

The Crossfire of Memories and Identities: The East Asian Controversy Over Hiroshima and Nagasaki

By Jesse Du

Note on Transliteration and Asian Characters: For all Chinese, Japanese and Korean personal names, I follow the Asian custom of placing surnames before given names; for the sake of consistency, this rule is followed even for Asian authors who have published their works in English (hence "Wang Zheng" instead of "Zheng Wang"). The only exception is for those who have Asian surnames but English given names, or those who have expressly stated a preference (as is the case with Akira Iriye). For the transliteration of Chinese sources and terms, I use the pinyin romanization system and strictly follow the updated Basic Rules of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet Orthography; for Japanese terms I use the Modified Hepburn system; for Korean terms I use the Revised Romanization of Korean system. However, for certain already well-known proper names, the common English spelling is used. All diacritics are omitted in text but kept in the endnotes and bibliography. When Asian characters are used to identify sources and terms mentioned, simplified characters are used for all Chinese sources and terms; shinjitai is used for all Japanese terms with kanji; hangul, immediately followed by the corresponding hanja if possible, is used for all Korean terms.

In April 2015, with the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki fast approaching, delegations from around the world gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for the Ninth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), a quinquennial meeting of the NPT's 190 state parties to review the treaty's implementation in the previous five years.

On 27 April, the opening day of the meeting, the Japanese delegation, led by Ambassador Sano Toshio, called for new actions in disarmament and transparency, and commented on issues such as fissile material cut-off and the Nuclear-Test-

Ban Treaty. At the end of Sano's speech, the delegation stressed the importance of raising awareness of "the tragedy that had been brought about by the use of nuclear weapons," and asked to have the Conference's Final Document invite world leaders to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki "to witness the reality [of atomic bombings] first hand."¹

Perhaps the Japanese delegation did not expect any controversy to derive from this speech, but their suggestion triggered an almost visceral reaction from China. In a closed-door session on 11 May, the portion

¹ United Nations, 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *Main Committee 1 - Summary Record of the 1st Meeting*, NPT/CONF.2015/MC.I/SR.1 (10 June 2015), 5, <http://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2015/MC.I/SR.1>.

in the Final Document regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki was deleted at the Chinese delegation's request, a move also supported by the South Korean delegation.

After Japanese news disapprovingly reported on this incident, and the Japanese government attempted to repeal the deletion, China responded with even greater fervor. When questioned by Japan's Kyodo News about the deletion, Chinese Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs Fu Cong did not bother with equivocation: "There are reasons why [Hiroshima and Nagasaki] were bombed... We don't want the humanitarian issue [regarding nuclear weapons] to be taken advantage of by [a] certain government with ulterior motives in trying to distort the history and trying to impose a partial interpretation of the Second World War."² Fu clarified that China's reaction was not directed against the Japanese people, "least of all [against] the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombing," but the NPT Conference "should keep clear of the history."³

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, like many other Japanese, seemed to be confounded by China's accusation. In a press conference on 13 May, he stressed that the invitation of world leaders to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a corollary of Japan's experience of the reality of being the target of atomic bombings (hibaku no jittai被爆の実態), proposed out of its wish for and promotion of a world

without nuclear weapons. "It is not related to any history problem, and such action [by the Chinese government] is difficult to understand."⁴

The Chinese government, on the other hand, thought everything was quite obvious. Quoting from a number of Chinese scholars in Japan Studies, a special report by the state-run Xinhua News Agency condemned the Japanese government's intention to portray itself as a victim of the Second World War, while downplaying its role as the victimizer.⁵ In the report, comments by an Associate Professor at the China Foreign Affairs University mirror those made by Fu: While commemorating the atomic bombings, Japan also ought to emphasize why exactly Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed. As a victim of the atomic bomb, Japan should also "answer the history problem to the victim countries [of its own past aggression]."⁶

In the end, the NPT Review Conference failed to ratify their proceedings, mainly over the issue of the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone in the Middle East, about which state parties could not reach consensus in a Final Document. Amidst the month-long contention and frustration, the diplomatic

2 "U.N. disarmament conference drops call for leaders to visit Hiroshima after China envoy complains," The Japan Times, 13 May 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/13/national/u-n-disarmament-conference-drops-call-leaders-visit-hiroshima>.

3 Ibid.

4 "Kakkoku shidōsha no hibakuchi hōmon ni Chūgoku ga hantai 'Rikai ni kurushimu' Kanbō Chōkan NPT saikentō kaigi" 各国指導者の被爆地訪問に中国が反対「理解に苦しむ」官房長官 NPT再検討会議 [Invitation of world leaders to atomic bombing sites rejected by China 'difficult to understand' Chief Cabinet Secretary NPT Review Conference], Hazard lab ハザードラボ, 13 May 2015, <http://www.hazardlab.jp/known/topics/detail/9/8/9893.html>.

5 Yang Zhou 杨舟, "Ribēn yāoqǐng gè guó lǐngdǎorén fǎngwèn Guǎngdǎo Chángqí zhī jiǎng shòuhài shēnfèn" 日本邀请各国领导人访问广岛长崎只讲受害身份 [Japan invites world leaders to visit Hiroshima Nagasaki only talks about victim identity], Xinhuanet 新华网, 17 May 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/17/c_127808495.htm.

