

The Struggle for the Japanese Soul: Komori Yoshihisa, Sankei Shimbun, and the JIIA controversy

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By David McNeill

On August 18, 2006, the entire collection of English language commentaries was abruptly pulled from the website of the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) following an attack by a columnist in the nationalist [Sankei Shimbun](#). When the site reopened, all texts by Japanese authors had been eliminated.

The controversy hinges on the fact that the Institute, whose English language website describes it as “an academically independent institution affiliated with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (MOFA), also describes itself as Japan’s “foremost center for producing and disseminating ideas on international relations.” (The official, Japanese language site is silent on the subject both of “independent” and “affiliated with MOFA”.)

What does the controversy reveal about contemporary Japanese and East Asian politics and international relations? The issue provoked a storm of international controversy and thus far little comment in the Japanese press and journals. Yet it reflects above all a contemporary conflict within Japanese politics over Japan’s place in Asia.

The Japanese press, journals and websites are filled with sometimes acrimonious discussion of Japan’s place in Asia and the global order centering on such issues as the Yasukuni controversy, tensions in Japan-China and Japan-

Korea relations, and the reframing of US-Japan security relations to expand Japan’s regional military role in the American order. The immediate issue in the JIIA case, however, is the question of whether an organ affiliated with, and funded in large part by, MOFA can provide a forum to discuss such sensitive issues, or whether its function should be to simply support the government position. Indeed, some deride as an oxymoron the very notion that a government-affiliated/funded institution can provide a forum open to a range of informed opinion on controversial issues...whether the venue be Tokyo, Washington, or Beijing, and the institution Japanese, American or Chinese.

Many foreign academics and journalists found the JIIA articles, which began to appear in April 2006, to be thoughtful, at times independent or even critical attempts to engage Japan’s undigested history, growing diplomatic assertiveness and increasingly troubled relations with China, Korea and much of East Asia. They were widely read, quoted, and discussed.

Editor Tamamoto Masaru, a Johns Hopkins Ph.D. and a former director of the Asian Studies Center at American University with a reputation in academic circles, and JIIA President and former UN Ambassador Satoh Yukio, were known to be open-minded and sometimes critical thinkers. They were the “perfect team to get some fresh debate going on Japanese foreign affairs,” says Ronald A. Morse, former director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center. “And that I understand was the plan.”

The row was sparked by two essays penned by Tamamoto, particularly “How Japan Imagines China and Sees Itself,” and one by Satoh’s daughter Haruko. On August 12, Sankei special Washington correspondent, Komori Yoshihisa, published an article savaging the essays, denouncing Tamamoto as “a radical leftist scholar who has often attacked the policies of the Japanese government”, and accusing the JIIA of using taxpayers’ money to bash Japan for foreign consumption.

Six days later, Ambassador Satoh responded to the criticism in the Sankei: “It has been pointed out that in the JIIA Commentary, a series in English for overseas audiences that began this April, an essay contained expressions inappropriate from the standpoint of JIIA, which is a public interest organization, and language that would invite misunderstanding about Japan’s position and situation. As the responsible official, I accept the criticism and have deeply reflected on it.” The former ambassador continued, “Having accepted Mr. Komori’s comments, JIIA Commentary is being suspended for the time being, and the essays from past transmissions on the home page will be removed. In addition, speaking for this institute, I, having deeply reflected on this situation, plan to make a full change in our editorial arrangement.”

Komori’s article apparently produced enough flak to shoot down the JIIA project at MOFA, at least for the time being. But it is also possible that JIIA pulled the commentary - perhaps as a prelude to reconstructing the site at a later date -- in a political culture prone to self-censorship following criticism and threats from the right.



Komori Yoshihisa

The entire JIIA commentary and the translated Komori article have been posted on an independent site by Daniel Sturgeon -- who has researched the Yasukuni controversy -- and can be seen [here](#).

The issue has arisen at a time when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s August 15 Yasukuni Shrine visit has again focused attention on the direction of Japan’s international policy. It is also a moment when nationalists, including Koizumi’s heir apparent Abe Shinzo, are beating the drums for Japan to throw off the fetters of Article 9 and become a “normal state” by stepping up its regional and global military role. Many commentators have seen JIIA’s abject retreat as another sign of official Japan’s growing intolerance of critical debate on war memory and relations with

China, Korea and other Asian nations.

