

"Constitution at the heart of textbook controversy " By Yone Sugita

OSAKA - In early April, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology accepted a new Japanese history textbook for junior high schools compiled by members of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Even though the authors revised more than 130 parts of their original version as ordered by Japanese government, the textbook still had strong nationalistic views, and it tried to ignore or revise the negative images of Japanese conduct during World War II.

As expected, the Japanese government's approval of the controversial textbook launched widespread criticism in Asia, especially in South Korea and China. South Korea recalled its ambassador from Japan to express its anger, and the textbook issue further destabilized already shaky Japan-China relations.

The root of this textbook controversy is the ambiguity concerning Japan's war responsibility and guilt. The Japanese should have solved this problem immediately after World War II, but a complicated development during the occupation concerning Article Nine of the new Japanese constitution prevented them from having to confront the issue.

Article Nine declares that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes".

The origin of Article Nine lay in conversations between General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, and Emperor Hirohito, which were held on September 27, 1945 and also between MacArthur and Prime Minister Shidehara Kijuro on October 11, 1945.

MacArthur told Hirohito that the progress of war technology, especially the increased use of air power and the existence of the atomic bomb, meant that another war could destroy all human beings. He argued that wise people would recognize the necessity of directing the world according to a peaceful philosophy.

Both MacArthur and Kijuro agreed with the importance of presenting an image of a peace-loving and democratic Japan to the world - and of retaining the imperial institution. The intention of MacArthur was to enhance the image of a completely demilitarized, peace-loving Japan by making this epoch-making clause part of its new constitution. MacArthur further tried to mollify anti-Japanese forces abroad that held deep distrust against Japan, and channel their attention to this clause. He argued that Japan had to take moral leadership, even without followers, in international relations by making a bold announcement to abolish war as a sovereign right of a nation state.

Japanese civilian leaders were generally willing to proceed with demilitarization to lessen the possibility of a social revolution and to establish their own positions. Throughout the war, the Japanese government had misguided its people through a one-way flow of information, exhorting them to sacrifice their lives and well-being for the emperor and to fight until the very end. After Japan's surrender, its people continued to lead miserable lives, suffering from hyper-inflation, serious food shortages, illness and dislocation. The Japanese people desperately needed somebody to blame for their misfortunes. The civilian leaders held the militarists and ultra-nationalists as wholly responsible for the war, thus giving the Japanese people the necessary political and psychological scapegoats. They defined the Asia-Pacific War as a great aberration: the militarists and ultra-nationalists had misguided the Japanese down a destructive road.

Demilitarization by the United States and the anti-military campaign by the Japanese civilian leaders greatly contributed to the pursuit of pacifism in postwar Japan. The new constitution's Article Nine was the culmination of the shift of power from the military and ultra-nationalist clique to civilian leaders.

This process of power transition created intricate and peculiar legacies in post-war Japan. The public was portrayed as helpless victims and as the Japanese grew disillusioned with militarism they acquired an almost fatalistic pacifism. Since they had been "deceived", the people were able to deny their role in pre-war and wartime militarism. Although Japanese militarism contained both aspects of victims and assailants, this denial emphasized only the former and ignored the latter.

Consequently, Article Nine allowed the Japanese people to avoid taking responsibility for the Asia-Pacific War, especially their invasion of Asian countries. Fatalistic pacifism and ignoring war responsibilities were complementary trends among the Japanese, and both mentalities contributed to the preservation of Article Nine. The growing pacifism among the Japanese provided support to Article Nine despite national security concerns.

The root of the current textbook controversies lies in this ambiguous solution to the issues of responsibility and guilt during the occupation of other Asian nations by Japan. Because of this ambiguity, more than 50 years after the war a certain amount of sympathy for the militarists began to emerge among nationalists, especially among the younger generations, which did not experience World War II. These young people have a hard time of understanding why China complains about internal affairs such as the text book issues, especially as Japan grants so much aid to China.