6 Ibid.

skirmish between China and Japan was of little account, and was quickly forgotten by the Chinese and Japanese publics themselves, who have long been used to such political squabbles. However, this peculiar incident epitomizes not merely a disagreement between the Chinese and Japanese interpretations of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but a larger fundamental conflict of historical memory and national identity between China, Japan, and Korea, fuelling tensions in the region.⁷

In East Asian diplomacy, the four-character word “history problem” (*lishi wenti* 历史问题; *rekishi mondai* 歴史問題; *yeoksa munje* 역사문제 歷史問題) carries a lot of weight. From Mainland China to Taiwan, the two Koreas to Japan, all are haunted by their own unique set of history problems—unanswered questions and unresolved issues of their nation’s troubled pasts that are often considered too sensitive to study and too controversial to discuss. Although mostly concerning the modern period, many of these problems have roots that can be traced back centuries, a legacy of the interconnected history of Asia’s ancient civilizations. As a result of this interconnection, the history problems of one nation or state party are often intertwined with those of another. One problem can unite nations in sympathy while another can turn them against each other with resentment, weaving a delicate web of complex international relations that sometimes baffles Westerners. A

7 Lai Yew Meng, *Nationalism and Power Politics in Japan’s Relations with China: A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation* (New York: Routledge 2013), 31-32.

popular Chinese Internet adage manages to provide a concise summary of the intricacy involved:

Sino-Japanese friendship relies on [common disdain towards] Korea; Sino-Korean friendship relies on [common hatred of] Japan; Japanese-Korean friendship relies on [common aversion to] China.⁸

For one not well-acquainted with East Asia, the significance of the role played by history problems in the quagmire of international relations may be initially hard to grasp. However, upon close examination it is not hard to find how the subtle effects of these problems seep through the very fabric of socio-political life. The profound societal influence of these disputed histories is entrenched in the national identities of the people of East Asia, shaping peoples’ collective perceptions of each other.⁹ An analysis of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s history and contemporary memories offers an opportunity to better understand these complexities.

History and Emotion

There is a paradigmatic difference in the Western and East Asian historiographies regarding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. American scholars generally have been able to isolate the bombings from the emotions of the rest of World War II history and focus the debate

8 The original phrase in Chinese is: 中日友好靠韩国; 中韩友好靠日本; 日韩友好靠中国。 Different variations of this saying can be found in abundance on the Chinese Internet.

9 Qin Pang and Nicholas Thomas, “Chinese Nationalism and Trust in East Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47 (2017): 834-835, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1322627>; Scott Synder, “Overcoming the Japan-South Korea Historical Identity Complex,” *Forbes*, 7 February 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottasnyder/2014/02/07/overcoming-the-japan-south-korea-historical-identity-complex/#440a83c07d9f>.

largely in strategic terms—i.e. the military and political calculations behind the Truman administration's atomic bomb decision. Gar Alperovitz, the leading revisionist historian on the atomic bombings, notes that the American public sometimes has "felt a strong need to justify the bombings by reference to what can only be called notions of 'revenge'" fuelled by "anger at Japan's sneak attack and the brutality of her military," but ultimately concludes it as a "quite separate issue."¹⁰ Both the orthodox and revisionist schools seem to agree.¹¹ Barton J. Bernstein takes a step further and writes that even in the summer of 1945, "such sentiments of punishment and revenge were not the key motives for use [of the atomic bombs]" of the Truman administration.¹² While certainly still a cause célèbre in the United States—as proven by the controversies surrounding the Smithsonian Institution's 1995 Enola Gay exhibition and President Obama's 2016 visit to Hiroshima—the American debate over the atomic bombings is for the most part narrowly defined within the immediate context of war termination, i.e. the surrender of Japan in the summer of 1945.

In China and Korea, however, the historiographies are different. The interpretation of the bombings is invariably associated with the memory of the Second

World War and its impact on the emotions of nationalism and identity. For members of academia, government, and the public, it is virtually impossible to separate the rationale of the atomic bombings from that of Japanese aggression and atrocities in the 20th century. Consequently, the main question at the heart of the atomic bomb debate in China and Korea, to the extent one exists, is not "were the bombs necessary to induce Japan's surrender?" "should alternatives to the bombs have been explored?" or "were the bombs militarily justified?" but simply: "Were the atomic bombings morally justified as a retribution for Japan's own atrocities against other Asian peoples?" For them, the overwhelming answer is undisputedly, "Yes."

Remember and Redress

Current Chinese and Korean national identities are similar in that they both heavily employ the collective memory of victimization as the basis of their nations' modern historical consciousness. In both narratives, the once-glorious, ancient civilization of the East was defeated by superior industrial technology from the West, and consequently ravaged by imperialist aggression and subjected to national humiliation throughout much of the modern period, initially at the hands of Western powers but later, and most horrendously, by Japan, who had successfully Westernized and become an imperialist power itself.¹³

In Chinese historiography, the

¹⁰ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 628.

