

**Impediments to Northeast Asian Regionalism –  
The Case of Japan and Korea**

**By**

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**Abstract**

Relations between Japan, Korea and China remain tense despite the Cold War's end and their consensus to pursue peace, prosperity and stability. Conventional wisdom holds that intentional distortion of the historical record and nationalism foster multilateral tensions. This study asserts these factors contribute to, but are not the essence of the problem. Largely overlooked, at least outside Japan, is the continuing debate among the Japanese people over whether Japan's military expansion into China and eventually into Southeast Asia was justified, and who was responsible for Japan's defeat. Another contributing factor is the belief of some Japanese that they are a superior human species because of descent from "*kami*," an 18<sup>th</sup> Century concept of early modern neo-Shintoism. Central to this is the conviction that Japan's emperor is the supreme emperor because of his descent from the supreme "*kami*" the sun goddess Amaterasu. Those who subscribe to this also believe their emperor to be supremely benevolent and virtuous, and thus incapable of condoning the misdeeds Koreans and Chinese allege he and his government sanctioned during Japan's early 20<sup>th</sup> Century empire building. Japan's relations with its neighbors will remain strained, and progress toward regional cooperation impeded until the Japanese people candidly confront such views.

**Key Words:** Korea-Japan relations, Japan, Japanese nationalism, Korea, Korean nationalism, Northeast Asia regionalism

## *Introduction*

The Cold War's end in 1990 largely erased ideology as a divisive issue in regional relations, particularly between Japan, South Korea and China. These nations subsequently forged for the first time in history a consensus that accents the pursuit of prosperity, peace and stability. Success in the pursuit of prosperity has elevated China, Japan and South Korea as the world's 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> leading economies. But sustaining prosperity requires peace and economic cooperation, goals best served through regionalism, i.e. multilateral cooperation. It would thus seem that their national interests are best served by multilateral cooperation. Yet despite the region's impressive prosperity, no effective and durable regional forum has emerged in Northeast Asia to sustain collaboration as has been the case evident in the North American Free Trade Zone (NAFTA), the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Northeast Asia's nations recognized the need for regional collaboration as early as 1998 by launching two joint efforts. China, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan agreed to convene annual high level diplomatic talks designed to promote multilateral cooperation beginning in the areas of environmental protection and disaster assistance. Negotiations to forge free trade agreements followed. Paralleling these efforts since 2002 was China's initiative to promote regional peace and stability through the Six Party Talks that for the first time brought together China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States to negotiate a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions.

Alas, both endeavors had faltered by 2010 (Quinones, 2013). Ever since political scientists, economists, and area specialists have attempted to explain this failure. Having shelved ideological differences, many observers point to distorted history, territorial disputes and nationalism, or ultra nationalism as some prefer, as primary impediments to regional cooperation. Largely ignored is the fact that World War II in East Asia continues to be waged between Japan and its neighbors Korea and China as a passionate debate over territorial disputes, "Comfort Women," etc. Recently even the United States urged all sides to resolve their differences concerning historical issues and instead focus on the future to achieve closer regional economic and security cooperation. Here we assess these perceived impediments, beginning with the largely ignored Japanese people's debate over the Imperial Japanese government's pursuit of empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### *Who was Responsible for Imperial Japan's Wars?*

John Dower in, *Embracing Death – Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 discusses in perceptive depth the "conservative" versus "leftists" or "liberal" interpretations of Japan's rise as an empire and conduct during World War II. A popular Japanese view among so-called "leftists" that gained currency immediately after the war and some still consider valid is that a small clique of "ignorant, reckless militarists and ultranationalists" and "right-wing thugs and academic ideologues, some industrialists and politicians" (Dower, p. 505) deceived the nation and lead it into war. Leading this clique was (p. 491) wartime Prime Minister and General Tojo (Dower p. 491). Another thesis is that Japan lost the war because of its "backwardness in science and applied technology," the favorite

explanation of postwar Prime Minister and Imperial Prince Higashikuni. (Dower, p. 492 and 494.). A minority allege that Japan's militarists' racist and state-centered ideology propelled Japan into war. (Dower p. 497). Another group pointed to Western racism as a cause of the war and motive behind the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (p. 493).

Some Japanese believe responsibility could have been determined by the Tokyo War Crime Tribunal. But after a relatively small number of alleged war criminals were found guilty and executed on orders from the U.S. Supreme Commander and ruler of Japan General Douglas MacArthur, an abrupt shift in U.S. policy toward Japan halted the process. (Dower, p. 511.) In 1948, as China was falling to Communist Mao Xe-deng's legions, Washington determined it needed Japan as the "cornerstone" of its defense against communism in East Asia. The doors of Japan's Sugamo Prison were opened and accused but untried war criminals released. Eventually, after the so-called San Francisco Peace Treaty took effect in 1952, ending the U.S. occupation of Japan, Japan's reinstated Diet approved the release of all imprisoned war criminals. Japan thus has yet to resolve the questions who was responsible for what is known in Japan as the "China Incident" and the "Great Pacific War" and what if anything did the war accomplish. The U.S. government must share responsibility for this situation since its abrupt policy reversal from condemning Japan's wartime leaders to rely on some to forge a close US-Japan Cold War alliance greatly muddled Japan's debate over responsibility for imperial Japan's perceived misconduct.

