

Asia Battles Over War History: The legacy of the Pacific War looms over Tokyo's plans for the future

David McNeill, Mark Selden

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by David McNeill & Mark Selden

Sino-Japanese relations sunk to a new low on the weekend of April 9-10 when an estimated 10-20,000 Chinese protestors surrounded the Japanese Embassy in Beijing, pelting it with missiles and shouting "Japanese pigs come out" and "Be ashamed of distorting history." Thousands more vented their rage in other parts of the capital and in Guangzhou, Shenzhen and elsewhere.

The protests, demanding a boycott of Japanese goods, followed Tokyo's authorization of textbooks that many in China condemn for whitewashing Japan's brutal fifteen-year invasion (1931-45). The result is to rock the already troubled partnership between Asia's stagnating economic leader and its rising power, bringing China-Japan relations to their lowest point since

reestablishment of diplomatic relations in 1972.

Protests also took place in South Korea, where Gil Won Ok and her elderly comrades serenaded the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to plead, pray and denounce the Tokyo government. "Who will take away my pain," cried the frail 77-year-old who was barely a teenager when she was forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers during World War II. "Atone for the past and let me die in peace!"

The pensioners – among the few still alive from an estimated 100-200,000 'comfort women', the sex slaves of the Imperial Japanese Army -- have been coming here since 1992 to demand an apology. But neither time nor mortality has dulled the emotional heat of their campaign, which is regularly stoked by what Koreans young and old consider fresh insults from across the Japan Sea. Japan has now poured more fuel on the fire by authorizing high-school textbooks that Korean government spokesman Lee Kyu Hyung said 'beautify and justify' its occupation of much of Asia until 1945.

The war over what Japan teaches its children has raged since the early 1980s. The latest battles emerge as the tectonic plates of Asian politics shift to accommodate the growing economic might of China, as territorial disputes between Japan and her major neighbors, China, Korea and Russia roil the waters, and as governments in Japan, China and South Korea all seek to turn genuine popular grievances to their political advantage by stoking the flames of nationalism. The resulting volatile political situation casts a dark shadow over the booming intra-regional economic growth and early steps toward regional integration.

The most contentious history text – one of eight passed for use by Japan's Ministry of Education - removes all references to the comfort women and atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre, and suggests that Korea invited the Japanese occupation a century ago. A civics text claims jurisdiction over a clump of rocks called Takeshima (Korean: Tokdo) that was seized by Japan in 1905 but has been held by Korea since 1945. “What nonsense is this,” editorialized the normally mild Korea Herald, at a time when the islets have become the subject of intense Japan-Korea strife as a result of renewed Japanese claims to them.

Both texts were written by the Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), a group of neo-nationalist academics that claims the current

curriculum in Japanese schools leaves youngsters “confused and no longer proud of their nation.” As an Asahi newspaper editorial said last week, the Society wants to “emphasize the ‘high points’ of Japanese history and ignore the ‘darker’ aspects; Jeffrey Kingston calls them the “Dr. Feelgoods of Japanese history”.

In 2001, the Society first won Ministry of Education approval for the texts, but grassroots opposition led by teachers and local activists across Japan blocked adoption. Backed by the huge Fuji-Sankei media conglomerate, the Society has since sold nearly one million copies of its history and civics texts, bringing what many consider extremist, fringe theories about history into thousands of ordinary Japanese homes and pushing the content of other textbooks sharply to the right.

This year, just one new history textbook out of eight mentions the comfort women, down from seven in the mid-1990s, while references to other infamous war crimes have been toned down or dropped, suggesting that the highpoint of progressive history teaching calling attention to issues of colonialism and war atrocities has passed.

Emboldened by this success and by heavyweight political and media support, including Japan's biggest newspaper the Daily Yomiuri, the Society believes it is moving with the tide. “We're

confident we can change the teaching of history in schools here," says one of its leading lights, Fujioka Nobukatsu. "More and more people share our opposition to instilling self-hatred in our children."

Whether the Society succeeds on its second attempt to secure textbook adoptions remains to be seen. In 2001, its opponents cobbled together a powerful grassroots coalition that included everyone from Communists to Christians, and this movement may yet spring back into life. But while there is miniscule support among ordinary Japanese for school textbooks that extol the benefits of Japan's colonial rule in Asia, the Society enjoys weighty political backing, including over 100 members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and Tokyo's powerful Governor Ishihara Shintaro. Revisionists already control the country's largest educational council in Tokyo, which will decide this summer whether the textbooks will be used in thousands of schools across the megalopolis.