¹¹ Some scholars, such as Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, argue otherwise. Hasegawa's book *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) indicates that one of the main causes of the atomic bombings was Truman personal vengeance for Pearl Harbor.

¹² Barton J. Bernstein, review of *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, by Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *H-Diplo Roundtables*, Volume VII, No.2 (2006): 17, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Bernstein-HasegawaRoundtable.pdf>.

¹³ Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 54.

“Century of Humiliation” (bainian guochi 百年国耻) inflicted by foreign aggressors on a weakened China, a period of modern history spanning over 100 years from the First Opium War of 1839 to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949,¹⁴ “defines the national trauma China uses to identify itself.”¹⁵ Of all the imperialist powers that bullied China, however, Japan inflicted the heaviest damage, both physically and psychologically.¹⁶ To the average Chinese citizen today, the Japanese aggression against China during this Century of Humiliation is best symbolized by the Second Sino-Japanese War, or as the Chinese call it, the “War of Resistance Against Japan” (Kangri zhanzheng 抗日战争), from 1937 to 1945. In turn, Japanese atrocities committed against the Chinese people in the invasion are embodied in the “Rape of Nanjing (Nanking),” the six-week long mass murder and mass rape of civilians in the then capital of China by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1937, a tragedy considered “worse than

the Holocaust,”¹⁷ and regarded by one scholar as “the fundamental keystone in the construction of the modern Chinese national identity.”¹⁸ Some Western scholars dismiss this victim consciousness as some kind of “mind-trap” set down by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as its de facto ideology has shifted from Marxism to nationalism.¹⁹ Although the CCP does indeed take advantage of this mentality as a tool to legitimize its single-party state (by casting itself as the liberator of China from such humiliation), the humiliation narrative in fact precedes the communist takeover of China by at least half a century. It is a concept as old as Chinese nationalism itself, which emerged during the late-Qing period, in the wake of the first wave of national humiliations brought about by Western powers.²⁰ The discourse of national humiliation was further developed by the Nationalist Party (also known as the Kuomintang, or KMT) as an integral part of Chinese national identity during its years on the Chinese mainland, and then on the island of Taiwan after 1949.²¹ The collective memory of humiliation is not only a national narrative of modern Chinese history, but a “key part of modern Chinese subjectivity” on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.²²

14 Some scholars like Wang Zheng in *Never Forget National Humiliation* (60) think that China’s Century of Humiliation ended with the defeat of Japan and the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945. In the book (48), Wang lists the major foreign invasions China suffered during this Century: the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Eight-Nation Alliance intervention during the Boxer Rebellion (1900), constant Japanese encroachment of Chinese territories in the 1930s, and finally the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945); Wang also deems the series of “unequal treaties” (bupingdeng tiaoyue 不平等条约) China was forced to sign during this period as an equally important component of the humiliation memory. In the end, whether or not the Second Chinese Civil War from 1945 to 1950 should be considered as a part of the Century is mostly a matter of technicality, the central role played by the humiliation memory in the shaping of China’s modern national identity is acknowledged by virtually all scholars of China Studies.

15 Wang, *Never Forget*, 68.

16 *Ibid.*, 54.

17 William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternative: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 206.

18 David Askew, “The Nanjing Incident: Recent Research and Trends,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, no. 1 (2002).

19 Gerrit W. Gong, “The Beginning of History: Remember and Forgetting as Strategic Issues,” *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2001): 47, quoted in Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

20 Wang, *Never Forget*, 71-78.

21 *Ibid.*, 78-84; Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

22 *Ibid.* It is worth noting, however, Taiwan’s history curriculum has slowly begun to change since the Lee Teng-hui leadership in the 1990s. The gradual shift of Taiwan’s identity politics is an interesting topic, but is outside the scope of this paper.

While the Chinese remember Japan for the brutal eight-year long conflict (now officially 14-year long²³) and the immense suffering it brought about, the Korean memory of Japanese imperialism is even more bitter. Subjugated by Japan after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and annexed into the Japanese Empire in 1910, Korea experienced the impact of Japanese colonization during what the Koreans call the “Period of Japanese Imperialist Forced Occupation” (*Ilje gangjeomgi* 일제강점기 日帝强占期). Just like how 18 September 1931, the beginning of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, is remembered as the unofficial National Humiliation Day (*guochi ri* 国耻日) in China, Koreans view the signing of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1910 as the “National Humiliation of the Year of the Yang Metal Dog” (*gyeongsul gukchi* 경술국치 庚戌國恥).²⁴ Although the modern North and South Korean governments each have their own historical narratives, both find common ground on their shared ethno-nationalism when it comes to the memory of Korea’s colonial history, and the powerful anti-Japanese sentiment it

evokes.²⁵ In North Korea, schoolchildren worship the revolutionary history of “Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung” against the backdrop of Korea’s anti-Japanese resistance movement during the Second World War.²⁶ Across the Demilitarized Zone, in a comparatively more objective manner, South Korean secondary school students learn about Japan’s economic and military exploitation of Korea in state-issued history textbooks.²⁷

This notion of constructing national identity around humiliation may be puzzling to some—after all, are such humiliation not evidence of a nation’s weakness? But when the memory of past humiliation and weakness is contrasted against present-day success and strength, it can function as a source of patriotic nationalism. This is especially the case with China. William Callahan succinctly summarizes the mentality behind modern Chinese nationalism: “Only China could go from so high a civilization to be the lowest of the low, the Sick Man of Asia, and back again.”²⁸ This ethnocentric perception of uniqueness in China’s ability to persevere and return to greatness is a source of pride for many Chinese, but the painful memory of a history of foreign aggression

23 China’s Ministry of Education amended its official history curriculum in 2017 to include the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria as a part of the “War of Resistance Against Japan.”

