

# The memory wars: Japan, China and Asia's future

In the post-surrender but pre-occupation Japan of August 1945, Japan's still military-dominated and emperor-led government decreed a new history teaching policy for schools. It became known as *suminuru*: the 'blackening over' of 'passages deemed to be militaristic, nationalistic, or in some manner undemocratic' in schoolbooks concerned with modern Japan. The blackening was done by the students themselves with brush and ink, in class - and often several coats of *sumi* (ink) were required.<sup>1</sup>

Peter King

Ever since the occupation ended in 1952, an ostensibly purged and progressive education ministry (*Monbusho*) has regularly carried out a comparable 'whitening over' exercise (a mixture of both outright censorship and nationalistic whitewash) on the textbooks of the day. For instance, having conceded in 1997 the existence of the *ianfu* ('comfort woman') system of forced prostitution run by the imperial army in China and the Pacific theatre of war from 1937-45, the latest history textbooks approved in April this year have been obliged to erase the whole topic once again. This immediately created yet another crisis for Japan in relations with Korea and China, whose women were the chief victims of the system. And for the first time, too, some of these textbooks also endorse the official Japanese claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea which is hotly disputed by Beijing.

## Whitening over

Contemporary whitening over is not done by children with brush and ink, of course, but by censorship panels at *Monbusho* under relentless pressure from the reigning bureaucrats at the ministry and the ascendant politicians of *Jiminto*, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). So one has to suspect that the whitening out of the comfort women may be followed by similar treatment of the forced labour system which saw thousands of abducted Koreans and Chinese slaving in the mines and factories of wartime Japan. Even the more famous wartime atrocities, such as the Nanjing massacre of 1937 and the ghastly human experiments and chemical and bacterial attacks orchestrated by Unit 731 in Manchuria, may be slated for this treatment.

Already the deficiencies of Japan's educational system seem to have had a determinable and deadly impact on the attitudes of Japanese youth: 'In a 1982 NHK [the national broadcaster] poll of 2,623 people, 10 per cent of those aged 16 to 19, and 11 per cent of those in their 20s, replied that "they can't tell" whether Japan waged a war of aggression [in China and the Pacific]. Those ratios grew to 29 per cent and 37 percent, respectively, in [a] 2000 poll'.<sup>2</sup>

Japanese widely regard themselves as among the principal victims in World War Two - not so much, unfortunately, as victims of their own government, but as victims of discriminatory American policies in the lead-up to war, and of blockade, indiscriminate fire bombing and nuclear holocaust towards war's end. They have a point here, of course, but so far the US has passed up the chance to set Japan a good example. Apparently superpowers need never say sorry, even to close allies, for inflicting needless death, suffering and destruction.

The suffering and damage inflicted by Japan's armies have never been adequately acknowledged in official quarters. But if Japan is to gain acceptance as a good regional neighbour and 'normal' country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems to have become imperative to rectify a flawed and failed process of apology. Because the politics of apology have been so excruciating - always hostage to the electoral and other priorities of the core nationalist support base of *Jiminto* - the apologies themselves have been largely vitiated by euphemism, half-heartedness, insincerity and conspicuous lack of follow-up.

At the heart of this failure is the preceding American failure to set Japan, as it did Germany, on a truly new course in 1945. This was above all the result of General MacArthur's decision to preserve the emperor system and ruthlessly shield the Showa emperor Hirohito himself from being held responsible as commander in chief for Japan's aggressions and atrocities. Supposing that a

claims, Japan's rearmament and its deepening strategic ties with the United States. It has brought the Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship to a postwar nadir.

There are now two competing visions of a 'normal' Japan. One is a repentant Japan still committed to peace, a serious apology process and good neighbourly relations in Asia. The other is a Japan which would do away with the restrictions of the US-imposed 'Peace Constitution' of 1947, in particular its war-renouncing Article 9, and free Japanese diplomacy to adopt a complete repertoire of *realpolitik* instruments and policy approaches. These would range from uninhibited armed international peace-keeping to active prosecution of Japan's maritime territorial/resource disputes with China and South Korea, and possibly also a nuclear spear to complement or replace the US nuclear umbrella in dealing with a nuclear North Korea. There is potential for friction with Japan's so far indispensable hyperpow-

731, the Nanjing killings, etc., remain largely a closed book. The government's reflexive habit is to come clean, albeit reluctantly and partially, only under pressure, including the pressure of scholars and journalists stumbling across explosive secret material.

## 3) Compensation of war victims

A proper legal framework for compensation would bring to an end the stultifying and inconsistent treatment of the whole issue by the Japanese courts. Victims could be reached out to rather than subject to years of costly and (usually) fruitless litigation - and regular public relations disasters for the Japanese government avoided.

All of this would make for an acceptably 'normal' Japan in China and elsewhere. At present, prime ministerial references to the pain and suffering of Japan's wartime victims are negated by persisting bureaucratic cover-up and judicial stone-walling, and also by widespread political 'denialism', symbolised above all by regular prime ministerial visits to honour (among other war dead) the Class A (and B and C) war criminals memorialised at the notorious Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo.

