

Nationalism in the Abe Era

Jeff Kingston

INTRODUCTION

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This group of papers emerged from a panel entitled “Japan’s Identity Crisis and Reactionary Nationalism” at the 2016 Association of Asian Studies Conference held in Seattle, Washington, US. With the exception of Akiko Hashimoto, all the contributors were panelists.

The authors explore different dimensions of nationalism in Abe’s Japan illuminating what the ongoing culture wars signify about Japanese democracy, war memory, pacifism, religion, education, and wartime responsibility. There is much common ground among the authors in terms of their analysis of the main factors driving contemporary Japanese nationalism, involving a rightward, neonationalist political shift at the top and the emergence of revisionism from the mid-1990s in response to the government’s more forthright reckoning regarding wartime misdeeds. These essays illuminate how identity politics are intensely contested in Japan’s ongoing culture wars as they are waged in the media, textbooks, museums, shrines, in the streets, and in school ceremonies.

Hashimoto elucidates public discourse concerning divisive war memories, exploring the culture of defeat and how different stakeholders embrace to varying degrees three different approaches – nationalism, pacifism, and reconciliation – and how they influence war memory. Nationalism seeks to expunge the stigma of defeat and embrace a more robust security policy, pacifism emphasizes the moral obligations Japan must shoulder in its dealing

with Asian neighbors and rejects moves towards militarizing Japanese foreign policy, while reconciliation seeks to reclaim a place in the region for Japan, and restore national dignity, based on a forthright acknowledgement of wartime misdeeds and atonement toward Japan’s neighbors. These divergent paths intersect with the fault-lines of Japanese identity politics and as such are hotly contested as evident in the current debate over constitutional revisionism and the Abe Doctrine.

Hashimoto argues that in the postwar era, Article 9 has become embedded in Japan’s civic identity and efforts to protect it from Abe’s onslaught tap into deeply embedded pacifist values and norms. As such, it is a symbol of Japan’s quest for moral recovery. She also introduces a variety of civil society organizations that are committed to defend the constitution, representing grassroots opposition to Abe’s goal to revise it.

Whereas most coverage of textbook battles focuses on examples of rightwing groups and government bodies seeking to downplay or expunge wartime misdeeds, Hashimoto draws attention to trilateral efforts by scholars, educators and activists from China, Japan, and South Korea to write a common textbook. Similar efforts in Europe eventually bore fruit and constitute an important contribution to postwar reconciliation. The relative lack of success in finding a common language and understanding of Asia’s shared and painful past, she argues, is more a challenge than an indictment of a process that requires patience and persistence. The goal of restoring dignity and achieving moral recovery is especially

difficult, but all the more important, given the current climate of heightened regional tensions.

Mark Mullins introduces religious nationalism in Japan, specifically the efforts of the Association of Shinto Shrines, Jinja Honchō, and affiliated organizations to recover or restore what was “lost” during the U.S. Occupation (1945-52). These groups have long worked closely with the Liberal Democratic Party and are committed to elevating the position of the Emperor and Imperial Household in national life, revising the Constitution, renationalizing Yasukuni Shrine to ensure proper care for the Shōwa martyrs, and restoring moral and patriotic education in the public schools. Mullins argues that the past two decades of economic stagnation and social turmoil have benefitted these religious organizations and that the March 11, 2011 triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident—has reinforced this trend. While many of these policy and legislative developments are not especially religious in nature, they have propelled the restorationist political agenda of these groups.

Addressing the “flag and anthem” case, Mullins shows how the state’s decision to impose these symbols of wartime nationalism on contemporary schools became a source of contention in schools in the wake of judicial backing for the Patriotic Education Law (2006). He explains that this legislation involves “a radical shift in the educational system from one that seeks to nurture individual character to one aimed at cultivating individuals who will comply with the policies of the state.” A significant feature of the conflict lies in the fact that Emperor Akihito publically distanced himself from the government’s promotion of compulsory “flag and anthem” veneration and singing in schools, suggesting that it should be a matter of individual choice rather than state compulsion.