But for victims of Japan's imperialism, there was and is today no doubt about who was responsible for inflicting enormous suffering on the people of China, Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere in East Asia. Perpetuating these nations' animosity toward Japan is the continuing debate in Japan between "liberals" and "conservatives" over whether Japan's pre-1945 political and military leaders, including the emperor, were justified in pursuing war or guilty of unjustifiable atrocities.

### *Japan's "Conservatives" versus "Liberals"*

The genesis of Japan's disputes with its neighbors is the intense dueling between two political schools of interpretation about Imperial Japan's conduct toward China and Korea. Generally speaking, the debate is closely aligned with Japan's two primary political camps – the "conservatives" lead in the Diet by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the "leftists" or "liberals" represented by the primary opposition parties the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Communist and Socialist Parties. Although the conservative LDP generally shares a strong anti-communist sentiment, the debate reflects different interpretations of pre-World War II Japanese history and imperialism more than political ideology.

In the summer of 2006 Japan's leading newspapers commemorated the 61<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Japan's defeat in 1945 by running special editorials and articles about the "Showa War" as the conservative *Yomiuri shimbun* collectively called Japan's military operations in China between 1931 and 1945. The period embraces the invasion of Manchuria (1931-32), the "China Incident" and the "Great Pacific War" (1937-45). (See: "Editorial - Responsibilities for 'Showa War' Assessed," *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 15, 2006). The same day Japan's leading liberal newspaper the *Asahi shimbun* ran an editorial entitled, "The War Waged by Japan." (The English

version appeared in the *Asahi shimbun*, August 15, 2006, Japanese language version August 13.) *Yomiuri shimbun*'s editorial explained that the newspaper, "... has worked to clarify what degree of responsibility wartime political and military leaders should bear." *Asahi shimbun*'s editor asked, "... what was the war really about? Was it a war characterized by Japan's invasion of Asia, or was it about self-defense? Debate continues to this day." For many Japanese, these key questions about the "Showa War" still await a satisfactory answer.

The quest for answers has preoccupied Japan's political leadership since Japan's surrender. Those Japanese who lean toward condemnation of Japan's colonization of Korea and invasion of China are usually labeled "leftist" by their "rightist" counterparts. Leftists blame militarism, excessive nationalism, submission to authority particularly to the emperor, and the greed of Japan's industrialists as the main causes for Japan's imperial ambitions and ruthless early 20<sup>th</sup> Century misconduct. In short, blame is placed primarily on the shoulders of the Japanese people and their leaders. They tend to approve of the Tokyo Tribunal's charges against key Japanese military and political leaders and sanction the convictions. So-called leftists champion Article 9 of Japan's post-war constitution which bars Japan from relying on armed force to resolve international disputes. Japan's "leftist," often also referred to as the "pacifist" camp has consistently opposed Japan's gradual strengthening of its "self defense forces." Some in the conservative camp assert that Japan's pro-communists inspired this "leftist" historical interpretation. They also allege that Japan's "leftists" collaborated with US occupation authorities to exploit the Tokyo War Crime Tribunal as a forum to confirm and to propagate the leftist historical view of Imperial Japanese history. Japan's leftist press includes Japan's largest or second largest daily newspaper the *Asahi shimbun*, monthly magazines such as *Seikai* and the English language daily newspaper the *Japan Times*.

The conservative camp's views on pre-WWII history are quite precisely defined thanks to several organizations such as the Society for the Distribution of the Truth and the *Yushukan* Museum attached to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Here the visitor can gain a comprehensive understanding of this "rightist" interpretation of modern Japanese history. (*Yasukuni Jinja - Yushukan Record in Pictures*). Conservatives also rely on Japan's mass media, particularly *Yomiuri shimbun*, *Sankei shimbun* and monthly magazines such as *Sapio* and *Seiron*.