24 Ben Blanchard and Antoni Slodkowski, “China marks ‘National Humiliation Day’ with anti-Japanese protests,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 September 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2012/0918/China-marks-National-Humiliation-Day-with-anti-Japanese-protests>; Han Jong-gu 한종구, “‘Nara ppaeatgin chiyong itji malja’ ... Gyeongsul Gukchiil jogigeyang jeongung hwaksan” ‘나라 빼앗긴 치욕 잊지 말자’ ...경술국치일 조기개양 전국 확산 [‘Never forget the humiliation of losing our country’ ... Gyeongsul Gukchi half-mast memorial expanded nationwide], *Yonhap News 연합뉴스 聯合뉴스*, 9 September 2016, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2016/09/08/0200000000AKR20160908124700063.HTML>.

25 Chris Wilson, Danton Ford, and Alisa Jones, “The History Text: Framing Ethno-Cultural and Civic Nationalism in the Divided Koreas,” in *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 249.

26 *Ibid.*, 235-240.

27 *Ibid.*, 245-248. It is worth noting that South Korea, like most other East Asian countries, also maintains a highly centralized curriculum system under its Ministry of Education. Only until very recently has limited textbook pluralism been legislated. Efforts by the Park Geun-hye government to push for a new state-issued history textbook in 2015 met heavy public resistance and was officially abolished by the succeeding Moon Jae-in government in 2017.

28 Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

also instils a perhaps unconscious sense of apprehension, lest China be visited by such humiliation again. According to Callahan and many others, this apprehension is present in the back of the minds of both China's leaders and populace when it comes to interactions with the West, and the notion of restoring "the rightful place of China on the world stage" is driven by "a strong sense of victimization, insecurity, and righteousness in foreign policy."²⁹ Similar sentiments of seeking the "rightful place" can also be found in modern Korean nationalism.³⁰

For both China and Korea, Japan's role as the main victimizer is crucial to the construction of their humiliation memory, which itself is an integral part of their respective modern nationalist narratives. Consequently, Japan's refusal to admit to this role is not only perceived as a mere lack of contrition, but a direct affront to the very essence of their national identities. An often-drawn comparison of attitudes towards World War II history is that between Japan and Germany.³¹ Many Chinese and Koreans would eagerly point out how the Federal Republic of Germany, although institutionally separate from the German Reich, has managed to face its brutal past and take active responsibility for the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, addressing them in history education and making compensations to surviving

victims.³² The modern state of Japan on the other hand is a direct heir to the former Empire of Japan and, as China and Korea claim, not only refuses to acknowledge the full extent of its past crimes, but is actively seeking to manipulate history and cast itself as the victim of war. China and Korea point to Japan's resurgent nationalism (although the two are just as nationalistic, if not more so, themselves)³³, historical revisionism, and general failure in answering their relevant history problems as evidence of the former imperialist aggressor's unrepentance. For China, the problem of the utmost significance is that of the Nanjing Massacre; for Korea, it is perhaps that of the "comfort women"—women and girls, many of them Korean, who were forcibly conscripted into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied territories.³⁴ Such history problems have long been evaded, downplayed, and even occasionally outright denied by Japanese politicians,³⁵ and they consistently prove to be a stumbling block in Japan's international relations with its Asian neighbours.

Forgive and Forget

While China and Korea continue to accuse Japan of unrepentance, why do more and more Japanese think that enough atonement has already been made? Why would Japan feel victimized in the first place? While the Japanese people did suffer

29 Ibid., 214; Zhao Suisheng, "Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 961-982, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030913.

30 Vickers, introduction to *History Education*, 17.

31 Philip A. Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories: The "Memory Rift" in Historical Consciousness of World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69.

32 Wan Ming, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.

33 Vickers, introduction to *History Education*, 16-17.

34 Nozaki Yoshiko, "Japanese Politics and the History Textbook Controversy, 1945-2001," in *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 290.