Unless the Japanese people, particularly the younger generation, reconsider the meaning of Article Nine and acquire a clear sense of responsibility for the country's actions during the way, they will continuously face the problem of the interpreting the country's wartime history.

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Examples from Japanese Textbooks

On Japan's Annexation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910:

Original: Japan annexed Korea in 1910. The annexation was supported by Western countries as a policy of helping stabilize East Asia. Japan's annexation of Korea was necessary for the security of Japan and the defense of Japan's interests in Manchuria. At that time, it was undertaken legally following the fundamental rules of international relations.

Japan had no choice but to keep up with colonialist Western nations and remain bound by obligations and pacts among superpowers after the 1904-1905 war with Russia.

Chinese and Korean people in those days could not understand this difficult position of Japan in international politics.

Revision: In 1910, Japan went ahead with the annexation of Korea using force despite the protest of Korea. The Japanese government thought that the annexation was necessary for the security of Japan and the defense of its interests in Manchuria. Because the U.K., the U.S. and Russia respectively were cautious about the expansion of the others' influence of on the Korean Peninsula, the three countries made no protest against Japan's annexation of Korea, saying that the annexation would help stabilize East Asia. There were strong resistance movements in Korea against the loss of national independence. Even after the annexation, there were persistent movements to restore national independence.

On the Korean Peninsula:

Original: The Korean Peninsula was an arm jutting out from the Asian Continent toward Japan. If the Korean Peninsula was occupied by a big power hostile to Japan, it would become an advance base suitable for attacking Japan. So, it would have become very difficult for Japan, an island country which had no hinterland, to defend its national territory.

Revision: The passage was deleted.

On the Great East Asia War and Asian countries:

Original: With the Japanese Forces' victory in the early stage of the Great East Asia War, desire for independence grew among people of Asian countries who had been ruled by Western countries.

The Japanese Forces declared the liberation of Asian countries as one of the goals of the war... Anti-Japanese guerrilla activities were rising. However Japan approved the independence of Belmar, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, which the Western countries had never allowed. ...Due to the southern advance of the Japanese Forces, trends for independence in the countries which were once colonies of European countries spread from Asia to Africa. The map of the world after World War II was drastically changed.

Revision: In the early stage of the war, Japan's victory over the Allied Nations encouraged the Asian peoples who had been under the colonial rule of Western countries for a long time. ...But, in the Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, people were forced to have education in the Japanese language and worship at Shinto shrines. Protests of people in these areas intensified more and more. It frequently happened that people in the sphere were forced to do unbearably hard work by Japanese armed forces, as the tide of the war turned against Japan. ...The toll of civilian casualties in battles in the regions where Japanese forces were stationed reached large numbers. After the defeat in the war, Japan made reparations to these countries. The idea of the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere came to be criticized that it was nothing more than a justification of Japan's war and occupation of Asia. ...The Japanese Armed Forces' southern advance gave to the Asian countries an opportunity for liberation.

On Forced Labor of Korean People by Japanese Military:

Original: Not mentioned.

Revision: Lots of Koreans and Chinese under Japan's occupation were forced to work in mines in Japan under harsh working conditions. Also in Korea, the policy of turning the people into the subjects of the Japanese Emperor, which was assimilation policy, was carried out intensively. Korean people were forced to change their Korean names into Japanese ones.

On Nanjing Atrocities :

Original: The postwar Tokyo Military Tribunal found that the Japanese armed forces had killed over two hundred thousand Chinese civilians in the battle to capture Nanjing city. But according to the documents of those days, the population of Nanjing in those days were two hundred thousands, while the population increased to 250,000 a month after the capture of Nanjing. Moreover, there are many doubts about the incident, and there are continuing disputes over the incident. Some killings may have occurred, but it was not a holocaust of any kind. (Because it was war, there could have been some killings. But they were not of a kind similar to a holocaust.)

Revision: The Tokyo tribunal found that Japanese forces killed numbers of Chinese civilians in 1937 when they occupied Nanjing during the Japan-China War (the Nanjing incident). But, there are many doubts about the materials on the incident and there are various opinions on the incident. The matter is being disputed.