For example the April 2014 issue of *Seiron* published an open letter to US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy written by OGAWA Eitaro who described himself as a "literary critic." He disagreed with the ambassador's "disappointment" sparked by Prime Minister (LDP) ABE Shinzo's December 2013 visit to Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo which some Japanese consider a national memorial where Japan's war dead since 1868 are remembered. OGAWA defends the visit as a "deeply personal and spiritual pilgrimage," and cautions against "religious matters" being handled in the "political sphere." Nevertheless, ABE's visit angered the governments of China and the two Koreas, and disappointed the U.S. government. (Ogawa, 5)

OGAWA relies on the "rightist" historical interpretation to lecture the ambassador. He claims that criticism of PM ABE's visit is a consequence of "strident propaganda" by China and South Korea. He cites the Tokyo War Crimes Trial as the source of this propaganda and claims, "... the war itself was not wrong. There is no right or wrong in war. In principle, modern warfare is a clash between state interests." OGAWA sets forth the conservatives' primary thesis that

Japan's war was justified because its "ultimate objective was to construct a 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' intended to benefit all East Asia by purging the region of Western imperialists, thus promoting regional prosperity and cooperation. (Ogawa, 7) He claims that,

Japan advanced mainly toward the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria. And the two main reasons for Japan's advance were that the very vulnerable Chinese government invited European and American powers into Asia which became a real threat to Japan, and second, Japan feared Russia's southward advance toward the Chinese Continent.

Despite Japan's northward "advance," the word PM ABE prefers to "invasion" when discussing imperial Japan's military movements in Korea and northeast China, OGAWA questions why the United States sought war with Japan. (Ogawa, 14)

American ambitions were attracted toward lucrative Chinese interests. Thus, there was a need to sweep Japan out of the way. Also, in order to prevent a German victory in Europe, there was a need to strike Japan, since Japan was a member of the Axis. Thirdly, an expanding Japan would be struck as a precautionary measure, before it became a threat to America.

Japan had "merely lost a war," he claims, and then asserts that labeling the war dead, a reference to the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, as "war criminals" is a "regression from civilization to barbarity." He continues, "Essentially, war crimes do exist (an oblique reference to the US bombing of Japanese cities), regardless of who is the winner or loser; ..., war itself is a cruel and absolute evil. With this argument in mind, the accusations against Japan make no sense at all." (Ogawa, 8)

The "culture of apology" is, for OGAWA at least (p. 8), "Japan's grave weakness." He points to the dichotomy between the Japanese concepts of "*tatemae* and *honne*," or inner and outer feelings. In other words, to avoid offending anyone, the Japanese may express outwardly a tempered view to avoid any offense but internally harbor an entirely different view. Here the important aspect is one's intent to avoid offending someone rather than candidly expressing the truth. He claims the Chinese and Korean governments have exploited this Japanese weakness to spread a "false image of Japan," to degrade Japanese humanity and to burden Japan with "the unbearable shame of being burdened with false accusation ...." As proof of Japan's humanity and benevolence, Ogawa (p. 12) points to the emperor, "The Emperor was in fact the exact opposite of militarism and fanaticism, a symbol of maternity of the nation of Japan." In other words, Japan's Showa Emperor Hirohito had ensured that his government officials pursued policies intended only to defend Japan and its neighbors against Western imperialism and racism while purging East Asia of the same.

With only minor variation, this is the essence of the conservative camp's view of Japan's early 20<sup>th</sup> Century "advance" onto the Asia mainland and the war with the United States. In short, Japan's intentions were merely to defend itself and its neighbors while promoting their modernization, independence and prosperity.

### *The Continuity of Japan's Conservative Thesis*

Japan's conservative camp is centered in the LDP which has dominated Japanese government and politics since the restoration of Japan's sovereignty in 1952. The LDP's political pedigree can be traced directly to Japan's anti-communist, pro-militarist political leadership during the "Showa War." Today the most prominent political linkage is between Japan's current prime minister ABE Shinzo and his grandfather former "Showa War" Minister of State and postwar Prime Minister KISHI Nobusuke. KISHI was born Sato Nobusuke but adopted into a wealthier branch of the family which changed his name. In 1945 he was accused of war crimes and imprisoned but released without being charged in 1948 when the United States decided to embrace Japan as its primary anti-communist ally in East Asia. KISHI's brother SATO Eisaku served as an LDP prime minister, son-in-law as an LDP foreign minister, and his son, KISHI's grandson ABE Shinzo, became LDP prime minister twice, once in December 2006 and, after resigning for health reason, again in December 2012. ABE Shinzo previously had served as Chief Cabinet Secretary to PM KOIZUMI Junichiro, the son of LDP Diet member KOIZUMI Junya.

PM Abe's deputy prime minister and concurrent finance minister is ASO Taro whose grandfather YOSHIDA Shigeru was one of Japan's early postwar prime ministers. ASO's great-great-grandfather was OKUBO Toshimichi, a leading statesman during the Meiji era (1868-1912). ASO's father Takakichi represented Kyushu Island's Fukuoka city in the Diet's Lower House. ASO's younger brother Yutaka heads the family's extensive business empire which includes 70 companies that range from hospitals and cement-makers to colleges and a golf course. ASO's sister is married to Emperor Akihito's cousin. As prime minister in 2008 he outraged Australian, British and Dutch veterans of WWII by refusing to admit that his grandfather had employed thousands of Chinese unpaid laborers and 300 European prisoners of war in the family's mines in Kyushu during WWII. (*JT* January 22, 2013, p. 3.)