35 Ibid., passim.

greatly during the later years of the war, it was their government and military, which they ardently supported, that initiated the conflict and committed undeniably horrendous atrocities—do the Japanese people not remember that? Is Japan a remorseless nation, fundamentally different from Germany? After examining China and Korea’s national identities, it is only fair to also take a look at Japan’s side of things. Most Japanese do not deny that significant destruction and human suffering accompanied Imperial Japan’s invasion of Mainland Asia and the Pacific, and the Japanese government does officially recognize its aggression during the Second World War.³⁶ Indeed, throughout the post-war years, multiple Japanese Prime Ministers and Chief Cabinet Secretaries, and in fact even the current Emperor Akihito himself, have made a series of apologies and expressions of regret.³⁷ But China and Korea have questioned the sincerity of these statements, especially one given by Abe Shinzo in 2015, on the eve of the 70th anniversary of Japan’s surrender, which merely reiterated his predecessors’ previous statements, and only made oblique references to the specific issues of the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women.³⁸ In light of Abe’s nationalist drive, many Chinese and Koreans scoff that Japan’s words have not been matched by its actions. More importantly, as Akira

Iriye incisively points out, “these [official apologies] have not been incorporated into [Japan’s] public memory.”³⁹ While individual, private memories of the Second World War are innumerable and wide-ranging, the Japanese people as a whole have failed to develop a collective, public memory of this specific period of history; this is in stark contrast to China and Korea, both of which not only have coherent public memories of Japanese imperialism and aggression, but have thoroughly incorporated them into their national identities.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, while memory of the rest of World War II history broke down into a disparate jumble among the Japanese public, that of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were ingrained in the Japanese historical consciousness.

For the Japanese, the fact that their country is the only one to have ever been attacked by nuclear weapon plays an important role in the construction of their national identity,⁴¹ and out of this a kind of victim consciousness very different from that of China and Korea is born. Originating during the Cold War years, caught between the titanic Soviet-American power struggle in Asia, the Japanese construction of a post-war national identity was driven by an intimate sense of nuclear victimization. As the fear that Japan would once again become the victim of nuclear warfare pervaded the public, the 1950s gave rise to the anti-nuclear weapons peace movement

36 Lai, *Nationalism and Power Politics*, 81.

37 Akira Iriye, “Introduction: Historical Scholarship and Public Memory,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 89-90.

38 Jonathan Soble, “Shinzo Abe Echoes Japan’s Past World War II Apologies but Adds None,” *The New York Times*, 14 August 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2jDFuE8>.

39 Iriye, “Introduction,” 90.

40 *Ibid.*, 89-90.

41 Asada, Sadao, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 95.

and anti-military pacifism that would influence Japanese politics for decades to come.⁴² However, while the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki played its lead role under the spotlight, those of Japan's own wartime atrocities were quietly forgotten. John W. Dower gives a crisp analysis on the special Japanese sense of victimization in his essay "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory":

Hiroshima and Nagasaki became icons of Japanese suffering—perverse national treasures, of a sort, capable of fixating Japanese memory of the war on what had happened to Japan and simultaneously blotting out recollection of the Japanese victimization of others. Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that is, easily became a way of forgetting Nanjing, Bataan, the Burman-Siam railway, Manila, and the countless Japanese atrocities these and other place names signified to non-Japanese.⁴³

Such is Japan's historical memory, or the lack thereof, of the Second World War. One perhaps would wonder then, if the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is so indispensable to Japan's modern national identity, the United States must have been cast as the ultimate victimizer behind such tragedies. However, this is not the case.

Unlike those of its Asian neighbours, which put emphasize on the victimizers as well as their atrocities, Japan's victim consciousness focuses almost entirely on the memory of human suffering. While

a significant portion of the Japanese are still bitter over the dropping of the atomic bombs when asked by surveys,⁴⁴ there is no deep-seated resentment towards the United States among the general public, certainly not to the degree as there is towards Japan in China and Korea.⁴⁵ The profusion of atomic bomb literature in Japan focuses on the human element of the bombing survivors' (hibakusha 被爆者) personal experience, not American decision-making. While the Chinese and Koreans remember themselves as victims of Japan, the Japanese remember themselves as victims of the atomic bomb, not the United States. As a matter of fact, contemporary Japanese history textbooks give the atomic bombings only a perfunctory mention, and sometimes do not even say who dropped the bombs.⁴⁶ Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monkashō 文科省, formerly Monbushō 文部省), the authority in charge of the screening and approval of all textbooks, has been furtively pushing an agenda to downplay the atrocities and horrors of war, including the atomic bombings.⁴⁷ As more

44 Ibid., 96-101.

45 Ben-Ami Shillony, "Auschwitz and Hiroshima: What Can the Jews and the Japanese Do for World Peace?" *IHJ Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2007): 9. When it comes to academia, however, Japanese scholars have widely adopted the "atomic diplomacy" school of thinking, first introduced by English physicist P. M. S. Blackett. The orthodox interpretation of the atomic bombings in Japan reflects the American revisionist view, concludes Asada Sadao in "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and the Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1998): 481. Again, there is a contrast to China and Korea, whose academia is dominated by an interpretation in line with the American orthodox view.

46 Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud," 113

47 Ienaga Sabuō, "The Glorification of War in Japanese Education," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993/94): 113-133; Ienaga Soshō Shien Shimin no Kai 家永訴訟支援・市民の会 [Ienaga Litigation Support Citizen Council], ed., *Taiheiyō Senso to Kyōkasho 太平洋戦争と教科書* [The Pacific War and Textbooks] (Tokyo: Shisō no Kagakusha 思想の科学社, 1970), passim, quoted in Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud," 113.