The heart of the challenge issued by Tamamoto's wide-ranging essay is the warning that the triumph of "hawkish nationalists", whose definition of a "normal nation" is tantamount to a Yasukuni shrine reading of Japan's wars and colonialism, could lead Japan to become "more isolated and alienated from the rest of Northeast Asia."

In his Sankei article, Komori called claims of a "revival of militarism" "the opposite of the reality in Japan" and criticized the article for using "much too many sensational, emotional and insulting words of the kind frequently used generally by the Western left or by China to bash Japan." In that sense, he said, "the essay can be called 'anti-Japan.'"

Read together, the Tamamoto and Komori articles usefully frame some of the most contentious issues in contemporary Japanese politics.

Tamamoto, while noting the contemporary struggle over Japanese national identity is somewhat circumspect over the question of whether Japanese militarism is on the rise, certainly makes clear the clash of political visions. But he infuriates Komori by contrasting what he calls "normal state advocacy" with hawkish nationalism, by holding Koizumi responsible for the decline in Chinese-Japanese relations, and by highlighting the concern of many Asians and Japanese that hawkish nationalism is a recipe for conflict in the region.

While Tamamoto and Satoh Haruko endure a self-imposed silence in the debate, the man behind their misery was in a relaxed, expansive mood during an August 23 interview at the Japan Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tokyo. Komori professes to be 'mystified' at some of the attacks on him on online forums and laughs at the attempts to, as he put it, 'psychoanalyze

me.' "It is a lot of garbage and lies." He rejects accusations of a personal vendetta with Tamamoto.

A fluent English-speaking former Mainichi correspondent who has spent years in the US, Beijing, London and (in the later stages of the war) Vietnam, and who has written several books on China, Komori rejects the 'pejorative' label 'right-wing'. At the same time, he staunchly defends powerful 'revisionist' views as the following examples attest.

In the ample discussion that the incident has provoked, the words and perspective of Komori have been largely ignored. But they are worth close examination.

On the JIII incident: I was told of the website being taken down but I had nothing to do with it. I didn't ask for the website to be pulled. I just asked why they use this person [Tamamoto] who has such minority views. Japan is not a dictatorship so how can they use a man like this? The institute is publicly funded by MOFA, which is odd. I'm against censorship. He is entitled to his own individual views but not at the taxpayers' expense. It has nothing to do with suppression of freedom of information. If this were a public expression of a biased view, nobody should be surprised, but this is an official institution and whatever comes out has to be internally approved by the institute.

Isn't this one of the things that distinguishes Japan from the undemocratic China you criticize; that is able to challenge its own government?

Not by the government itself. It is I who has been attacked for expressing my own views. It is almost amusing to see the double standards at work. I don't support suppressing personal views. You have to ask (JIIA President) Satoh his views. I didn't advocate closure or suspension. I don't have a personal vendetta against the writer of the JIIA articles. He is free

to write somewhere else.

On Japan's war-time sex-slaves: "The comfort women existed but there is no evidence to support the contention that the Japanese military per se was forcibly recruiting those women against their wishes. It was done by so-called intermediary merchants of prostitution and should be condemned, except for the fact that prostitution itself was not against the law at the time. I know for a fact that some of those women were making lots and lots of money and built houses back home; remitted money back home to their loved ones. They were getting paid more than generals. But there is sadness involved and I feel very sympathetic toward those women. But I cannot agree that I should support the governments of South Korea or China when they say the issue has not been resolved or addressed.

Governments didn't support these women though, did they? The South Korean women had to fight their own government as well as Japan.

Does the Korean government maintain this position now? With regard to the issue of compensation, in 1965 normalization was accompanied by reparations by the Japanese government - I don't have the exact figure - and the Korean government was supposed to compensate their own victims. It is up to the government how they compensate. And you know the existence of the private Japanese fund to help the comfort women? But somehow the Korean government is not comfortable with this. They somehow discourage their victims from receiving the money.

On Yasukuni: I feel that the prime minister of Japan should not be deprived of the ability to visit the country's own war dead within his own country. No other country would have to listen to this incessant criticism. I lived and worked in China so I know the structure from which their incessant criticism of Japan derives. It is part of

the legitimacy of the Communist Party in China to criticize Japan.