ABE Shinzo has endeavored with mixed success, to walk a fine line between the LDP's most conservative faction and Korean and Chinese perceptions of imperial Japanese history. On the one hand, Japan's conservatives want imperial Japanese history re-written to project a more positive, less demeaning image of Showa Japan. Korea and China counter that this would be further evidence that Japan's previous official apologies for imperial Japan's perceived misconduct had been insincere and meaningless. During his second term as prime minister, ABE has attempted to appease both sides but with inconsistent remarks. He has repeatedly assured the Chinese and South Korean leadership that he has no intention of backing away from either the 1993 KONO Diet-approved apology statement regarding "Comfort Women" and the 1995 Prime Minister MURAYAMA Tomiichi statement which recognized that Japan had, "caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries ..." in East Asia. ABE on the other hand, referring to the 1995 MURAYAMA apology, told the Diet's Upper House in April 2013 that he is "not upholding all of (the statement) as it is." (*Japan Times*, April 27, 2013, p. 1). ABE's Chief Cabinet Secretary SUGA Yoshihide later explained that, "We'd like to issue a new statement to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015." Later the same week ABE told the Upper House that he questioned the use of the term "aggression" to describe Japan's military activities in China in the 1930s. Instead, Abe said he preferred the world "advanced."

ABE's remarks since becoming prime minister for the first time in 2006 regarding imperial Japan's past are consistent with his views prior to becoming a nationally recognized politician. In 1997 he joined the Association to Consider the Future Path for Japan and History Education which advocates exonerating the narrative of Japan's wartime past. (*JT*, April 28, 2013, p. 8). In 2001 Abe pressed Japan's national TV network NHK to revise a documentary about the judgment of an international people's tribunal regarding Emperor Hirohito's wartime responsibility (*JT, Ibid.*). In 2007 Abe dismissed allegations that Japan had forced Asian women, particularly Korean and Chinese women, to serve as "comfort women" to the Japanese imperial army. Abe's remarks outraged Koreans, Chinese and other Asian women and he eventually apologized to US President Bush, but only after the US House of Representatives had passed a resolution that condemned the imperial Japanese army's reliance on "sex slaves." Also in 2007 ABE angered the people of Okinawa when he directed the education ministry to erase from textbook references to the Imperial Japanese army's directive that Okinawans commit suicide rather than surrender to US forces during the 1945 battle for Okinawa. (*JT, Ibid.*).

But ABE's remarks reflect a broader spectrum of Japanese public opinion as reflected in an opinion piece the *Sankei shimbun* first published and then was translated into English and appeared in the April 23, 2013 issue of *Japan Times (JT)*. The article is entitled "Conservative Tasks in Japan," authored by Japan's former ambassador to Thailand (1988-92) OKAZAKI Hisahiko. (*JT*, April 23, 2013, p. 11.) Okazaki writes that PM ABE's first priority should be;

... eradication of the so-called postwar historical view. This view was a product of the U.S. policy in the earlier days of the (WWII) postwar (US) Occupation. U.S. occupation authorities taught Japanese children that all of Japan's past and traditions were bad in an attempt to completely eradicate Japan's war potential, both materially and spiritually. The U.S. revised this policy as soon as the Cold War began in order to make Japan a reliable ally. But the education based on this policy was taken over by pro-communist leftist elements in Japan, whose main purpose was to neutralize Japan in the realm of intellectual and moral capabilities. This led to the emergence of the leftists' biased historical view. ... Eradication of this leftist historical view has been a long term issue for the Japanese nation and it has to be continuously pursued in classrooms and other educational arenas.

Okazaki lists as the conservatives' second priority;

... departure from the postwar regime in the field of defense and security issues, including an increase in the defense budget and approval of the exercise of the right to collective self-defense.

PM Abe at the end of June 2014, despite a popular outcry, re-interpreted Japan's constitution to sanction the right to collective self-defense. He and his LDP colleagues' views on the need to re-interpret imperial Japan's history continue to anger many "leftist" Japanese, not to mention the people and governments of China and both Koreas.

### *Distorted History*

Conventional wisdom holds that distorted history, nationalism and territorial disputes perpetuate Japan-Korea tensions. Koreans in both the southern and northern halves of the Korean Peninsula

share the view that the Japanese government in recent years has drifted increasingly toward the “right” or conservative interpretations of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese history. As discussed above, some Japanese politicians, government officials and private scholars’ prefer the “rightist” interpretation of Imperial Japan’s history (1868-1945) despite areas of dubious accuracy. But the allegation that Japan alone distorts the historical record is itself a profound distortion.

