

The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia

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Abstract: This essay summarizes my argument in *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia*. The history problem is essentially a relational phenomenon that arises when nations promote self-serving versions of the past by focusing on what happened to their own citizens with little regard for foreign others. East Asia, however, has recently also witnessed the emergence of a cosmopolitan form of commemoration taking humanity, rather than nationality, as its primary frame of reference. When cosmopolitan commemoration is practiced as a collective endeavor by both perpetrators and victims, a resolution of the history problem will finally become possible.

Keywords: East Asia, memory, commemoration, history, Asia-Pacific War, nationalism, cosmopolitanism

Seventy years have passed since the end of the Asia-Pacific War, yet Japan remains embroiled in controversy with its neighbors over the war's commemoration. Among the many points of contention between Japan, China, and South Korea are interpretations of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, apologies and compensation for foreign victims of Japanese aggression, prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and the war's portrayal in textbooks. Collectively, these controversies have come to be called the "history problem." But why has the problem become so intractable? Can it be resolved, and if so, how? These questions motivated me to write the book *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).



Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo, Japan

Why Has the History Problem Become So Intractable?

In essence, East Asia's history problem is a set of complexly entangled controversies over how to commemorate the Asia-Pacific War. The problem is comprised of multiple controversies dealing with diverse issues that have their own political dynamics and historical trajectories. In this sense, it may be more appropriate to speak of "history problems" in the plural. Nevertheless, these multiple controversies are historically homologous—tracing back to Japan's actions during the Asia-Pacific War—and inextricably entangled to form a more or less bounded domain of public debates and policy problems.

The controversies are also structurally homologous in the sense that they pertain to commemoration. Although commemoration frequently oversimplifies and even distorts, the

act of remembering the past is indispensable to social life because it enables people to articulate their collective identity. However, disjunctive commemorations can become sources of controversy and even conflict between groups precisely because the foundations of their collective identities are at stake. For this reason, history problems are not unique to East Asia but commonplace around the world.

But controversy and conflict over commemoration of the past become intractable when they intersect with nationalism, a political doctrine and cultural idiom that divides the world into discrete national communities. When people commemorate the past according to the logic of nationalism, they focus on their conationals, whether heroes or victims, without sufficient regard for foreign others. Moreover, nationalism excludes foreign others from commemoration in another sense: the principle of national sovereignty prohibits foreign others from participating in the process of shaping the content of commemoration. When a government plans a memorial ceremony for war dead at a national cemetery, for example, it typically does not allow foreign governments to influence the content of the ceremony.



"Family Ruined," Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, Nanjing, China

By doubly excluding foreign others from the content and process of commemoration, nationalist logic prompts people to embrace a certain version of the past as a foundation of their national identity. Not surprisingly then, if nationalist commemorations collide, intense controversy can result. Contradictory versions of the past, each predicated on the negation of the foreign other, is a recipe for escalating mutual distrust and denunciation. Specifically, nationalist commemorations in East Asia have revolved around the historical judgment of the Tokyo Trial. On the one hand, Japanese nationalists articulate their commemoration—Japan fought a just war for self-defense and liberation of Asia—by rejecting the Tokyo Judgment as victor's justice. On the other hand, Chinese and South Korean nationalists blame Japan entirely for the history problem, consistent with the trial that judged Japan as solely and entirely guilty of the war.

In short, East Asia’s history problem needs to be understood as relationally constituted. Even though Japan’s nationalist commemoration is a primary cause of the problem, it is only through its collision with nationalist commemorations in China and South Korea that the history problem has become intractable.²

The Coexistence of Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

The interaction of nationalist commemorations alone, however, does not adequately explain the dynamic of East Asia’s history problem. This is because nationalism is no longer the only logic of commemoration available today. As Ulrich Beck and his colleagues have argued, cosmopolitanism, an orientation of openness to foreign others, is increasingly institutionalized in a variety of human practices in the contemporary world, thanks to the globalization of human-rights discourse and the growing sociocultural interactions across national borders.³ Cosmopolitanism presents an alternative logic of feeling, thinking, and acting that takes humanity, rather than nationality, as a primary frame of reference. Drawing on the logic of cosmopolitanism, people can include foreign others in commemoration in two ways: they remember what happened to foreign others as members of humanity, but they also invite those others to contribute to shaping the content of commemoration.

