

IN THE CROSSFIRE OF NATIONALISM:  
HISTORICAL MEMORY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE EAST ASIAN  
CONTROVERSY OVER HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI

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HONORS 230D: Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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## Note on Transliteration and Asian Characters

For all Chinese, Japanese and Korean personal names, I follow the Asian custom of placing surnames before given names; for the sake of consistency, this rule is followed even for Asian authors who have published their works in English (hence “Wang Zheng” instead of “Zheng Wang”). The only exception is for those who have Asian surnames but English given names. For the transliteration of Chinese sources and terms, I use the *pinyin* romanization system and strictly follow the updated *Basic Rules of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet Orthography*; for Japanese terms I use the Modified Hepburn system; for Korean terms I use the Revised Romanization of Korean system. However, for certain already well-known proper names, the common English spelling is used. All diacritics are omitted in text but kept in the footnotes and bibliography. When Asian characters are used to identify sources and terms mentioned, simplified characters are used for all Chinese sources and terms; *shinjitai* is used for all Japanese *kanji* terms; *hangeul*, immediately followed by the corresponding *hanja* if possible, is used for all Korean terms.

In 2015, the seventieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, delegations from around the world gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for the Ninth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), a quinquennial meeting of the NPT's 190 state parties to review the Treaty's implementation in the previous five years.

On 27 April, the opening day of the meeting, the Japanese delegation, led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Kishida Fumio and Ambassador Sano Toshio, called for new actions in disarmament and transparency, and commented on issues such as fissile material cut-off and the Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. At the end of its speech, the delegation stressed the importance of raising awareness of “the tragedy that had been brought about by the use of nuclear weapons,” and asked to have the Conference's Final Document invite the world's leaders to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki “to witness the reality [of atomic bombings] first hand.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps neither Kishida nor Sano expected any controversy while delivering the speech, but their seemingly innocent suggestion would trigger an almost visceral reaction from China. In a closed-door session on 11 May, the portion in the Final Document regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki was deleted at the Chinese delegation's request, a move also supported by the South Korean delegation. After Japanese news disapprovingly reported on this incident, and the Japanese government attempted to repeal the deletion, China responded with even greater fervor.

When questioned by Japan's Kyodo News about the deletion, Chinese Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs Fu Cong did not bother with equivocation: “There are reasons why

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *Main Committee 1 - Summary Record of the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting*, NPT/CONF.2015/MC.I/SR.1 (10 June 2015), 5, <http://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2015/MC.I/SR.1>.

[Hiroshima and Nagasaki] were bombed... We don't want the humanitarian issue [regarding nuclear weapons] to be taken advantage of by [a] certain government with ulterior motives in trying to distort the history and trying to impose a partial interpretation of the Second World War."<sup>2</sup> Fu clarified that China's reaction was not directed against the Japanese people, "least of all [against] the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombing," but the NTP Conference "should keep clear of the history."<sup>3</sup>

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, like many other Japanese, seemed to be confounded by China's accusation. In a press conference on 13 May, he stressed that the invitation of world leaders to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a corollary of Japan's experience of the reality of being the target of atomic bombings (*hibaku no jittai* 被爆の実態), proposed out of its wish for and promotion of a world without nuclear weapons. "It is not related to any history problem, and such action [by the Chinese government] is difficult to understand."<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese government, on the other hand, thought everything was, in fact, quite obvious. Quoting from a number of Chinese scholars in Japan studies, a special report by the state-run Xinhua News Agency condemned the Japanese government's intention to portray itself

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<sup>2</sup> "U.N. disarmament conference drops call for leaders to visit Hiroshima after China envoy complains," *The Japan Times*, 13 May 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/13/national/u-n-disarmament-conference-drops-call-leaders-visit-hiroshima>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Kakkoku shidōsha no hibakuchi hōmon ni Chūgoku ga hantai 'Rikai ni kurushimu' Kanbō Chōkan NPT saikentō kaigi" 各国指導者の被爆地訪問に中国が反対「理解に苦しむ」官房長官 NPT 再検討会議 [Invitation of world leaders to atomic bombing sites rejected by China 'difficult to understand' Chief Cabinet Secretary NPT Review Conference], *Hazard lab* ハザードラボ, 13 May 2015, <http://www.hazardlab.jp/know/topics/detail/9/8/9893.html>.