A sincere policy of apology would make for an easier transition to a more diplomatically and strategically self-reliant, less Washington-dependent Japan. A permanent UN Security Council seat could ensue, together with an opportunity to negotiate a lasting settlement of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands/resources dispute with China free of mutually aggravating nationalistic eruptions. As things stand, there is little possibility of clearing the increasingly toxic atmosphere between Beijing and Tokyo. Yet some kind of strategic understanding is essential to face the inevitable reconstruction of the bilateral relationship as Japan strives to be 'normal' and China to gain acceptance as a global great power. The huge continuing flow of trade and investment between the two is clearly now a vulnerable hostage to a dysfunctional relationship. In addition, Tokyo can look forward to more populist but officially condoned attacks on Japanese property and even persons in China when textbook revision and Yasukuni visit times come around.

## It takes two

But of course it takes two to settle, and the Chinese government role in recent eruptions of nationalist resentment directed at Japan is not encouraging. China muddied the whole issue of compensation for Japan's war crimes and occupation during the 1970s by setting them aside in favour of receiving a large Japanese aid program immediately. It also, for many years, gave no aid and comfort to individual Chinese victims of imperial Japan. Now all is greatly changed and the government is riding a

nationalist tiger in a more prosperous and internationally oriented China.

Whether the authoritarian legates of Mao can ride this tiger or will be thrown off or even eaten by it remains to be seen. In any case, Beijing would do well to avoid the kinds of pitfalls which the Japanese government has already succumbed to, including a dogmatic defence of dubious historical positions and heedless hypocrisy in demanding history-based apology. For instance, the widely accepted but increasingly discredited victim tally of the Nanjing massacre (300,000) is literally inscribed in stone at the Nanjing Memorial Hall, making any serious Chinese - or, better still, joint Sino-Japanese - scholarly exploration of the 1937 atrocities that much more difficult.<sup>3</sup>

As for the Chinese government's own role in China's self-inflicted post-1949 disasters, the more said in sincerity the better. But so far we - and the Chinese people - have heard very little from those currently responsible for coming to terms with those disasters.

In a word, Japanese and Chinese governments and civil societies in various combinations must work together to ease the drift into entrenched hostility and conflict in the bilateral relationship. But there is little doubt where the prime onus for initiating this process should fall. Sixty years of prevarication and evasion in Tokyo on its catastrophic Asian adventure in *lebensraum* have been enough. ◀

## Notes

1. Dower, John. 1999. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: WW Norton, p 247
2. Reiji Yoshida, 'Doubts over Tokyo Tribunal's linger', *Japan Times*, 4 August 2005
3. Depending on decisions about duration, geographical scope, definition of 'victims', etc for the massacre, a new consensus among responsible professional historians is emerging which sets the victim tally at around 100,000. See David Askew, 'New Research on the Nanjing Incident', *Japan-Focus*, No 109, 2004

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*'we deeply regret to have caused him [the emperor] so much anxiety'*

— Prime Minister Higashikuni, 4 September 1945

whitewashed emperor system was essential to ensure an easy occupation, the US passed up the chance to propel the Japanese towards profound reflection on their fateful adventure of 'escape from Asia', while Washington was soon keenly collaborating with most of the surviving wartime elite in the local and global anti-Communist struggle.

With the war criminal in chief on the imperial throne and the surviving wartime elite exonerated, it was always going to be hard for the Japanese people themselves to contribute to the expiation of national guilt. But Japan's civil society has been struggling valiantly with this burden ever since, even while Japan's democratization remains problematical. There is no longer (yet) a military caste, but the bureaucracy and political class have never managed to shed the Showa legacy, even though its toxic mixture of outright racism on the part of the 'children of the sun god' and impunity and reckless expansionism on the part of the military have little resonance in contemporary Japan. But the shades of Showa - denying wartime atrocity - keep punishing its victims and the victims keep fighting back.

## Politics of apology

China, for instance, is well prepared to use its UN veto and block Japan from achieving long-desired permanent membership of the Security Council on the grounds that the war issue remains unresolved. The nationalist eruptions in China over the history textbook issue in April 2005 are now fatefully entangled with the issue of disputed maritime

er ally in both kinds of 'normality', but its militarised version on the whole seems to entail more active strategic cooperation with the US than ever before, including potentially a role in the defence of Taiwan.

Ironically, this kind of normalisation will further antagonise and intensify disputes with the very countries that were the victims of Japan's first 'normalisation' - as a would-be Western-style imperialist. In other words, Japan will continue to be regarded as abnormal by its close East Asian neighbours, and the power-political option will be just as fraught with burdens and dangers as the post-1931 (or post-1894, if you will) misadventure in China. The road not taken - a genuine purge of all the major protagonists of imperial militarism, and a policy of sincere 'in-depth' apology complemented by an opening of archives and compensation of victims - would have made a vast difference to Japan's contemporary regional standing.

It's worth spelling out in detail what 'sincerity' could or should entail in the politics of apology for Japan:

- 1) Apology wide and deep  
So far the lawmakers of the Diet have been absent from the process. Ad hoc, often euphemistic interventions by emperors and liberal-minded (Murayama, Hosokawa) or under-pressure (Koizumi) prime ministers have proved inadequate.
- 2) Coming clean  
Japanese government archives on forced labour, the *ianfu* system, Unit