Consistent with a worldwide trend, the Japanese government began to incorporate cosmopolitanism in its official commemoration in the early 1990s. When the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a defender of nationalist commemoration, was temporarily ousted from power, non-LDP prime ministers such as Murayama Tomiichi officially apologized for Japan’s past wrongdoings. These gestures of contrition expressed the cosmopolitan logic of commemoration and, during the last few decades, Japan’s official commemoration has come to exhibit a complex

mixture of nationalist defiance and cosmopolitan contrition—even Koizumi Jun’ichirō and Abe Shinzō, whose visits to the Yasukuni Shrine sparked so much controversy, maintained the so-called Murayama statement.



“Statue of Peace” comfort woman statue, Seoul, South Korea

Perhaps more important, a growing transnational network of historians in East Asia has begun to critically reassess the historical judgment of the Tokyo Trial that had fueled nationalist resentments in Japan and justified one-sided criticisms of Japan by China and South Korea. Indeed, the joint projects have shown the potential to encourage Japanese citizens to fully commemorate the suffering of South Korean and Chinese victims by confronting the full magnitude of Japan’s past wrongdoings, as well as to encourage Chinese and South Korean citizens to reflect on their own nationalism and commemorate the war,

including Japanese victimhood, from a more cosmopolitan perspective.⁴

Cosmopolitan commemoration, however, is not replacing nationalist commemoration in a zero-sum manner. Instead, the relationship between the two is open-ended because nationalism continues to operate as a central organizing principle in the contemporary world. Since both nationalism and cosmopolitanism are legitimated, this creates what sociologists call an “institutional contradiction,” wherein contradictory but equally legitimate logics clash with each other.⁵ This institutional contradiction serves as a focal point of political struggles for *the* legitimate commemoration, and these struggles are likely to be intense and protracted because all sides, subscribing to nationalism and cosmopolitanism in their own way, have reasonable claims to legitimacy.

Can the History Problem Be Resolved, and If So, How?

Thus, the future of the history problem remains much uncertain, but my answer to the question “Can the history problem be resolved, and if so, how?” is cautiously affirmative. My answer is cautious because nationalist commemorations, focusing on the suffering of conationals without sufficient regard for foreign others, persist throughout the region and beyond, overwhelm historians’ critical reflections, and threaten to prolong the history problem. My answer is also affirmative because the region has witnessed the emergence of cosmopolitan commemoration based on the transnational network of historians as well as educators, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and concerned citizens who have come to recognize the suffering of victims of the Asia-Pacific War irrespective of nationality.

In a way, this book is a response to a famous passage in the speech that Richard von Weizsäcker delivered on the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II: “Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind

to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.”⁶ When people inside and outside Japan criticize the Japanese government for failing to adequately commemorate Japan’s past wrongdoings, they often quote this passage. Yet critics rarely probe three questions buried within Weizsäcker’s speech: Which inhumanity should be remembered, how should it be remembered, and precisely how will remembrance of past inhumanity prevent future tragedies?



Simply put, the inhumanities on all sides in the Asia-Pacific War need to be commemorated according to the logic of cosmopolitanism. As Herbert Kelman observed, former enemies can move toward reconciliation if they manage to revise their previously incompatible identities, but this “revision in the group’s identity and the associated narrative is possible only if the *core* of the identity remains intact.”⁷ This means that Japanese citizens will likely commemorate the suffering of Chinese and South Korean victims more extensively if their own dual identity as both perpetrator and victim remains intact. Put another way, while Japan needs to embrace a greater degree of contrition first, China and South Korea will

have to recognize that Japan, too, suffered, if a cosmopolitan resolution is to be achieved. This cosmopolitan commemoration on the part of China and South Korea can help move Japan to fully accept its war responsibility because doing so will no longer threaten the core of Japan's dual identity.

Thus, cosmopolitan commemoration needs to be envisioned as a collective endeavor, and such mutual cosmopolitan commemoration has the potential to prevent "future infection" by bringing the three countries together within the horizon of common humanity that recasts the logic of nationalism. The question remains, however, how willing the governments and citizens in the three countries are to further the transnational network as an infrastructure of mutual cosmopolitan commemoration.