42 John W. Dower, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 135.

43 Ibid., 123.

than one scholar has pointed out, today's Japanese remember the atomic bombings almost like some sort of natural disaster that simply "happened," without much thought or reflection on the lead-up to and reasoning behind the American planning and decision.⁴⁸

According to Ben-Ami Shillony, the Japanese mentality regarding the Second World War is to "forgive and forget"—forgive what others had done to Japan, and forget what Japan had done to others.⁴⁹ To many on Japan's political right, their country's experience in the war is an unpleasant episode of the past, and a major hindrance to the reconstruction of Japanese nationalism.⁵⁰ The sooner the psychological scars of that devastating trauma can be healed, and its memory be expunged from the nation's historical consciousness, the sooner Japan can be restored as a "normal" country. Thus, Japanese atrocities in China, Korea, and other Asian countries are covered with euphemism and circumlocution, while the firebombing and atomic bombings of Japan are treated as natural disasters. Promoted by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (which has effectively ruled Japan as a single-party state for much of its post-war history), aided by the right-leaning Monbushō bureaucracy, and riding on the resurgence of right-wing nationalism, this narrative stood firm through the Cold War years, as Japan was diplomatically severed from its neighbours who had turned

communist, and the common "red menace" kept silent any discussion of potentially divisive history problems with its remaining capitalist allies.⁵¹

Contradicting History and Politics

However, after the Iron Curtain fell, the history problems that had been smothered by Cold War dispensation finally began to surface as focal points in East Asian international relations. When it comes to imperialism, atrocities, and the Second World War, the Chinese and Koreans are about remembrance, while the Japanese wish to forget. Caught in the crossfire of conflicting historical memories and national identities, the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have sadly been reduced to a chess piece for diplomatic leverage in the game of nationalism between the East Asian peoples.

The ever so parlous history problem predicament haunting East Asian diplomacy has not been ameliorated by the current Japanese government, whose conservative Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, is a staunch right-wing nationalist, and wishes to restore Japan's own rightful place as a "normal" power on the world stage.⁵² Abe's openly nationalist agenda to amend the pacifist Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, coupled with other incendiary political gestures such as appointing prominent World War II revisionists to important government positions and visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where chief

48 Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud," 113; Shillony, "Auschwitz and Hiroshima," 8.

49 Shillony, "Auschwitz and Hiroshima," 9.

50 Lai, *Nationalism and Power Politics*, 103.

51 Nozaki, "Japanese Politics," 291.

52 Takahashi Kosuke, "Shinzo Abe's Nationalist Strategy," *The Diplomat*, 13 February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/shinzo-abes-nationalist-strategy>.

war criminals are enshrined among the war dead, have only validated China and Korea's already firm conviction that an unrepentant Japan has not learnt its lesson from the Second World War, and subsequently strengthened China and Korea's stance on denying Japan's quest of recognition for its own wartime victimhood.

In 2013, during the height of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute between China and Japan, and with a series of other historical controversies still stirring public sentiments, footage emerged of a smiling Abe Shinzo posing with a thumbs-up inside the cockpit of a Japan Air Self-Defense Force jet marked "731"—coincidentally the code number of the infamous Imperial Japanese Army unit that conducted appalling chemical and biological experiments on Chinese civilians and Allied prisoners of war.⁵³ South Korean media instantly exploded. All three of the country's largest newspapers ran articles condemning what they perceived as Japan's callous provocation. JoonAng Ilbo, however, brought up the issue of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With venomous language, a column by an editorial writer labelled the two atomic bombings as "God's punishment and humanity's revenge" (Sinui jingbeorija inganui boksuyeotda 신의 징벌이자 인간의 복수였다) for the Asian victims of Japan's militaristic nationalism, such as those murdered by Unit 731.⁵⁴ The Japanese government immediately lodged an official

53 Kirk Spitzer, "Sorry, But Japan Still Can't Get the War Right," Times, 20 May 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2013/05/20/sorry-but-japan-still-cant-get-the-war-right/>.

54 Kim Jin 김진 金璉, "Abe, Marutau boksureul jjeonna" 아베, 마루타의 복수를 잊었나 [Abe, did you forget the revenge of Maruta], JoonAng Ilbo 중앙일보 中央日報, 20 May 2013, <http://news.joins.com/article/11559123>.

protest over the article, with an indignant Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga declaring: "We will never tolerate such an attitude [towards the atomic bombings]."⁵⁵ The Chinese media, on the other hand, warmly embraced its Korean counterpart's fervor. Quoting from the Korean column, a Xinhua special report again made the comparison between Japan and Germany, proclaiming that "Germany has been 'reborn as a liberal and progressive country,' while Japan still refuses to apologize for its 'past crimes.'"⁵⁶

During the 2015 NPT Review Conference controversy, when Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary explained that visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "not related to any history problem," the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman retorted: "Let me ask first: when will Japanese leaders come to China and visit the memorial hall of victims in the Nanjing massacre?"⁵⁷ A year later, when President Obama made the unprecedented visit to Hiroshima, a short documentary aired on China's state media CCTV explicitly proclaimed that "under the historical circumstances at the time, the dropping of the atomic bombs on an unyielding Japan was a wholly necessary decision to preserve world peace."⁵⁸ The Koreans also

55 Yang Zhou, "Ribèn yàoqǐng gè guó língdǎorén."

56 Ibid.; Hu Ruoyu 胡若愚, "Hánméi chēng Ribèn zāo hébào shì 'tiānqiān'" 韩媒称日本遭核爆是 '天谴' [Korean media claims Japan's nuclear bombing was 'divine retribution'], Southern Metropolis Daily 南方都市报, 24 May 2013, AA27.