as a victim of the Second World War, while downplaying its role as the victimizer.<sup>5</sup> In the report, comments by an Associate Professor at the China Foreign Affairs University mirror those made by Fu Cong: While emphasizing the hazards of atomic bombs, Japan also ought to emphasize why exactly Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed. As a victim of the atomic bomb, Japan should also “answer the history problem to the victim countries [of its own past aggression].”<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the NTP Review Conference fell apart, mainly over the issue of the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, as the involved state parties could not reach consensus on a substantive Final Document. Amidst the month-long contention and frustration, the diplomatic skirmish between China and Japan was of little account, and quickly forgotten by the Chinese and Japanese publics themselves, who have long been used to such political squabbles with each other. What this peculiar incident epitomizes, however, is not just the mere disagreement between the Chinese and Japanese interpretations of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the much bigger, fundamental conflict of historical memory and national identity between China, Japan, as well as Korea, constantly fuelling tensions in the ever more strained East Asian international relations.

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<sup>5</sup> Yang Zhou 杨舟, “Rìběn yāoqǐng gè guó lǐngdǎorén fǎngwèn Guǎngdǎo Chángqí zhī jiǎng shòuhài shēnfèn” 日本邀请各国领导人访问广岛长崎只讲受害身份 [Japan invites world leaders to visit Hiroshima Nagasaki only talks about victim identity], *Xinhuanet* 新华网, 17 May 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/17/c\\_127808495.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/17/c_127808495.htm).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

In East Asian diplomacy, the four-character word “history problem” (*lishi wenti* 历史问题; *rekishi mondai* 歴史問題; *yeoksa munje* 역사문제 歴史問題) carries a lot of weight. No matter if it is the Chinese mainland or the Taiwan Area, either of the two Koreas or Japan, all are haunted by their own unique set of history problems—unanswered questions and unresolved issues of their nation’s troubled pasts that are often too sensitive to study, and too controversial to discuss. Although mostly concerning the modern period, many of these problems have roots that can be traced back centuries, legacy of the interconnected history of Asia’s ancient civilizations. As a result of this interconnection, the history problems of one nation or state party are often intertwined with those of another. One problem can unite nations in sympathy while another can turn them against each other with resentment, weaving a delicate web of complex international relations that sometimes baffles Westerners. A popular Chinese Internet adage manages to provide a concise summary of the intricacy involved:

Sino-Japanese friendship relies on [common disdain towards] Korea;  
Sino-Korean friendship relies on [common hatred of] Japan;  
Japanese-Korean friendship relies on [common aversion to] China.<sup>7</sup>

Such a labyrinthine system of mutual love-hate relationship between regional powers, especially with such vehemence, is not too common in the present-day West, where ethno-nationalism is no longer *en vogue* as it once was (at least in the mainstream). For someone not well-acquainted with this part of the world, the significance of the role played by history problems in the East Asian quagmire of international relations may be initially hard to grasp. However, upon close examination, it is not hard to find that the subtle effects of these problems seep through the very fabric of socio-political life in East Asian countries. The profound societal influence of these

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<sup>7</sup> The original phrase in Chinese is: 中日友好靠韩国; 中韩友好靠日本; 日韩友好靠中国。 Different variations of this saying can be found in abundance on the Chinese Internet.

disputed history is entrenched in the national identities of the East Asian peoples, shapes these peoples' collective perceptions of each other, and ultimately guides national interests and state actions in the arena of foreign affairs.