I think Japan has paid its dues. Official reparations were declined by [Chinese nationalist leader] Chiang Kai-shek in the first place. Then, at the time of normalization talks between Japan and China, [Former Chinese Premier] Zhou En-lai said the country did not want reparations from Japan. That was their [the Chinese government's] own choice.

But the Chinese government is not looking for reparations, is it? Just that Japanese leaders stop visiting the shrine to worship class-A war criminals. And of course they are upset by the museum (Yushukan) next door which legitimizes the invasion of China and the colonial rule of Korea.

When I go to the shrine, anything related to the museum never enters my mind. It is a separate issue.

You don't agree with the view of history there?

I don't know. But how I interpret those rather primitive-sounding English translations has nothing to do with my desire to pay a visit to the war dead. We don't even know who is responsible for those statements, probably the priests who wake up one morning and say, 'let's say this or that.' So I separate it, and so does Koizumi. He clearly divorces himself from the exhibits. I have to remind you that there is a shrine there for those non-Japanese victims too.

If the museum is the reason for the opposition then if we removed that museum would they [Seoul, Beijing] agree with visits? My answer is no. It is just a recently conveniently added reason for what would remain opposition under any circumstances. In China, it is rule by the party which still believes in Marxist-Leninist teachings, which denies the spirit of religion and praying, Shinto is considered a cult, like

Falun Gong. There is no middle ground. If we removed those Class-A war criminals would China be happy?

Wouldn't China be happy to get this issue out of the way between the two countries?

I don't think so. I've seen editorials in the *China Daily* saying that the class-B and C criminals were the ones that actually perpetrated the killing of Chinese citizens. They would certainly be happy if Japan caved in. In junior high school textbooks they teach nothing about the postwar history of Japan, except that in 1972 Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei came to Beijing to normalize relations. There is nothing there about Article 9, or about how hard we apologized and tried to be friendly with China. It is government policy to keep Japan in an extremely negative light, and denouncing Yasukuni is part of this.

People on the street in China knew nothing about the Murayama statement [1995 apology by socialist Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, considered the gold standard of Japan's official reflections on the Pacific War]. I'm not saying he should not have apologized, but I don't wholly support that statement because by implication he interpreted the Russo-Japan war of 1904 as a war of invasion, which Britain helped.

Clearly in the 1930s and 40s there were atrocities. But those who were held responsible paid the price by being executed. How many more times should Japanese who were not around keep kowtowing to the Chinese? The way the Chinese perceive this and other issues is only through the Chinese media, which is strictly controlled, so all those statements Koizumi makes when he visits Yasukuni, including praying for peace, no more war; none of them are reported in the Chinese press.

Yasukuni is not a diplomatic issue. Only China and possibly South Korea have made it a

diplomatic issue. It doesn't reflect the statement of any foreign policy in Japan. They say prime ministerial visits to the shrine are a glorification of the past and so on, and they say that this is an attempt to revive Japanese militarism. Do you believe that?

The US says nothing about visits to Yasukuni because both sides of the war paid the price - the US and Japan, we have accepted the verdict. You cannot argue that the country that was invaded has the right to forever demand we apologize. I can name at least 10 Japanese prime ministers who have apologized to the Chinese. Go to Taiwan and ask people what they think of the occupation, they all say it was good.

[Current Chief Cabinet Secretary and likely future Prime Minister] Abe Shinzo should maintain his freedom to choose how or when, or whether or not, to visit Yasukuni.

You can't see why Yasukuni makes China, Korea and other Asian countries nervous? It is the most potent symbol of the war and represents for them a movement in Japan to reverse the whole settlement on which the postwar era has been built. This process begins with Yasukuni and ends with Japan saying the people who are in there are not war criminals, just generals and politicians doing their job.

Koizumi doesn't say that. Abe says nothing about war criminals. What about Chinese nationalism and Korean nationalism. Why don't you criticize them? Look at the reasons that are fuelling geopolitical rivalry between China and Japan. This is the first time that Japan and China are almost on an equal footing. Look at the issue of oil exploration in the East China Sea. The government of Japan forbade Japan's own companies from exploration for 40 years, showing all the good will, only to see China unilaterally begin exploration in a contested area.