Mullins finds broad opposition to plans for constitutional revision as many people are troubled by the LDP’s proposed revisions of Articles 20 and 89, which currently define the separation of religion and state and protect religious freedom, respectively. Proposed revisions would facilitate state support for Yasukuni Shrine and sanction official visits by politicians. He concludes that many Japanese oppose constitutional revision because it would subject them to greater government coercion, an erosion of civil liberties, and further encroachment of Shinto into the public sphere by redefining certain religious rituals as social rituals.

Nakano Koichi argues that the New Right transformation of Japanese politics—the combined ascendancy of economic liberalism and political illiberalism—is the driving force of contemporary nationalism in Japan. This nationalism is marked by jingoism and xenophobia targeting China and South Korea as evident in the popular media. Japan’s ethnic Korean population—the Zainichi—have been a target of hate speech stoked by hate-mongering activists and an opportunistic media. Moreover, there has been an unsettling degree of tolerance towards this intolerance by the Abe administration. Abe’s nationalism, Nakano argues, also involves rewriting Japan’s shared past with Asia. Textbooks are the battleground where there has been a sustained effort by revisionists since the late 1990s to whitewash this history. In his view, the mutually reinforcing trends of jingoism and revisionism are driven by the conservative elite and don’t reflect grassroots sentiments.

So, why this resurgence of nationalism now? Mullins highlights the natural disasters of 1995 and 2011 as windows of opportunity seized by rightwing religious organizations to promote their political agenda. Nakano argues that the adoption of neo-liberal reforms and support for military normalization from the Nakasone era in the mid-1980s forward propelled a reaction

in the form of attempts to come to grips with the past in order to promote reconciliation. But controversial history issues that emerged in the early 1990s, especially the comfort women issue, derailed such efforts and propelled a nationalist backlash. Nationalism also draws on anxieties rooted in Japan's twenty-year economic decline. This rightward shift is awkward for Washington as it welcomes Abe's moves on security, but finds his views on history counterproductive from the perspective of building alliance partners in Asia.

Sven Saaler argues that revisionist myth making since the 1960s concerning Japan's "eternally unbroken" imperial line stretching back to Jimmu Tennō (660 BC) has been an important aspect of contemporary rightwing identity politics. Currently, historical revisionists are trying to rewrite the history of the Asia-Pacific War, challenging the view that Japan fought a war of aggression. They target Japan's educational system, and school history textbooks, asserting they are distorted and masochistic, thus explaining why younger Japanese lack pride in their nation. Saaler notes that there are very few historians in the ranks of these historical revisionists.

In Abe's Japan, the revisionists are amplifying xenophobia and hardening nationalist attitudes. In detailing Abe's systematic promotion of revisionist history in various Diet groups and in his publications, Saaler conveys a picture of a zealot. He also updates the textbook battles, showing how their recent texts are making headway in middle schools, now claiming a market share of 6.5%. In his view, these textbooks are sowing seeds of recrimination over Japan's territorial disputes with Russia, South Korea, and China by indoctrinating students into believing that they are not only very important, but that Japanese claims are indisputable.

Abe and his supporters advocate "moral" and "patriotic" education initiatives they hope will

nurture pride in the nation. This agenda is supported by a web of organizations promoting an exculpatory wartime narrative such as Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), and Shintō Seiji Renmei (Shintō Association of Spiritual Leadership). Saaler argues that Abe seeks to overcome the "postwar regime" of U.S. Occupation (1945-52) reforms that debilitated Japan's political, social, and educational systems. Abe also challenges the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMFTE) that found Japan guilty of fighting a war of aggression and held its top leaders, the Class A war criminals, guilty of crimes against peace. But, as Saaler points out, this might have negative implications for the U.S. alliance because the Japanese government committed itself to upholding those judgments in the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) that ended the U.S. Occupation, established the basis for the U.S. military presence in Japan that continues to this day, and enabled Japan to peace with other signatories. Finally, Saaler probes the duplicity of moral education initiatives that are being promoted by a political establishment engulfed in a cascade of scandals. Indeed, the promotion of a moral education that seeks to deepen "love for the nation" through *dōtoku* education threatens minority values and beliefs while stifling voices critical of the political establishment.

