

*Japan-China Historical Understanding for the Citizens
Who Do Not Know the War: Reading the Japan-China
Joint Historical Research – Modern and Contemporary History*

[戦争を知らない国民のための日中歴史認識: 日中歴史共同研究〈近現代史〉を読む]

by Kasahara Tokushi (Ed.)
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The first decade of the new millennium witnessed a proliferation of cross-national endeavors of dialogues over history in Northeast Asia. In 2005, for the first time teams of historians, teachers, and activists from China, Japan, and Korea jointly authored a modern history of the three countries entitled *A History That Opens the Future*. In the next few years a number of jointly authored history books, mostly by Japanese and Koreans scholars and schoolteachers, followed. In addition to these private endeavors, the governments in the region set up bilateral joint history commissions that released research reports amounting to tens of thousands of pages after several years of work. Such a phenomenon is nothing less than historic, for although these three countries have had interacted with one another well over a millennium, it is only recently that their citizens have engaged in such intense discussion of their mutual history.

The work under review is the first book-length scholarly examination of this phenomenon. It focuses on the modern history section of the research reports (hereafter Reports) produced by the China-Japan Joint Historical Research (hereafter JHR) project, which lasted from late 2006

to early 2010. At the request of the Chinese side, the section on contemporary history after World War II was not released. The book consists of essays written specifically for this collection as well as articles already published. It also features the verbatim record of a four-member roundtable discussion (*zadankai*). Not all of them deal with the Japan-China JRH per se — a few essays address the larger issues of academic dialogue between Japan and China or the media and scholarly freedom in Japan. These rather diverse materials are gathered together for a timely assessment of an important topic in Northeast Asia.

Its editor, Kasahara Tokushi, is a Japanese historian who has written many critical works on the Japanese war atrocities in China, including several highly acclaimed books on the Nanjing Massacre. Though not a participant in the China-Japan JHR, he has been active in private dialogues over history in Northeast Asia, playing a leading role in the trilateral project that produced *A History That Opens the Future* in 2005. Two other Japanese contributors (Obinata Sumio and Saitô Kazuharu) to this book are also members of this ongoing trilateral history project. Essays by several Japanese participants (Shôji Junichirô, Kitaoka Shin'ichi, and Kawashima Shin) in the government-sponsored China-Japan JHR are also included. The fact that participants in both governmental and private dialogues contribute to this volume is itself significant, since in Japan they come from two completely separate groups, often with different political and ideological leanings. In fact, the editor has to clarify at the outset that any divergence in views expressed in the book should be welcome and not be misunderstood as result of editor's oversight (p. iii). The book also includes several essays by Bu Ping, the Chinese team leader in the JHR.

As Kasahara puts it, there are two broad goals for this book. One is “to examine issues of interpretation of historical facts by providing a basic reading of the (JHR) Reports on the basis of sharing of historical facts that is achieved to some extent in them; and to examine issues of historical education, media coverage, and scholarly stance in Japan and

China that surround the Reports.” Moreover, the book also “considers tasks concerning the sharing of historical understanding by Japanese and Chinese people, such as how to resolve the confrontation and friction between Japan and China over history issues, which should have been the objectives of the China-Japan JHR, and how to advance ‘history dialogues’ that will serve as the basis for a relationship of trust and co-existence”(p. ii). Simply put, it is about the assessment of the China-Japan JHR Reports on modern history and on the JHR itself.

After Kasahara introduces the overall themes, Saitô Kazuharu provides a chapter-by-chapter summary of the JHR reports produced by Chinese and Japanese authors. Saitô notes several characteristics of the essays. One is the recognition common to essays by both Chinese and Japanese authors that Japan waged a war of aggression against China. Another is the different emphasis: while Chinese historians tend to emphasize the continuity of Japanese aggression since the Meiji Restoration as well as the consequences of aggression such as war damages, the Japanese historians tend to stress the multiplicity of options and complexity at each juncture (p. 51). This impression is shared by several authors including Bu Ping.