Takeshima [disputed island roughly halfway between South Korea and Japan, called Dokdo by the Koreans]: we would like to take the case to an international court, but South Korea doesn't want to do it. They use force and we do nothing (emphasis). The fear of Japan is totally groundless. We don't have any weapons like the Chinese. Look at the reality of postwar Japan and what we have endeavored to do.

But the things that Japan has endeavored to do (maintain pacifism and Article 9, remain essentially diplomatically passive etc.) are precisely the things that the people who support Yasukuni visits are against, right? They don't like that Japan is a pacifist country with its hands constitutionally tied.

That's a matter of opinion, but what is not a matter of opinion is that Japan is the most peaceful nation on the face of the earth. Japanese troops in Iraq have to be protected by other foreign troops.

Presumably you're not happy at that?

What other country exists that serves such self-imposed constraint. We don't want to be unique, we want to be normal. The Japan I grew up in was taught to pay no respect to the national anthem or flag. The state was something vicious, for good reason; I mean, look at what happened to the people during the war. But Japan went really too far, and this was combined with the teaching of Marxism that the modern nation is something you should bring down. That, combined with deeply rooted pacifism went really too far. If I said I loved my country, I was criticized. Do they have that in your country?

I think love of country is associated everywhere with an uncritical view of country, that it is right above all else.

No, you're accepting the premise that the country is not democratic. If the country is

democratic it reflects the wishes of the people. You're talking about a dictatorship.

So why does Mr Koizumi go to Yasukuni, despite polls showing a majority against the visits?

He is supported (emphasis). Look at the polls in the Nikkei, Yomiuri, the Sankei. Polls are tricky things because they come and go. But even if Koizumi is faced with overwhelming opposition, he still has the right to go as an individual to pay his respects to the dead.

He's not an individual though, is he? He is the ruler of Japan.

George Bush goes to church. I'm sure he is not going there as the president of the US representing any official policy. Koizumi is not representing any official policy whatsoever when he visits Yasukuni. He makes it clear it is not an official visit. It is not a dangerous right-wing conspiracy for us to pay respects to our war dead. Yasukuni as a symbol of militarism – those days are gone. The Diet symbolized militarism; the Asahi newspaper symbolized militarism.

Are you worried by escalating tensions with China and Korea?

It is not really escalating at all. Those anti-China demonstrations in China and the Koreans storming the Japanese embassy [in Seoul]; have you seen anything like that in Tokyo? (The Japanese ultra right-wing protest foreign embassies). That's just silly people shouting, nothing violent.

Korea even has less right to criticism. Their logic is that the prime minister should not appear (emphasis) to pay respects to class-A war criminals. The alleged crime of these men was to start a war against China in the early 1930s. But Japan never invaded militarily into the Korean peninsula. Korean people have the

right to condemn the Japanese government administration but there is very little connection between that and what the class-A war criminals did. The conduct of those criminals, for which they were tried and judged, happened long after Korea.

I don't accept this analogy between Germany and Japan. Germany was condemned for the preconceived determination to annihilate an entire race. Japan did nothing like that. Germany was judged for crimes against humanity. I totally reject the comparison with Germany.

I accept Nanjing, although there is no factual basis of the numbers - 300,000. John Rabe testified that it was 40,000 or something like that. Tilman Durbin [eyewitness to the Nanjing massacre] of the New York Times, I spent a day with him and he doesn't agree either. He says about 20-40,000 people. There was a guerrilla war going on so I'm sure there was killing of ordinary people. I am also sure there was some wrongdoing in Unit 731, but there are a lot of exaggerated grossly inaccurate versions of what happened. But Japan has paid the price in the best way we could. [Former Prime Minister of Singapore] Lee Kwan Yew asked [ex-Japanese] Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi why Japan keeps apologizing to the Chinese, and I think that's a good question.

The Komori Article

Japan-dispatched Official Anti-Japanese Essay

Commentary by Sankei special correspondent Komori Yoshihisa

Sankai Shimbun August 12, 2006, (Page 5) (Excerpts)

It has become increasingly crucial for Japan to

dispatch its messages to the world. It has always been important for Japan to properly explain its case and to clearly present its views to the international community. At a time when China and other countries are heightening their criticism of Japan for a "revival of militarism" that is quite the opposite of the reality in Japan, it is indispensable in terms of Japan's national interests for it to rebut such charges.