Finally, Akiko Takenaka examines the nexus of war memory, post-95 revisionism, the comfort women controversies and Abe Shinzō's efforts to lift constitutional constraints on Japan's military forces. She selects four incidents that illustrate contemporary politicization of Japan's wartime past while drawing readers' attention to "postmemory" Japan (following the death of those who experienced the traumas of war directly) and the role of memory activists in framing debate. The paradigm of apology, contrition, and reconciliation that emerged in the 1990s ignited, she argues, a powerful revisionist backlash repudiating this "masochistic" narrative that conservatives

believe has undermined pride in nation at home and tarnished the nation's dignity internationally. In her view, apologies were made in response to international pressure rather than self-reflection while the revisionists represent a reactionary domestic response to this reconciliation agenda. She further argues that the public's embrace of official apologies in the 1990s didn't mean that people actually felt responsible for wartime misdeeds, but rather, could conveniently shift the burdens of this past onto the government.

For Japan's postmemory generation, coping with the complexities of this vexing past elicits varied responses. Takenaka asserts: "The inherited trauma of wartime hardship, then, is deeply intertwined with a pressure of guilt. In attempts to rectify the guilt and the resulting trauma, many have come to embrace the victim's history in which at least the ordinary Japanese are not to be held responsible. Others have turned to revisionist history that echoes the wartime state propaganda that asserted Japan fought the Asia-Pacific War out of self-defense, a narrative that absolves all Japanese, including political leaders, from war responsibility." Memory activists have also contributed to a sense of victimization among Japanese by emphasizing narratives of suffering while marginalizing the traumas inflicted throughout Asia. Proponents of this victim-consciousness, she asserts, also tend to be strong supporters of Article 9.

Overall, Takenaka thinks that the general

public does not accept the concept of people's war responsibility, preferring to focus on suffering endured, but she believes that the culture of protest that has emerged in the Abe era has the potential to develop into a movement for acknowledgement of this responsibility. Perhaps, but this may be overly optimistic and bears watching.

The goal of this special issue is not confined to reexamining Japan's new and old nationalisms: The issue of war's victory and war's defeat, coupled with nationalisms that accompany them, goes beyond Japan. Every war posits a global challenge of reckoning with the past and that challenge almost always reignites nationalism with varying degrees of intensity. While Japanese tend to dwell on their victimization, Americans also embrace a vindicating narrative, presenting World War II in glowing terms as a just war that defeated the forces of fascism and liberated suffering peoples from oppression. Just as Japan has not fully confronted the complexities of being invader, despoiler, and inadvertent liberator, the US has not come to terms with its own wartime savagery and war crimes such as the targeting of civilians in the firebombing of over sixty cities in Japan and atomic bombings of two more. While revisionists are primarily concerned with "victor's justice" and Japan's victimization, "victor's amnesia" in the US is also salient to understand issues of war memory and responsibility and how they reverberate across the Asia-Pacific.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Nationalism in Japan

Edited by Jeff Kingston

Akiko Hashimoto, Nationalism, Pacifism, and Reconciliation: Three Paths Forward for Japan's "History Problem" (<https://apjif.org/2016/20/Hashimoto.html>)

Mark Mullins, Neonationalism, Religion, and Patriotic Education in Post-disaster Japan (<https://apjif.org/2016/20/Mullins.html>)

Nakano Koichi, Contemporary Political Dynamics of Japanese Nationalism (<https://apjif.org/2016/20/Nakano.html>)

Sven Saaler, Nationalism and History in Contemporary Japan (<https://apjif.org/2016/20/Saaler.html>)

Akiko Takenaka, Japanese Memories of the Asia-Pacific War: Analyzing the Revisionist Turn Post-1995 (<https://apjif.org/2016/20/Takenaka.html>)

Jeff Kingston is Director of Asian Studies in Temple University Japan. He is the author of number of books and articles, including *Asian Nationalisms Reconsidered* (Routledge 2015, editor) and *Nationalism in Asia: A History Since 1945* (Wiley-Blackwell 2016).