57 China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 13, 2015* (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1263642.shtml.

58 "Xīnwén bèijǐng: Ribèn Guǎngdǎo hé Chángqí zāo měijūn yuánzìdàn hōngzhà" 新闻背景: 日本广岛和长崎遭美军原子弹轰炸 [News background: Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings by US military], CCTV-13, 27 May 2016, <http://m.news.cntv.cn/2016/05/27/ARTIDuHlGyFby3QDyxwZQeh9160527.shtml>.

were not too contented with Obama's so-called "reconciliation of the century"⁵⁹; one of the leading news media conglomerates in South Korea, Chosun Ilbo, criticized the U.S. President for not visiting the Korean memorial, or attempting to talk to the Korean delegation present in the Hiroshima Peace Park.⁶⁰

More than seventy years have passed since the end of the Second World War. China, Japan and South Korea have all become modern, prosperous countries and important actors on the world's stage. To the majority of their populations, as it is mostly the case in America and Europe, the painful memory of their nation's wars and suffering should be something of the distance past. However, unlike in America and Europe, the baggage of history weighs heavier in East Asia. "In China," notes Peter H. Gries, "the past lives in the present to a degree unmatched in most other countries."⁶¹ In Korea, the collective socio-cultural emotion of hatred (한恨) "encapsulates the grief of historical memory."⁶² While Japan, in contrast, only has a "historiographic cacophony" and a "miserable record when it comes to offering a clear and unequivocal

acknowledgment" of the past.⁶³ A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 found that 77% of the Chinese population believe that Japan has not apologized sufficiently for its military actions during the 1930s and 1940s, a number that has not significantly changed over the past decade. In contrast, 53% of Japanese believe they have apologized sufficiently, a proportion that has steadily increased since 2006, while 17% say that no apology is necessary at all.⁶⁴ The nations' contradicting memories of the turbulent 19th and 20th centuries, and the national identities upon which they are built, not only shape how they look back at the past, but also how they imagine themselves in the present and ultimately how they view the world and others.

Multilateral Reconciliation Endeavor

When it comes to the question of addressing history problems, time and again, the comparison between Japan and Germany is made. Germany, many would say, is the only mentor that can offer lessons to East Asians on successful reconciliation. Although the German government has been largely reticent about involving itself in the East Asian history

59 Jo Deok-hyeon 조덕현, "'Bulgwa 2bun georiinde' Obamaga chatji aneun hangugin wiryeongbiseo hangugin pihaeja 'nahollo wiryeongje'" '불과 2분 거리인데' 오바마가 찾지 않은 한국인 위령비에서 한국인 피해자 '나홀로 위령제' ['Just 2 minutes away' Obama did not look for Korean victim, Korean victims held 'memorial alone'], Chosun Ilbo 조선일보 朝鮮日報, 27 May 2016, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/05/27/2016052703153.html.

60 Ibid.

61 Peter H. Gries, "Face Nationalism: Power and Passion in Chinese Anti-Foreignism" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999), 15, quoted in Christopher B. Williams, "110 Years of Humiliation from 1839 to 1949: China's Grand Strategy" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2016), 10.

62 Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow,'" *Korean Studies* 41 (2017): 257, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665890>.

63 Walter Hatch, "Bloody Memories: Affect and Effect of World War II Museums in China and Japan," *Peace & Change* 39, no. 3 (2014): 381, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12078>; John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 563.

64 Bruce Stokes, *Hostile Neighbors: China vs. Japan* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2016), 9-10. The survey was conducted only in China, Japan, Australia and India, and does not provide data on Korean opinion on the issue.

feud,⁶⁵ Chancellor Angela Merkel did leave behind some words for thought when she visited Japan in March 2015, just weeks before the diplomatic incident erupted at the NPT Review Conference. Against the backdrop of an approaching 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Merkel urged Japan to confront its wartime history as Germany had “faced its past squarely.” However, she also stressed the importance of the “generous gestures by [Germany’s] neighbours” in accepting their former enemy’s re-integration into a post-war European community. Reconciliation is a process that involves both the victimizer and the victims; the French and the British have made “just as valuable a contribution as the Germans have.”⁶⁶ By giving credits to Germany’s neighbours, Merkel was implicitly encouraging that Japan’s neighbours also have to do their part by taking an active role in creating a more understanding socio-political environment to embrace their once hated foe, instead of stubbornly clinging to the past, holding on to condemnation and vilification, and simply expect Japan to one day apologize.

