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Abe and History - The Kobayashi Yoshinori Interview 安倍晋三の歴史認識ー小林よしのりとの対談
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The recent controversy over Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Toru's statement that the wartime comfort women system was "necessary to maintain discipline" and "needed to provide rest to … brave soldiers" shows that historical revisionism in Japan's public sphere is by no means limited to Abe Shinzo's Liberal Democratic Party. Abe is known to hold revisionist views and a firm belief that the current approach to history in Japanese education is "masochistic", but since the December 2012 election, he and other LDP elites have tried (not always successfully) to maintain voter support by skirting controversy and focusing on the "economy first" approach of "Abenomics" which has spurred a stock market boom and proven popular with the public. In April, *The Wall Street Journal* ran comments by Abe's number two, Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro:

"In the past three years while we were in the opposition, we found out what the general public was really looking for. It was not education or constitution, but the economy. We have persuaded Mr. Abe to set aside his pet interests and focus on the economy first, and he's doing just that…. [T]here's concern that once we get a victory in the upper-house election, Mr. Abe might go in a different direction. It's probably my job to tell him that he will have to concentrate on the economy for another few years."

Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide has reportedly told key members of Abe's government, "Our Cabinet will adopt a unified perception of history. Make no slip of the tongue because it would immediately cost you your post." Hashimoto's comments on the comfort women have sparked widespread condemnation, and support rates for his Japan Restoration Party have plummeted. This may have ended Hashimoto's push to make the leap from mayor of Japan's second largest metropolitan region to a politician with national reach. Elite LDP members seem determined to make sure that Abe does not share his fate.

Abe's historical views received a great deal of critical scrutiny during his first term in power between 2006 and 2007. In the years since, he has flip-flopped through a series of vague and often contradictory statements on Japan's wars of the 1930s and 1940s and imperial practice more broadly. His views on the past are difficult to pin down and there has been no sustained effort by scholars or journalists to keep tabs on what he has said about history in Japanese-language books or interviews in the years between his 2007 resignation and his return to the political center in 2012. In interviews in English-speaking outlets such as *Foreign Affairs*, Abe has been confronted directly with questions about his revisionist views but has typically tried to stick with the narrative of official contrition, "Throughout my first and current terms as prime minister, I have expressed a number of times the deep remorse that I share for the tremendous damage and suffering Japan caused in the past to the people of many countries, particularly in Asia." This is also typical of his self-presentation in Washington. Far more interesting than these soundbytes which have been carefully cultivated for international consumption is a 2010 interview between Abe and Kobayashi Yoshinori, published in the collection *Kibo no kuni Nippon* (Japan, A Country of Hope). Kobayashi is (in)famous as the manga artist behind *Sensoron* (On War), a manga which engaged in Nanking Massacre denial, castigated surviving comfort women as former prostitutes out to exploit Japan, and called for a revival of military patriotism. Kobayashi's revisionist manga and views on Japanese history have been dissected by Rumi Sakamoto in "Will you go to war? Or will you stop being Japanese?" Nationalism and History in Kobayashi Yoshinori's Sensoron and Philip Seaton in Historiography and Japanese War Nationalism: Testimony in Sensōron, Sensōron as Testimony. Sitting down with Abe, the ultra-right Kobayashi did not, as *Foreign Affairs* and some mainstream Japanese interviewers have done, ask Abe to defend his views on history. Instead, Kobayashi asked Abe why he had not done *more* to root out "masochistic" historical views and defend Japan's war record to the world. This illuminating exchange is perhaps the clearest example of Abe outlining what he thinks about 20th century history and the importance of the past in what the LDP has presented as a time of "national crisis". As a leader, Abe should be judged primarily on the basis of what he says and does in office, but an understanding of Abe's particular take on the conservative revisionist project is important for assessing the ideological milieu in which he operates and can help critics respond to policies like textbook reform and constitutional revision, which will likely become major issues in the years ahead.