Political and philosophical priorities have motivated the compilation of history in East Asia for more than two millennia. East Asia’s historical record has and continues to be routinely and extensively distorted to serve political purposes more than accurate scholarship. Confucian scholar-officials beginning with China’s ancient Jin Dynasty compiled history as the basis for evaluating the conduct of rulers and government officials. The theory of the dynastic cycle encompassed the view that the final ruler of each dynasty was an unworthy despot, as recorded in each subsequent official dynastic record. The new dynasty’s first ruler on the other hand received the “mandate of heaven” because of his superior virtue as defined by Confucian ethics and recorded in the dynastic annals.

In East Asia, the historical record is routinely distorted to conform to contemporary political preferences. The first and foremost purpose for recording history was to judge human conduct according to Confucian virtues. This was necessary lacking other codes of conduct. The Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious traditions rely on codes such as the Ten Commandments recorded in the Bible and the Koran’s laws. The precisely stated Ten Commandments and similar laws are believed to be the “word of God,” i.e. the ultimate source of truth. This elevated the rules above human tampering. But Confucian virtues lack moral authority. Instead they are defined by the writings of scholars who lived long after Confucius, making them subject to reinterpretation and political manipulation.

Actually the practice of officially distorting history continues, particularly in China and North Korea. North Korea’s official version of its own history continues to undergo revision to satisfy contemporary political preferences, a process that dates from North Korean founder Kim Il Sung’s ascent to power by 1947. This tradition helps explain why contemporary Koreans and Chinese emphasize “distorted history” as a major cause for tensions with Japan. They are actually alleging that the Japanese government is intentionally distorting the historical record of Imperial Japan to rationalize Japan’s perceived misdeeds and to gloss over Japan’s previous lack of virtue in dealing with its neighbors.

Neither contemporary Koreans nor Chinese can claim to be above distorting history. Their history of late 19th Century Korea is a thoroughly distorted account of politics and the Korean royal court. Titled the *Kunse Choson chonggam* (Record of Modern Korean Politics), this small book written in classical Chinese was published in Tokyo in 1884 (Quinones 1980). Its authors, three minor ranking Korean officials, claimed that Korea’s Queen Min and her relatives had thoroughly corrupted court politics and manipulated the king. Obviously the book’s primary purpose was to justify the 1884 attempted coup by the Korean scholar-official Kim Ok-kyun and his Japanese financially supported “Enlightenment Party” (*Kaehwadang*) which then was intent on freeing the king from his corrupt in-laws so he could initiate Korea’s modernization. The views in this highly distorted text became the basis for every general history of Korea published



around the world until the late 1980s. In other words Koreans as much as Japanese have distorted their own historical record.

The distortion of history is a universal phenomenon not limited to Northeast Asia. One need only examine American history textbooks. As documented in, *Lies My Teacher Taught Me*, American textbooks are riddled with distortions (Loewen). Rare is the American textbook that recognizes Spaniards, not Britain's Pilgrims, as the first settlers of North America. Few accounts of European Americans' westward migration explain that "Manifest Destiny" involved official government genocide against native Americans. The black American experience has received increasingly accurate recounting but much remains to be revealed.

Koreans and Chinese agree that Japan is guilty of officially distorted school text books. Indeed, the Japanese government through the Ministry of Education continues to edit textbooks to conform to politically preferred interpretations (Japan Ministry of Education paragraph 1, article 16 of the revised Basic Act on Educations sets forth this requirement). But the authoritarian governments of China and North Korea are even more thorough in their distortion of officially sanctioned textbooks to promote their political agenda and the images of their past leaders. The South Korean government's distortion of textbooks may lack the scope and intensify of its neighbor's political motives, but still reflects the national agenda of projecting North Korea to South Korean youth as being an evil, ruthless communist society. Similarly, Japan is depicted as previously having been a cruel, ruthless imperialist nation that preyed on a hapless Korea until 1945. Historical research suggests a much more complex reality, one that has yet to be fully represented in South Korea's government sanctioned text books.

Surely the distortion of the historical record contributes to the perpetuation of tensions between Japan and Korea, but even if the historical record is cleansed of distortion, tensions would most likely persist because this is but one element of a complex situation. This will remain true until the writing and publication of history books is removed from the hands of government officials and politicians.

