicts between these nations can only lie in coming to terms with the truth about colonialism and war, past and present. In brief, policies that perpetuate U.S. hegemony are central to the contemporary interstate conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region. They are the largest part of what must change in order to insure the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in the East and South China seas. Once the political climate improves and nations turn away from militarism and recognize the UN principle of the mutual equality of states, ongoing problems can be resolved amicably. Because American policy-makers have the dominant hand, it is they who must make the first moves by responding positively to North Korea’s recent overtures and ending the state of war on the peninsula. They need to confront the sorry history of their relations with the two Koreas. It would help to get at the roots of Korea-Japan and China-Japan disputes if researchers were allowed every opportunity to visit state archives where they could conduct investigations, learn more about the facts, and produce less one-sided narratives of present day conflicts. Good history helps citizens make informed judgments on their governments’ policies.