Yasukuni, War Memory, and China

Since returning to office in 2012, Abe has declined to say whether or not he will visit Yasukuni Shrine. In the interview with Kobayashi, however, he claims that he truly desired to make an official visit to Yasukuni during his first tenure as PM. He says that the "real reason" he did not go was the debilitating medical condition that led him to step down as PM, not deference to China. Going to Yasukuni, in his view, is a way to "make the Chinese side rethink their stance toward Japan". He evidently sees going to Yasukuni as a way to make China accept differences on history as the status quo of the Sino-Japanese relationship and, in common conservative parlance, as a way to "broadcast Japanese views [of the war] to the world".

When speaking to *Foreign Affairs* in 2013, Abe tailored his response on Yasukuni to fit with mainstream American discourse on war and memory, "I think it's quite natural for a Japanese leader to offer prayer for those who sacrificed their lives for their country, and I think this is no different from what other world leaders do." He also stressed:

"About the Yasukuni Shrine, let me humbly urge you to think about your own place to pay homage to the war dead, Arlington National Cemetery, in the United States. The presidents of the United States go there, and as Japan's prime minister, I have visited. Professor Kevin Doak of Georgetown University points out that visiting the cemetery does not mean endorsing slavery, even though Confederate soldiers are buried there. I am of a view that we can make a similar argument about Yasukuni, which enshrines the souls of those who lost their lives in the service of their country."

When speaking with Kobayashi, however, Abe suggested instead that visiting Yasukuni was not simply a politically neutral form of commemoration for soldiers who died in Japan's wars, but a way of reorienting discussions of Japanese history, almost a form of debate with both Chinese and members of the Japanese public critical of the country's war record. He also frames Yasukuni visits as an issue of Japanese sovereignty, "It is unacceptable that there be any place in Japan for which foreign countries can tell a Japanese Prime Minister 'You must not go there'."

Abe ties outside criticism of Japan's war record to an idea, pervasive in contemporary conservative discourse, that Japan has entered a time of crisis with its "traditional values" being undermined and its territorial integrity threatened. The main lesson that he takes away from the Asia-Pacific War is that sacrifice for the state is the highest good. He says, "In a time of crisis, if nobody is willing to sacrifice their lives, the nation cannot continue to exist." Abe not only ignores the damage and suffering wrought by Japanese expansionism all over Asia, but also the thought police, torture, censorship, and forced conscription used to manage public consent at home and the often horrifying indifference of Japanese military elites toward the lives of the country's soldiers. As Fujiwara Akira argued in his classic *Ueji ni shita eirei tachi* (The Honorable Dead Who Were Starved to Death, 2001) about half of the "honored dead" at Yasukuni died not in acts of heroic sacrifice in battle, but from starvation, effectively sacrificed by the state in a series of hopeless campaigns. Abe instead finds the meaning of the wars of the 1930s and 1940s in a decontextualized view of popular sacrifice, and he sees visiting Yasukuni as a way to propagate this vision of nationalism and the relationship between state and citizenry.

Abe also believes that bringing history debates to a head will force China to change, "One party rule [in China] cannot continue without … propagating the fiction that 'The Communist Party defeated the Japanese militarists.'" It is for this reason that China "is always bringing history into bilateral discussions." While he stops short of saying it, Abe seems to believe that forcing China to acknowledge the "truth" of history will spark democratization and bring China closer to Japan and "international norms". He insinuates that anti-Japanese feelings have no genuine popular foundation and they will simply evaporate without official backing. Until that happens, standing up to China is a major goal for Abe.

Abe seems certain that a confrontational stance must be maintained in relations with other countries, particularly China. He describes negotiations as a type of "battle". Democratic Party Prime Minsiter Hatoyama Yukio's 2009 olive branch to China and suggestions that Japan placed too much weight on its alliance with the United States were held by Abe to be a sign of weakness. Abe imagines Chinese leaders thinking about the conciliatory Hatoyama, "This guy doesn't understand anything." Abe acknowledges that "… from both the point of view of security and the economy, China is an important country for Japan, and it goes without saying that a stable relationship with China is in Japan's national interest." He offers little insight, however, into how a stable relationship can be achieved if standoff is the perpetual diplomatic order of the day.

America and Japan – Occupation, the Tokyo Trials, and the Comfort Women

Much of what Abe has done in office – from rock-solid support for the Iraq War in 2003-2004 to participation in TPP free trade negotiations which are unpopular with a large slice of the conservative voting base, to stressing the importance of improving controversial US military infrastructure on Okinawa – seems in lock-step with US interests. Despite this orientation, however, Abe has strategically employed soundbytes critical of the United States and past US-Japan relations when speaking with neo-nationalists like Kobayashi Yoshinori.