### *Nationalism*

An equally potent impediment to better Japan-Korea relations is the intensity and nature of nationalism in these societies. A generic definition of nationalism defines it as an "ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests." The individual puts national priorities above their own personal preferences. This concept first emerged in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Great Britain and gradually gained acceptance across Europe by the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The American and French revolutions defined nationalism as a desirable emotional force because of its potential to promote paradoxically one's own nation-state's independence to ensure individual freedom. Nationalism can also be viewed as a double edged sword. The imperialist nations of Europe and Japan relied on nationalism to rally their populations to fight for their empires' survival. Yet they also saw the emergence of nationalism in their colonies as a threat to their supremacy. Their efforts to stifle nationalism nurtured its emergence in their Asian and African colonies. Either defeated or exhausted by World War II, the imperialist nations were compelled to liberate their colonies. Nationalism subsequently flourished. (Hans Kohn in *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

The global emergence of nationalism by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century suggested to many social scientists the concept's universality. To a limited degree this is accurate. Nationalism everywhere shares the same essence, i.e. people within a particular nation-state tend to manifest allegiance to their nation. Each nation's cultural legacy however profoundly influences the character of nationalism in a particular nation. This makes nationalism much more particularistic than its generic definition suggests. One's culture, more than nationalism, defines a person's priorities and conduct.

### *Korean Nationalism*

Korean and Chinese nationalism share some characteristics but are both radically different from Japanese nationalism. Korean and Chinese nationalism, like Japanese nationalism, urge individuals to work together to protect and to promote their nation-state, a concept rooted in the Confucian pursuit of social harmony through family centered collective action. But Korean and Chinese nationalism distinguish themselves by sharing strong anti-Japanese sentiment. Korean nationalism emerged first as an overwhelmingly negative reaction to Japanese soldiers' brutal assassination of Queen Min in 1895, followed by Japan's suppression of Korean armed uprising against Japanese rule after their King Kojong's forced abdication in 1907, Korea's annexation in 1910 and Japan's harsh suppression of the anti-Japanese violence that swept Korea after King Kojong's death in 1919. North and South Koreans today share similar anti-Japanese nationalistic sentiment. Its intensity varies according to an individual's personal experience in dealing with Japanese, but by and large all Koreans harbor at least a distrust of Japanese politicians and reject Japanese explanations for the colonization of Korea.

As discussed earlier, the words and deeds of some contemporary Japanese "right" wing politicians as like Prime Minister ABE and his Deputy Prime Minister ASO Taro perpetuate Korean's anti-Japanese sentiment despite Japan's prior apologies for previous misdeeds. Particularly irritating to Koreans are Japanese government efforts to rationalize and marginalize Japan's imperial misdeeds in officially sanctioned textbooks, claims to the tiny island of *Tokto (Takeshima)*, ranking officials' visits to *Yasukuni Shrine*, denial that Japan forced Korean women to serve as "sex slaves" and refusal to compensate Korean workers for their forced labor during the "Great Pacific War". Koreans are quick to point to these occurrences as evidence that Japanese apologies have been insincere.

A second common element of Korean nationalism is a shared sense of Korean ethnicity which distinguishes Koreans from both Chinese and Japanese. Pride in being Korean is largely linked to Korea's long history as a united kingdom with an impressive cultural legacy. Koreans achieved political unification in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, eight centuries before Japan's unification under the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1600, and sustained unity until division in 1945. Koreans are proud of their cultural diversity. They welcomed Buddhism and Confucianism and transmitted it to Japan. They adapted Chinese political institutions to their socio-political preferences. Their centralized bureaucracy closely resembled China's but was headed by a hereditary dynasty, the Yi *Choson*, which reigned longer than any Chinese dynasty. They adopted China's competitive civil service examination to staff their bureaucracy, but made it more competitive by adding

levels of competition. Although they relied heavily on written Chinese, they developed their own phonetic alphabet.

Koreans today continue to demonstrate an impressive openness to the outside world and an eagerness to integrate foreign ideas into their culture as evident from the fact that nearly one quarter of all Koreans are Christians in South Korea. Koreans rely on diverse economic ideals, capitalism in the south and socialism in the north. Many young Koreans in the south study abroad. South Korean society accepts foreigners as educators, business partners, etc. and is increasingly open to immigration. Often North Korea is described as a closed society. Indeed, relative to South Korea, the North Korean government strives to limit the extent of foreign access to and influence on the society. Yet the number of North Koreans studying in China and Russia is impressive and the continuous trickle of students to Europe, Canada and elsewhere is recognition that national survival requires acquisition of advanced technology.

Korean culture includes a pervasive concern about ancestry. Some Koreans believe they are descendants of a legendary ancestor named *Tangun*. Korea's royal household and aristocracy maintained detailed genealogies, a common practice today in South Korea. The purpose of these genealogies is to maintain proper marriage between families of equivalent socio-economic class, not as an effort to maintain "racial" purity. Although once concerned about sustaining ethnic purity, since 1950 and the influx of tens of thousands of foreigners into South Korean society, concern about preserving ethnic purity has evaporated. For most Koreans, the source of their positive nationalism is rooted in their ancestors' cultural accomplishments and shared sense of ethnic uniqueness relative to the Chinese.

