

Memory Wars in East Asia: Pluralistic Memories in Japan

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It is silly to think that the 127,341,000 citizens of Japan maintain the same memory of the past. There is a tremendous plurality of memories about the dark chapters of modern Japan's history, ranging from outright contrition (which is far more common than most people outside Japan seem to understand) to far rightist claims that Japan never did anything wrong. This plurality is reflected in how museums in Japan portray the past.

Curiously, Japan has no national museum, in other words a museum funded by the central government, devoted to telling the full sweep of Japan's modern history. This is significant, and it is probably fair to say that the lack of such a national museum results from intense domestic contention about how that modern history should be told. The lack of such a museum also hints at the fact that the government of Japan, since 1945, arguably failed to reconcile with much of its own citizenry about the Asia-Pacific War, not to mention failed to reconcile with its neighbors about the imperial era.

The lack of a national museum about modern history in the Tokyo area (or anywhere else in Japan) lends undue significance to the far rightist Yushukan Museum that is part of the privately operated Yasukuni Shrine. But there are many additional museums throughout Japan that present competing contrite versions of the past, and it is important to contextualize Yushukan within a broader "museum landscape."

Let me introduce here two museums whose exhibits symbolize the pluralistic ways that Japanese remember the past. First, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum established and operated by the City

of Hiroshima presents what could be termed the pacifistic viewpoint. Although the pacifistic line can at times be faulted for its unwillingness to assign clear responsibility for which country perpetrated the Asia Pacific War that caused so much suffering, it draws a vehemently anti-war stance from the lessons of the past, and in that sense tends to be very anti-Imperial Japan.

Second, the Ritsumeikan Kyoto Museum for Peace unambiguously presents the “Japan was Wrong” narrative of the past. The exhibit holds that the actions of Imperial Japan, including those towards its neighbors, were wrong, and that Japan bears a special responsibility for the errors of its past. Here is a description of the Kyoto Museum for Peace written by one of its staff members:

“In 1992, the Kyoto Museum for Peace opened as the first peace museum run by a university. It was established as a facility to realize the university’s educational principles. A permanent exhibition was developed to reflect both the common academic understanding and Ritsumeikan’s own perspective on Japanese history. Like other peace museums in Japan, it documents the horrors of war to induce the sentiment ‘never again.’ But the museum focuses not only on the perspective of the victim, but also on the perpetrator’s side of Japanese history. One display includes images that are often targeted by historical revisionists, such as those of sex slaves (often from occupied areas) of Japanese soldiers and bodies of Nanjing Massacre victims. The museum believes that only through exploring all facets of history, can one learn the lessons for peace. The university’s own past as a collaborator [in the militaristic era] is also on display.” ?1?

In fact, there are museums in Japan that provide an even harsher verdict on modern Japan’s history. For example, I think that the Osaka Human Rights Museum provides one of the most biting anti-government interpretations of history that I have ever come across anywhere.

Although that at the moment that I write in 2015, Prime Minister Abe’s backsliding on the issue of Japan’s responsibility for the imperial era seems to be overshadowing the plurality of memories in Japan, I would still urge people to be very careful when making observations about how the Japanese (as in 127 million of them) remember the past. Please be wary of accepting uncritically inflammatory claims that Japanese collectively do not remember the bad things that Imperial Japan did.

Japan’s far right is very loud and their views tend to be given far greater weight, especially outside of Japan, than they deserve. My personal working thesis is that among the Japanese people, the “Japan was wrong” interpretation is more prevalent than the far right one. But the most common view of the past of all among the Japanese people is a tremendously strong pacifistic line that holds that “War is bad and must be avoided at all costs in the future.”

Some versions of this pacifistic line unquestionably focus more on Japanese suffering as the result

of the war than on the suffering that Imperial Japan dished out to its neighbors. Nonetheless, the pacifistic line is also highly critical of Imperial Japan. In fact, Imperial Japan is typically held up precisely as the model of what must be avoided in the future. In that sense, the Japanese do reject Imperial Japan.

Reference

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