At this juncture, I thought that the JIIA Commentary, an English-edition newsletter that JIIA (Japan Institute of International Affairs, which is under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Ministry) began this spring was coming out at just the right timing to send such a message. Living in Washington, I could receive their dispatch by e-mail and read the research on the institute's website. The commentary would be regularly sent in the form of essays written in English.

However, on reading some of the essays, I was astonished by the contents. The essays unilaterally condemned the thinking of the government and ruling camp, as well as a majority of views in Japan as dangerous, and categorized the attacks on Japan by China and other countries as proper.

Look at the title of the essay in the May entry, "How Japan Imagines China and Sees Itself." The essay starts out: "Japan watchers (in foreign countries) increasingly blame the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations on Japan, describing Japan's China policies as mindless and provocative, self-righteous and gratuitous. But in the country itself, there is scant awareness that Japan is perceived (by some countries) as being nationalistic, militaristic, or hawkish."

The vast majority of Japan watchers in Washington who are familiar also with China see the current tense situation between Japan and China as due to "China's confrontational stance" and as "a clash between the strategic

interests of Japan and China," as well as a "China's anti-Japan national policy." Moreover, in the same essay, such false claims are made as, "It is internationally perceived that Japan is seen as being militaristic." In a BBC broadcast late last year of its international opinion poll, the people of 31 out of 33 countries chose Japan at the top as "the country that has the best influence on the rest of the world." The exceptions on the list were China and South Korea. The departure point for JIIA's overseas dispatch is a view that is just the opposite of international opinion.

The same essay contained the following passages: "'China is a threat, because it is China.' This seems to be the underlying assumption prevailing in Japan's national security circles."

"Critics see in Prime Minister Koizumi's stance on Yasukuni a lack of repentance for past imperial aggression in Asia, about which Japan has long been silent."

Both quotes are absurd remarks that are the opposite of the truth. The thrust of the essay rejects moves in the direction of Japan becoming an "ordinary country" from the aspect of its national security, which can be said to be the majority view in Japan, rejecting and denouncing them as dangerous "hawkish nationalism."

The English-language essay is filled with biased words such as calling those who support paying homage at Yasukuni Shrine the "cult of Yasukuni." The word "cult" is a derogatory term used to mean a fanatical religious group such as the Aum Shinrikyo believers in Japan.

The essays contains much too many sensational, emotional and insulting words of the kind frequently used generally by the Western left or by China to bash Japan, such as calling the thinking of Japan's pragmatists "ahistorical imagination" and claiming

"selective amnesia" regarding the war by the Japanese people. In that sense, the essay can be called "anti-Japan."

The Japan Institute of International Affairs or JIIA is a public institution that is operated by subsidies from the Japanese government. Its current director is Satoh Yukio, a former diplomat who once served as ambassador to the United Nations. The opinions in JIIA's international dispatch could be taken as the official views of the Japanese government, ruling parties, and majority of Japanese.

Although the English-language essay in question contains a statement that "these are the views of the author alone," Director Sato has stated that the intention of the JIIA Commentary was to broadly make known the "thinking of Japan about Japan itself and toward international affairs." Looking at the name of the author of the essay, I was even more astounded, and yet at the same time, convinced, for the author was Tamamoto Masaru, the English editor at JIIA. Tamamoto is a long-time resident of America and is well known as a radical leftist scholar who has often attacked the policies of the Japanese government. In a Washington seminar in 2003, I myself heard him make such comments as, "The abduction issue with North Korea has already been resolved, but the Japanese side is using it as an excuse to keep a hard-line foreign policy stance"; and, "Japan should never dispatch the Self-Defense Forces to Iraq; such a dispatch will never occur."

That Tamamoto is not only the author of an essay sent out to the world by JIIA, he also is the senior editor there. In the April edition, he took up the topic of criticism by Foreign Minister Taro and others of the lack of democracy in China, and under the title, "Japan discovers democracy," he poked fun at Japan's diplomacy toward China now discovering that the country lacks democratic values.

What is the reason for entrusting Japan's international messages to someone with extreme views who rejects Japan's current diplomacy and security foundation? I would like to send an open letter questioning Director

Satoh, attaching this column.

David McNeill is a Japan Focus coordinator and writes about Japan for the London Independent and other publications. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted September 5, 2006.