### *Modern Japanese Nationalism's Genesis*

Japanese nationalism is a complex blend of legend, religious beliefs and political ideology that first emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It traces its genesis to the merging of these diverse traditions into a single school of thought called *kokugaku* (School of National Learning). (Varley, p. 18) The studies of Shinto religious legends and concepts by 18<sup>th</sup> Century Tokugawa (1600-1868) Confucian scholars Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutani (1776-1843) initiated an intellectual tradition that elevated Japan's emperor and people above all others. (Varley, pp. 185-9 and Earl, pp. 76-81). Motoori focused on the Shinto concept of *kami* which he defined as "the spirits that abide in and are worshipped at shrines. In principle human beings, birds, animals, trees plants, mountains, oceans – all may be *kami*." (Varley, pp. 185-9). The supreme *kami* is *Amaterasu*, the sun goddess and legendary mother of Japan's imperial dynasty. This assertion gave Japan's emperor the divine right to rule which eventually pit advocates of *kokugaku*, who saw the emperor as Japan's legitimate ruler, versus champions of the Tokugawa *shogun*.

Hirata Atsutane, a native of Akita prefecture which was ruled by a *daimyo* who had opposed Tokugawa rule, used his position at the Kyoto Imperial Court to teach the imperial household a highly racist form of *kokugaku*. He declared that Japanese were racially superior to all other people because of their descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu;

Japanese differ completely from and are superior to the peoples of China, India, Russia, Holland, Siam, Cambodia and all other countries of the world, and for us to have called our country the Land of the Gods was not mere vainglory. It was the gods who formed all the land of the world at the creation, and these gods where without exception born in Japan. Japan is thus the homeland of the gods, and that is why we call it the Land of the Gods. This is a matter of universal belief, and it's quite beyond dispute. (Ryusaku, *et. al.* p. 39.)

Hirata's advocacy of the emperor as Japan's only legitimate ruler gained him the ire of the Tokugawa government and he was eventually expelled from Kyoto to die in obscurity in his homeland. But his view of Japan's emperor as the ultimate *kami* and belief in the Japanese people's racial superiority were adopted by the advocates of the Meiji Restoration.

A Japanese sense of intellectual and political inferiority to China had motivated the birth of *Kokugaku* which asserted Japan's spiritual and racial superiority *vis a vis* China. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 gave Japan an emperor spiritually and morally superior to that of China. Unlike China's emperor who had to earn the "Mandate of Heaven" through battle and virtuous statesmanship, Japan's emperor was "divine," thus the ultimate source of virtue and benevolence. Victory against China in 1895 affirmed Japan's political and technical superiority *vis a vis* China. Next, Japan would have to establish itself to be equal or superior to Europe.

Japanese nationalism by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century blended Shinto myth with a sense of racial superiority and a conviction of superiority relative to China and Korea, Korea being viewed as China's inept little brother. Victory over Russia in 1905 bolstered Japan's conviction that it was equal to Europe. Just as Americans had rationalized genocide against native Americans and the acquisition of Puerto Rico, Hawaii and the Philippines as colonies, Japan's leaders believed their nation's superior morality under their benevolent emperor sanctioned colonization of Okinawa, Taiwan and Korea. Whereas the United States believed its "manifest destiny" required it to spread Christianity and capitalism, Japan was convinced its benevolent emperor had the responsibility to enlighten China and Korea, and to protect them from Western imperialism. In other words, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century conviction of Japanese moral and racial superiority combined with a sense of equality *vis a vis* Europe, motivated Japan's quest for empire. The intent, so far as Japanese were concerned, was benevolent, not malicious or self serving.

Japanese nationalism was further elaborated by the concept of *kokutai or kodo*, the imperial way. This theory asserted that Japan's emperor, descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami, was a living god who transcended all law and was thus sacred and inviolable. The Japanese people were viewed as an extended family descended from the emperor, their father and the source of the nation's uniqueness, virtue and benevolence. (Bix. p. 10-11). Consequently, all Japanese were obligated to commit themselves completely to the emperor.

Whereas nationalism in most other nations developed as a popular sentiment among the general population, Japanese nationalism by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century had become a "top down" phenomenon propagated by the nation's leadership through the educational system. The climax of the Japanese government's effort to foster its version of nationalism on the people of Japan came in 1937 as part of the effort to mobilize the nation to support the "China Incident." This

involved the Ministry of Education's distribution of the *Kokutai no hongii* (Fundamentals of the National Polity). (Bix, p. 13-14).