"The Japanese government is inflaming opinion across Asia with these textbooks," says Hasegawa Takashi, a teacher and anti-textbook campaigner in Tokyo. "If they really think Chinese communists are to blame, why play into their hands."

If Tokyo can afford to ignore the anguished keening of Gil Won Ok and her dwindling fellow

survivors in Seoul, more troubling is the anger emanating from China, its biggest trading partner and a rising regional power. There the textbooks inflamed already seething anger at Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's repeated visits to the Tokyo war memorial Yasukuni Shrine and Japan's handling of the recently inflamed territorial conflict over the Diaoyutai (Japanese: Senkaku) Islands claimed by both China and Japan. In recent weeks, a grassroots boycott targeting Japanese goods has grown, and attacks on Japanese businesses in Chengdu and Shenzhen, and now Beijing and Guangzhou, have spooked otherwise bullish investors.

The Chinese actions come on the heels of a massive online citizens' campaign that claims to have gathered over 25 million signatures opposing Japan's campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. China's Premier Wen Jiabao on April 12 commented that "Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for history and wins over the trust of peoples in Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibilities in the international community," the clearest indication to date that China will not endorse Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the Council. Seoul's UN ambassador Kim Sam Hoon previously made clear his country's opposition to a permanent seat for Japan. In a year pregnant with political and business possibilities, Tokyo is again finding the way forward blocked by its undigested history.

Japan's official response to the growing textbook controversy and surging protest movements in China and Korea has been a series of bland government statements calling on both governments to prevent differences in historical interpretation from damaging ties. "It is important to control emotions," Prime Minister Koizumi said.

But behind the diplomatic platitudes, sentiment has hardened among key elements of the prime minister's fellow Liberal Democrats, well over 100 of whom – including Education Minister Nakayama Nariaki – publicly back the historical revisionist current. The issues of nationalist education have not been limited to textbooks. In the past two years, hundreds of teachers, mainly in Tokyo, have been punished for refusing to stand for the national anthem and flag, symbols across Asia of Japan's militarist past.

Liberal Democratic Party spokesmen insist that the Chinese government is stoking patriotism and anti-Japanese sentiment, while Korea has failed to properly digest its own history of collaboration with Imperial Japan. Events of recent months make clear that nationalism is not only seething in all three countries, but that it is frequently manipulated by the state. The Chinese government, struggling to deal with the massive social fallout from over two decades of breakneck capitalist growth, has repeatedly resorted to banging the nationalist drum to keep the country

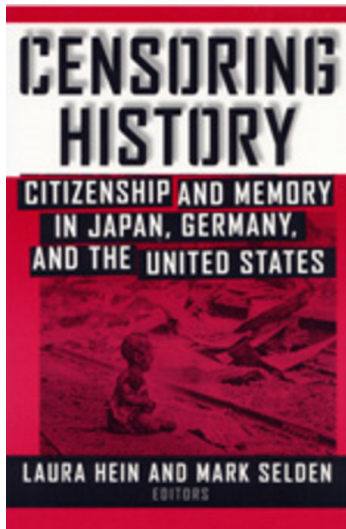
united, at the risk of alienating the Japanese capital, technology and markets it so desperately needs. Japan too is grappling with economic problems, and in a chilling echo of the 1930s, finds itself increasingly tugged rightwards by a neo-nationalist movement that wants to confront the Chinese threat both militarily and ideologically.

Tokyo hopes that red-hot trade with China, which grew by 17 percent last year, and growing economic and cultural links with Korea, will trump the fallout from its contentious views on history. But a clash of old nationalisms in the world's most dynamic economic region cannot be good for business, as Japan's corporations now recognize, indeed it threatens the peace and stability of the region. With Japan in the midst of territorial disputes with four of its neighbors—China, South Korea, Russia, and Taiwan—all with roots in the colonial past, the tensions will not soon ease.

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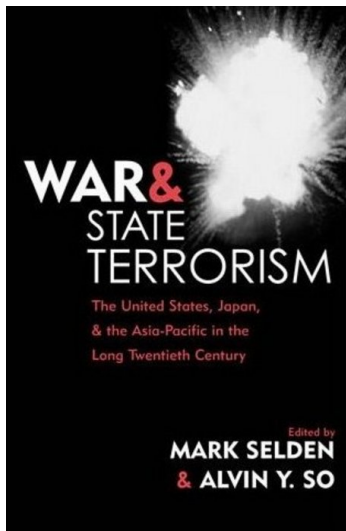
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