Looking Ahead

I acknowledge that observers of the history problem, including myself, can never remain neutral. In fact, researchers who offer empirical observations are part and parcel of the history problem because they provide policymakers, NGOs, and concerned citizens with languages and rationales for justifying their commemorative positions and framing their preferred solutions. The goal of this book is not to impose on the public a certain version of the history problem in the name of academic research but to facilitate a timely and candid multinational dialogue involving researchers and citizens to collectively improve understanding of the history problem.

In fact, my own understanding of the history problem has evolved since I completed the book. Specifically, I have realized that the persistent legacy of Cold War geopolitics in the region, as critically analyzed by Chen Kuan-Hsing, is key to explaining the recent trajectory of the history problem.⁸

Take, for example, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, originally signed in the midst of the

Cold War that had turned "hot" on the Korean Peninsula. Even though Japan's economic ties with China and South Korea have grown significantly since the late 1980s, Japan's foreign policy remains firmly anchored in the security treaty. In fact, conservative politicians in Japan increasingly emphasize the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance to counter China's military expansion as well as a North Korean nuclear threat. This is why Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in May 2016 failed to set a moral example for Japanese leaders to follow in coming to terms with Japan's past wrongdoings, but instead provided an excuse for downplaying the need for contrition—by emphasizing the strong U.S.-Japan alliance. Japan does not need to fear China. Indeed, a nationalist wish for a strong Japan, coupled with longstanding disregard for China and "Asia," will keep the history problem intractable.

Similarly, the legacy of the Cold War has stifled Japan's relations with South Korea. The Japanese government has been reluctant to compensate former "comfort women" and other victims of Japan's past wrongdoings not simply because of the 1965 normalization treaty between the two countries. This reluctance is deeply rooted in the sense of injustice that conservative politicians, as well as a significant number of Japanese citizens, have harbored over the Tokyo Trial—a case of compromised transitional justice at the outset of the Cold War. Japanese conservative politicians feel that it is unfair to be asked to compensate former "comfort women" and other foreign victims when the suffering of Japanese victims of the atomic bombings and other atrocities committed by the Allied powers remains unredressed.⁹ These multiple unredressed injustices in the Asia-Pacific, as Lisa Yoneyama pointed out, have become interlocked to fuel the politics of war memory and transitional justice on a transnational scale.¹⁰

To deepen understanding of the history

problem, then, it will be crucial to expand the scope of analysis beyond East Asia and situate Japan's relations with China and South Korea within the persistent legacy of the Cold War geopolitics vis-à-vis the changing reality of the Asia-Pacific region.¹¹

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Notes

¹ I thank Laura Hein and Mark Selden for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

² For concrete examples of how this relational dynamic of East Asia's history problem works, see Mikyoung Kim, "[Myth and Fact in Northeast Asia's History Textbook Controversies](#)," *Japan Focus*, Aug. 1, 2008; Jeff Kingston, "[Nanjing's Massacre Memorial: Renovating War Memory in Nanjing and Tokyo](#)," *Japan Focus*, Aug. 1, 2008

³ Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider, "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda," *British Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 1 (2006): 1-23.

⁴ Saito Kazuharu, *Chūgoku rekishi kyōkasho to Higashi Ajia rekishi taiwa: Nicchūkan sangoku kyōtsu kyōzai zukuri no genba kara* (Tokyo: Kadensha, 2008).

⁵ Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232-263.

⁶ Media Culture Online, "[Speech in the Bundestag on 8 May 1985 during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny](#)"

⁷ Herbert C. Kelman, "Reconciliation as Identity Change: A Social-Psychological Perspective," in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119-120, emphasis in original.

⁸ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹ For example, see how conservative politicians discussed the 2007 U.S. House of Representatives House Resolution 121 at the House of Representatives Cabinet Committee,

March 28, 2007.

¹⁰ Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Mark Selden has also shown how East Asia's history problem needs to be contextualized in Asia-Pacific, including the United States. "[Japanese and American War Atrocities, Historical Memory and Reconciliation: World War II to Today](#)," *Japan Focus*, April 1, 2008