Ever since Japan's defeat in World War II, the Japanese have struggled with who and what were responsible for the war and their defeat. Just five years after Japan's defeat, the United States seemed to many Japanese to be following a course of action identical to Japan's prior to defeat. Once the Cold War had begun in 1948, the United States appeared to emulate Japan's pre-war anti-communist activities in China. Many Japanese could only conclude that their government's previous actions had not been entirely wrong. On the contrary, the Tokyo war Crimes Tribunal's conviction of only a few radical militarists seemed further justification for the Japanese to conclude that their emperor and his officials had acted righteously to defend Japan. China's fall to "communism" in 1949 and the Korean War seemed to further affirm this view. Some of the less desirable elements of Japanese nationalism, particularly belief in racial superiority, consequently escaped being discredited. Hirohito denied his divinity but was spared any responsibility for the war which enabled him to retain his claim to moral supremacy.

### *Japanese Nationalism Today*

Japanese nationalism survived the trauma of World War II and was spared condemnation by the abrupt shift in US policy on the eve of Mao Zedong's 1949 victory. Evidence of continuity between Hirata's views and *Kokutai* as elements of contemporary Japanese nationalism is apparent in the following assessment by prominent American scholars of Japanese history Edwin O. Reischauer and Marius B. Jansen:

Because the Japanese have merged their feelings about race, culture and nation together, they have probably made their attitudes toward race all the stronger. It is almost as if they regard themselves as a different species from the rest of humanity. (Reischauer and Jansen, p. 396.)

They continue: "Japanese find it difficult to shake off their sense of uniqueness. They place themselves above the human race and have a strong sense of separateness." (*Ibid.* p. 409. None of this has anything to do with so-called Japanese "ultra-nationalism." For many Japanese, the sense of racial superiority is the essence of their nationalism. This sentiment, deeply rooted in Japan's cultural and philosophical heritage, distinguishes Japanese nationalism from Korean and Chinese nationalism.

### *Conclusion*

The Japanese belief in their racial superiority lacks malicious intent. It is rooted in an ancient cultural belief and lacks any contrived contemporary political purpose. For most Japanese, it is merely a benign characteristic of their heritage, i.e. we are superior because we are descended from the "gods," something no other ethnic group can claim.

So long as Japanese nationalism subscribes to such a belief, it will irritate Japan's relations with its closest neighbors and impede its ability to participate in regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. Simply put, Koreans and Chinese reject the Japanese belief in their superiority. As proof, they point to imperial Japan and its grievous misdeeds. For some Japanese, particularly those who are "right" leaning, admission of Japanese guilt for causing the "Great Pacific War" and for

some of its atrocities would undermine the credibility of Emperor Hirohito's benevolent intent when striving to expand his empire. Similarly, the status of Japan's emperor would be demeaned by lowering him to the level of a war criminal.

Yet there is indeed reason for optimism. Japan's youth are far more future and internationally oriented than their parents. They recognize that Japan's future success as a nation depends increasingly on the ability of the Japanese to win the respect of their foreign peers by forging patterns of collaboration. They are less preoccupied with living in the past and defending their recent ancestors' misdeeds.

But Koreans and Chinese need to demonstrate greater understanding and patience toward their Japanese neighbors. They would do well to begin by realizing that the Japanese people themselves intensely debate the differing assessments of Imperial Japan's conduct. They understand that this debate is a consequence of contemporary Japanese politics. It has little to do with Japanese attitudes toward Koreans and Chinese today. Also, Koreans and Chinese need to focus more on the future, less on the past. The past cannot and should not be erased. They also need to recognize that they too are guilty of distorting history. Steps such as this would surely be more effective in opening the way to reconciliation, and eventually regional cooperation. Already the Korean government's promotion of "*Hanyu*" (Korean Wave) in Japan through educational exchange and popular culture such as music, movies, TV drama and food has proven far more effective in rallying Japanese respect of Koreans and their culture than nationalistic arrogance and condemnation of Japan.

Political leaders in all the concerned nations would do well to take the first steps away from focusing on the past. This was Japanese Prime Minister ABE's error when in 2006 he angered Koreans by rejecting as groundless the Japanese Imperial Army's exploitation of Korean women as "comfort women." His Deputy Prime Minister ASO Taro did not help by repeatedly rejecting Australian demands that he admit and apologize for his father's exploitation of prisoners of war. But Korean politicians are not entirely blameless. On occasion they have attempted to use Japan's past misdeeds to shift attention away from their misconduct as former ROK President LEE Myung-bak did in August 2012 when he visited *Tokto (Takeshima)* Island to deflect South Korean public attention away from his brother's corrupt activities.

Unfortunately it would appear that both Japanese and Korean politicians, more than the youth of both nations, remain prone to inflaming ethnic tensions than pursuing reconciliation. But time and patience on both sides is essential to eventually achieve sustainable reconciliation particularly as the younger generation assumes political leadership in both societies. Quickening this process will be the mutual realization that Korea and Japan's future prosperity is better served by multilateral cooperation.

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