Indeed, to truly resolve any history problem, an answer needs to be submitted by all sides involved. From disagreements over the interpretation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the controversies regarding

Nanjing and the comfort women, are all manifestations of the fundamental conflict of historical memory and national identity. If one wishes for an East Asia of mutual understanding, free from the tethers of a disagreed history, then the only fundamental solution to this fundamental conflict is the creation of a shared historical memory, an international perspective bridging national identities. As Akira Iriye puts forward in his introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombings, “shared historical memory remains a worthy goal for all nations if they are to understand each other better,” but also acknowledges that “public memory, once constructed, is very slow to change.”⁶⁷ The biggest obstacle to World War II reconciliation in East Asia, unlike some would argue, is not solely Japan’s obstinate impenitence of its crimes, or just China and Korea’s perverse obsession of the past, but the widespread ethno-nationalism and institutionalized animosity between the East Asian peoples. The construction of a universal interpretation of the past, as replacement for the existing nationalistic historical narratives, is an endeavour that can only succeed through the open dialogue and honest cooperation of historians from across China, Japan and Korea. Without active support from these respective governments, the challenges of this Herculean undertaking will be enormous, and the reshaping of public memory through scholarly history is a process that can only be measured in generations.

65 “Xi Jinping’s Germany Trip: Berlin Nixes Holocaust Memorial Request,” *Spiegel Online*, 3 March 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/no-holocaust-memorials-for-china-president-xi-on-trip-to-berlin-a-956574.html>. Quite notably, Germany declined overtures from both Chinese President Xi Jinping and then South Korean President Park Geun-hye to target Japan on addressing World War II history when the two visited the country in 2014.

66 “Germany’s Merkel addresses WW2 reconciliation in Japan,” *BBC*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31792313>.

67 Iriye, “Introduction,” 91-92.

However, historians should not be daunted. In Iriye's words, the very *raison d'être* of this profession is the dispassionate inquiry of the past, not for the purpose of serving any nationalist dogma, but of enlarging the realm of shared knowledge for all.⁶⁸ History as rebuilt by modern historians, as true as the contemporary availability of resources and evidence allows, should be one without national boundary, and with only one international identity. In time, the establishment of this scholarly history will have to influence the conflicting national memories of the past.

Jesse Du is currently a third-year History and HCDE undergraduate student at the University of Washington. He originally wrote this paper as part of Prof. Kenneth Pyle's seminar on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the autumn of 2017-2018. He is broadly interested in modern history, but with an academic focus on East Asia. He hopes to continue exploring the role of history in international relations, especially US-Asia relations and intra-Asia relations.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 92-93.

The Crossfire of Memories and Identities: The East Asian Controversy Over Hiroshima and Nagasaki by Jesse Du

Bibliography

Alperovitz, Gar. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Asada, Sadao. "The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 95-116.

Askew, David. "The Nanjing Incident: Recent Research and Trends." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, no. 1 (2002).

Bernstein, Barton J. *Review of Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, by Hasegawa Tsuyoshi. *H-Diplo Roundtables*, Volume VII, No.2 (2006): 0-32. <https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Bernstein-HasegawaRoundtable.pdf>.

Callahan, William A. "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternative: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199-218.

Dower, John W. "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory." *In Hiroshima in History and Memory*, edited by Michael J. Hogan, 116-141. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

———. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

Hatch, Walter. "Bloody Memories: Affect and Effect of World War II Museums in China and Japan," *Peace & Change* 39, no. 3 (2014): 366-394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12078>.

Iriye, Akira. "Introduction: Historical Scholarship and Public Memory." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 89-93.

- Kim, Sandra So Hee Chi. "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow.'" *Korean Studies*, 41 (2017): 253-279. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665890>.
- Lai, Yew Meng. *Nationalism and Power Politics in Japan's Relations with China: A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation*. New York: Routledge 2013.
- Nozaki, Yoshiko. "Japanese Politics and the History Textbook Controversy, 1945-2001." *In History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, edited by Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones, 275-305. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Pang, Qin, and Nicholas Thomas. "Chinese Nationalism and Trust in East Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47 (2017): 815-838. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1322627>.
- Snyder, Scott. "Overcoming the Japan-South Korea Historical Identity Complex." *Forbes*, 7 February 2014. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottasnyder/2014/02/07/overcoming-the-japan-south-korea-historical-identity-complex/#440a83c07d9f>.
- Seaton, Philip A. *Japan's Contested War Memories: The "Memory Rift" in Historical Consciousness of World War II*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Shillony, Ben-Ami. "Auschwitz and Hiroshima: What Can the Jews and the Japanese Do for World Peace?" *IHJ Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2007): 1-17.
- Stokes, Bruce. *Hostile Neighbors: China vs. Japan*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2016.
- Vickers, Edward. *Introduction to History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, edited by Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Wan, Ming. *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

- Wang, Zheng. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Williams, Christopher B. "110 Years of Humiliation from 1839 to 1949: China's Grand Strategy." Master's thesis, *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College*, 2016.
- Wilson, Chris, Danton Ford, and Alisa Jones. "The History Text: Framing Ethno-Cultural and Civic Nationalism in the Divided Koreas." In *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, edited by Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones, 227-253. New York: Routledge, 2005.