Few of the contributors assess the quality of scholarship in the Reports. One exception is Obinata Sumio, who carefully analyzes the papers from the mid-19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. He notes a number of factual errors and impressionistic remarks in the chapter on the 19th century China-Japan relations and attributes them to the fact that its author Kitaoka specializes in early 20th century Japanese political history. At the same time, he praises Kitaoka’s attention to domestic developments in both countries in a comparative manner and regrets such an approach is not used by other authors (pp. 154-156, 165). Such even-handedness and attention to details including sources and interpretation should serve as a model of analysis of other works of joint history.

Another aim of the book is analysis of the China-Japan JHR as a

whole. In an essay previously published in Japan, Japanese team leader Kitaoka Shin'ichi emphasizes the intention to delink history issues from overall diplomatic relations between Japan and its neighbors. Such an approach would free the political leaders of the countries involved to work on other urgent matters including mutual cooperation. This is echoed by Kawashima who notes the need to depoliticize history issues (p. 81), although he is cautious to note that the causation between the start of JHR and the calming down of China-Japan relations is far from being proven. At the same time, a few authors raise questions about such accepted wisdom. Ishida Yûji questions why “parallel history” was chosen as the goal from the start (p. 55), while Obinata makes an insightful observation that an effort to depoliticize history is in fact a very political move (p. 61). There is no doubt that questions like these should be pursued more rigorously.

Two major problems of the China-Japan JHR are the delay in the release of its reports as well as omission of the entire postwar history from released reports. Japanese team leader Kitaoka details the obstacles the JHR ran into after mid-2008 as a result of the Chinese refusal to release the reports that had been completed and scheduled for publication. He speculates that the Chinese government might hope to avoid any domestic instability before the National Day (October 1) or it might be counting on the newly empowered Democratic Party of Japan to move closer to Chinese views on history issues (pp. 230-232). Kasahara attributes the delay to the great earthquake in Sichuan Province and the upcoming Beijing Olympics (p. 5). Kawashima, who specializes in modern Chinese-Japanese diplomacy and participated as a second-tier member, notes that the Chinese government was reluctant to allow the Chinese public to read Japanese views that differ from the “official Chinese account” (p. 88). In my view, it is not the different “Japanese views” per se that the Chinese government sought to block — Chinese public have access to views of Japanese nationalists, whether via media or through translated works. It is rather the Chinese government endorsement

of the JHR itself — which might be seen as endorsing those “Japanese views” — that may create problems for itself in the Chinese public. On the other hand, the Chinese team leader Bu Ping does not deny China’s part in causing the delay and requesting omission. He offers some explanations why in the end the postwar reports were not released: primary sources for such a recent period is not widely available and that the decision whether to release the reports should take into consideration the public sentiment on both sides (p. 124). Here one wonders why the Chinese side had agreed to releasing all reports when the project was first launched in late 2006.

While the contributors note a number of problems, they seem to agree on its important accomplishments. As Bu Ping points out in many of his essays, seen from the process of the JHR and the Reports, the goal of deepening mutual understanding has been achieved (p. 120). In fact, many contributors agree that such accomplishment has been overlooked in media reports. Though varying in degrees, many express dismay at the way the Japanese media (and to a lesser extent, the Chinese media) reported the JHR and its Reports. Bu Ping is critical of certain Japanese media that “wanted the JHR to fail even as it barely started, and then reported negatively after the reports were released.” Kasahara expands his criticism of the Japanese media into a full chapter under “Is there really freedom in scholarship, education, media, and publishing in Japan?” in his view, because the Japanese media was obsessed with the remaining gaps of the JHR, the Japanese public fail to learn about the most important findings from the reports — that Japan was guilty of invading China but also of various war atrocities including the Nanjing Massacre and chemical warfare. He thus sees the reports, especially those written by Japanese historians who are considered closer to the Japanese government, should serve as counterweight to the nationalistic “grass-root conservative” movement as well as the powerful rightwing politicians in the LDP. The book’s somewhat unusually long title reflects his concern. The lack of true academic and media freedom in Japan, in

