

The politics of memory

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

– Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651

Editorial

Sixty years after the collapse of the Japanese New Order in East Asia, the ghosts of empire and war continue to haunt the region. As Tokyo lobbies for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, demands for apology, compensation and the forthright teaching of history simmer in the media, courts, civil societies and legislatures of affected nations. With the region's future once again uncertain, the conflict of six decades ago is assuming greater significance in its international relations.

Much of the current acrimony has its roots in the imperious nature of the post-war settlement. As the authors in this sixty-year retrospective point out, those wishing to reopen the book on wartime history and post-war official memory must first dig through successive layers of political imperative: super-power confrontation, civil war, decolonisation, nation-building. Suffice to note here that many Asian grievances went unheard at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, dubbed by one critic 'a white man's tribunal'; that western governments waived their citizens' rights to compensation in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, where Japan emerged as the essential Asian ally in containing communism; and that the reestablishment of official ties between Japan and the Republic of Korea (1965) and the People's Republic of China (1972) focused on diplomatic recognition (exit Taiwan) and what Japan could do to aid economic development – the less said of the 'unfortunate period' the

better. Thus all seemed well, at least at the level of official diplomacy.

Silence on the war did not extend to Japanese domestic politics, especially following rapprochement with the PRC and the escalation of the US war in Vietnam. The post-war battle over remembering and forgetting the war pit the Japan Teachers Union against the Ministry of Education; pacifists in the Socialist and Communist parties against proponents of big power status in the Liberal Democratic Party; students' and citizens' groups and much of the intelligentsia against the established centre of political power. What was contested – as always – was contemporary: the security alliance with the United States, rearmament, revision of the constitution's war-renouncing Article IX, control over education, political careers that reached back into wartime. Recalling the history of Japanese aggression in Asia aided neither the LDP government's legitimacy nor its cause of rearming Japan in the Cold War – a point not lost on the left opposition.

Beijing entered this heated debate in 1982, precipitating the first in a long series of diplomatic incidents between Japan and its East Asian neighbours over 'the correct interpretation of history'. At issue in 1982 was a Ministry of Education 'recommendation' to replace 'invasion' with 'advance' (into China) in a high-school history textbook; textbooks have been central to the controversy ever since. 'Why does our nation stray from the world stage during big events?' asks

Fujioka Nobukatsu of the private but officially well-connected Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform: 'Our history education is wrong. Since the end of World War II, we have been taught that our country was a villain in the war. The Japanese have lost confidence in their ability to determine what direction the country should take'. The Ministry's approval of the Society's text for school use led to South Korea recalling its ambassador and placing an embargo on Japanese pop culture in 2001. History textbooks 'offensive to Chinese feelings' were at the core of the petition signed by over twenty million Chinese to deny Japan a seat on the UN Security Council in 2005.

Why is a war that ended sixty years ago so prominent on the international stage? We're back to Hobbes.

Gain. In staking its claims for future regional leadership, Beijing has found in the legacy of invasion and atrocity a moral club to beat down its rival. Around the region, competing versions of the war buttress claims to territory and energy reserves disputed by Japan, Russia, the PRC and South Korea. One also suspects indigenous competitors to Hello Kitty to be active in any boycotts.

Safety. The war's use as domestic political foil extends well beyond Japan. Caroline Rose presents evidence in *Interpreting History in Sino-Japanese Relations* that Deng Xiaoping raised the stakes on Japan's whitewashing of history in 1982

to bolster legitimacy for himself and his reform agenda because the 'old guard' in the People's Liberation Army – still in position to block Deng's final consolidation of power – were blasting his pragmatism as harmful to ideology, discipline, and morale, and the foreign policy that accompanied the four modernizations as subservient. 'By taking tough positions, Chinese leaders demonstrate their nationalist credentials and win vitally important domestic political support... No Chinese politician can afford to appear soft on "hegemony" or "imperialism" and expect to stay in power' (David Shambaugh on PRC succession politics, *International Security*, 21-2).

Reputation. Moral authority is essential to political power; governments want historiography to foster pride in the nation and loyalty to the state. Nor is it simply a matter of top-down manipulation. As Ernest Renan observed: 'Getting history wrong is an essential part of being a nation'. The problem for international events such as war is that more than one nation will get the shared history wrong, while narratives for domestic consumption rarely please audiences abroad. Here theorists of globalisation overlook an important border-crossing commodity: offence. With the media's interest in sensationalism and the political utility of enemies real or imagined, it bodes ill for the future. ◀

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Deadline for registration:

1 October 2005

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