Abe plays to the idea that the American occupation, and especially the war crimes trials, victimized Japan. He engages in some linguistic gymnastics, insisting that while Japan "accepted" the decision of the Tokyo Trial as a part of the treaty process to secure independence, the nation has never "acknowledged" the validity of the trial or the "value system" that it represents.

In the interview, Abe also made comments similar to Hashimoto's recent controversial statements on the comfort women system. Abe asserts that when he visited America and discussed the US comfort women resolution in 2007, that Senator Daniel Inoue told him during a gathering of members of Congress that "[On the issue of sex crimes] If we [America] had lost the war we probably would have been censured in the same way." This "caused everyone to go silent" but "It was never reported in Japan." Abe suggests that the historical experience of the comfort women was no different than the RAA brothel system that was established in occupation era Japan. While the sex crime record of the American military historically and at present certainly deserves increased scrutiny, Abe seems to be paralleling Hashimoto here in insinuating that the issue of Japanese official responsibility for the comfort women system is settled because of how common military sex crimes and rape have been historically. Through this discussion he sticks to the conservative narrative that Japan has no unique responsibility when it comes to wartime prostitution and ties the discussion generally to the common neo-nationalist argument that it is only because Japan was defeated that the wartime conduct of its military has been besmirched and described as criminal.

Capitalism, Neo-liberalism, and Imagining Historical Harmony

A great deal has been written about Abe's understanding of 20th century history, but Abe's broader historical vision and the ways that it collides with changes in the Japanese economy deserve more scrutiny. In the Kobayashi interview, Abe suggests that without some guiding moral force, the market is simply a form of "slaughter in the jungle". "Conservative spirit" is necessary to build a "healthy market system". He says, "Japan has been a country in which people have lived by tending the fields together and sharing the water. With the

imperial family at the center, people prayed together for bountiful harvests and prosperity." He believes that Japan's market economy should continue to reflect this idealized past vision. This historical understanding serves to frame Japanese capitalism as something uniquely altruistic that must be protected from the outside. The assumption that Japanese power relations and capitalist system generally are somehow different and more benevolent in their securing of mutual benefits for all members of society serves to mask a great deal – poverty, exploitation, environmental degradation, discrimination, regional marginalization, and so on.

Abe represents America as an economic bully, suggesting that America has been very successful in framing its "national interests" (the "American standard") as the "global standard" – effectively turning the world system to its advantage and "when things go bad for them they just change [the standard]." Abe is seeking a "Japanese standard" here and while this is not surprising, it does forebode difficult TPP negotiations. The "Japanese standard" in this discussion seems to look a lot like a typical deregulated sink or swim economy, albeit one cut off from globalization with strategic interventions, couched in an essentialist cultural mysticism of benevolent elites and a naturally happy, prosperous people.

The Murayama Statement and the Future of Contrition

Discussing the 1995 statement of apology and contrition by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, Abe recounts that he has long desired a "new" statement to replace Murayama's. He is critical of Murayama because he believes that historical memory and awareness of what Abe chooses to call the "Greater East Asia War", "Is not something that should be handed down from politicians as if theirs is the word of god."

When talking about history, Kobayashi goes on the offensive, accusing Abe of bowing to American pressure on history issues. Abe admits that while in office in 2006-2007 he was not able to act on points of great relevance to his supporters on the right like rescinding the Murayama Statement. He insists, however, that part of the problem was his "failure to communicate" what he frames as a "long-term strategy" to do away with lingering elements of the "postwar regime". From his discussion with Kobayashi, it appears clear that Abe considers future visits to Yasukuni Shrine, doing away with Murayama's understanding of the war, openly negating the "values" of the Tokyo Trial, and being more "assertive" in defending Japan's war legacy, are parts of a continuing plan that will unfold when Japan returns to economic growth and conservative political hegemony is re-solidified. Abe may avoid a serious push on issues relating to historical memory, education, and constitutional revision in 2013, but it appears as though he imagines "Abenomics" and economic revival being followed by a broad conservative remaking of Japan's public life.

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