his view, greatly hinders historical reconciliation with its neighbors.¹

Although the subject of the book is the China-Japan JHR, many of the contributors raise issues that are of much wider implications. Building upon ideas from other scholars, Bu Ping proposes to understand “history issues” in three inter-related spheres: at the political level they are issues to be resolved by governments and politicians; at the academic level, they are to be studied by historians and other scholars to narrow the gap of understanding; at the popular level, they are part of the collective and personal memories of ordinary citizens (p. 124). Kawashima proposes a slightly different tripartite framework: politics, scholarship and media (p. 83). He also categorizes various types of history dialogue in East Asia. Perhaps the most important contribution is his proposition of an asymmetrical structure between Japan and China at all three levels. Interestingly, he notes that the Chinese coverage was more varied than the Japanese media, and urges the Japanese government and participants to speak up about the JHR (p. 89). Though not proposing any model, Mori Kazuko, a veteran China watcher in Japan, offers observations as to how to promote genuine constructive academic dialogue between the two countries. Respect for the other side, according to her, is a prerequisite.

The book raises some interesting issues when its contributors make several kinds of comparison. It is now almost passé when one refers to the process of history dialogue in Europe, especially between Germany and Poland that started in the early 1970s and Franco-German dialogue and common history textbook. Indeed, there is a near consensus among authors that Europe is more successful, although some point out that it has had a much longer history. Ishida Yûji, the only expert on European

¹ Some of Kasahara’s concern seems born out after this book was published in Japan in late 2010. After it became known that a local public library in Tokyo had purchased two copies, some complained that public funds should not have been spent on such a “biased” book by a known “masochist.”

history among the contributors, adds some useful insights. For instance, he notes that the important political time in the realization of a common Franco-German history textbook (pp. 64-65).

Comparing government-sponsored JHR with private endeavors of history dialogue is another useful perspective. It is noteworthy that the three Japanese contributors who participated in the non-governmental joint history project have generally positive things to say about the China-Japan JHR, whereas the government-sponsored history projects have tended to receive criticism in the past by many scholars and activists. For instance, Saitô notes that whereas in writing *History that Opens the Future* the debate over the outbreak of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937 was brushed aside in favor of a more general statement about Japan's invasion, the China-Japan JHR indicates a convergence between Japanese and Chinese participants that the first shot may well have been accidental. Indeed, one wishes for more detailed comparisons like this that can produce tips for improving both governmental and non-governmental projects in the future.

Although the book is devoted to examining the China-Japan JHR, given the fact that several of the Japanese contributors including the editor have long been involved in trilateral history dialogues in Northeast Asia, it may not be a surprise that Korea is mentioned a number of times. For instance Obinata laments the absence of Korea in the Chinese reports. More interestingly Kasahara makes comparison with the Japan-Korea JHR in the Afterword. In his view, in contrast with the China-Japan JHR, the Japan-Korea JHR largely failed because first, the latter did not clearly define its goals, principles and the framework at the outset and second, the selection of Japanese participants was highly problematic (pp. 261-264). Certainly his assessment as well as his explanation is both open to debate. The fact that the Japan-Korea JHR published entire reports as well as comments, when compared with the China-Japan JHR, must surely be considered an important achievement. However, Kasahara does raise new questions about the argument proposed by several

contributors (Kitaoka, Kawashima) that true dialogue over history (and reconciliation) can only take place between “fellow democracies.” Finally, the fact that no similar systematic assessment of the two Japan-China JHRs has been published is an open question that awaits answers.

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In summary, this book not only provides a good start to evaluate one of the key joint history projects in Northeast Asia, it also raises a number of methodological and conceptual issues that merit greater discussion among those interested in the interconnectedness of politics, historical knowledge, and public memory. To fully examine the China-Japan JHR, one should examine statements made at the early stage of the project. The diversity of views is indeed a welcome development; yet it is also necessary to examine different Chinese voices other than Bu Ping’s unless one thinks there cannot be anything but the official line. In fact, by asking Bu to write from “a Chinese official perspective” (p. iv), the editor may have inadvertently solidified such an impression.

In the Afterword, Kasahara mentions attending a conference held in Seoul in October 2010 that examined the various joint history projects in Northeast Asia and partly inspired this book. This reviewer also was present at that conference and wishes that a more comprehensive assessment may come out of such a useful gathering.