Before delving into any further study of the Chinese and Korean perspective on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or any other conflict over history in general, it is crucial for Western scholars to understand this very special history dynamic that underlies much of East Asia's political discords and conflicts. Prominent Chinese scholar Wang Zheng says it outright in the preface of his book, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*: "one cannot understand China's current situation without knowing China's past."<sup>8</sup> The same perhaps can be said for Japan and Korea as well. It is easy to dismissively blame the incessant rancor and acrimony in East Asia on nationalistic chauvinism—and this verdict would not be incorrect—but it is more important to learn *why* this is the case, and to try to appreciate the reasoning behind it with an East Asian mindset. Only then can one truly comprehend the myriad of attitudes, approaches and actions that are at play.

In the case of Japan, the various facets of its history problem are all centred around the Second World War and its legacy in the twenty-first century. Despite their own mutual antipathy, both China and Korea can agree on one thing—that their easterly neighbour has not made adequate apology for its aggression and atrocities in the war. Japan has not "[answered] the history problem to its victim countries." From the Chinese and Korean perspective, Japan's own stubborn impenitence is to blame for all the historical controversies and damaged international

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<sup>8</sup> Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xiii.

relations. For the two main victims of Japan's militarism and imperialism in the past century, it is thus only natural to return the favour by denying Japan's claim of victimhood in the war.

Westerners sometimes do not understand or underestimate the intensity of such passion, and are thus surprised by what they deem Chinese and Korean overreactions to Japan's innocuities—such as refusing to include any mention of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in NPT Review Conference's Final Document.

Here arises a paradigmatic difference in the Western and East Asian historiographies regarding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. American scholars generally have been able to isolate the bombings from the emotions of the rest of World War II history, and focus the debate largely in strategic terms—i.e. the military and political calculations behind the Truman administration's atomic bomb decision. Gar Alperovitz, the leading revisionist historian on the atomic bombings, notes that the American public sometimes does have “felt a strong need to justify the bombings by reference to what can only be called notions of ‘revenge’” fuelled by “anger at Japan's sneak attack and the brutality of her military,” but ultimately concludes it as a “quite separate issue.”<sup>9</sup> On this point, both the orthodox and revisionist schools seem to agree.<sup>10</sup> Another renowned figure in the discourse, Barton J. Bernstein, goes a step further and writes that even in the summer of 1945, “such sentiments of punishment and revenge were not the key

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<sup>9</sup> Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 628.

<sup>10</sup> Some scholars, such as Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, argue otherwise. Hasegawa's book *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) indicates that one of the main causes of the atomic bombings was Truman personal vengeance for Pearl Harbor. This is, however, only a minority opinion.

motives for use [of the atomic bombs]” of the Truman administration.<sup>11</sup> While certainly still a cause célèbre in the United States—as proven by the controversies surrounding Smithsonian Institution’s 1995 Enola Gay exhibition and President Obama’s 2016 visit to Hiroshima—the American debate over the atomic bombings is, for the most part, narrowly defined within the immediate context of war termination.

In China and Korea, however, things are very much different. There, the interpretation of the bombings is not only invariably associated with the memory of the Second World War as a whole, but also directly impacted by the politics of nationalism and identity. For academia, government, and public alike, it is virtually impossible to separate the issue of the atomic bombings from that of Japanese aggression and atrocities in the twentieth century. Consequently, the main question lying at the heart of the atomic bomb debate (if there even is a debate) in China and Korea is not “were the bombs necessary to induce Japan’s surrender?” “should alternatives to the bombs be explored?” or “were the bombs militarily or diplomatically justified?” but simply: Were the atomic bombings *morally* justified as a retribution for Japan’s own atrocities against other Asian peoples? And the overwhelming answer is undisputedly, “Yes.”

During the 2015 NPT Review Conference controversy, on 13 May, the same day Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary explained that the invitation of world leaders to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was “not related to any history problem,” when pressed by Japanese reporters on whether Chinese leaders would ever visit the two cities, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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<sup>11</sup> Barton J. Bernstein, review of *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, by Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *H-Diplo Roundtables*, Volume VII, No.2 (2006): 17, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Bernstein-HasegawaRoundtable.pdf>

spokeswoman retorted: “Let me ask first: when will Japanese leaders come to China and visit the memorial hall of victims in the Nanjing massacre?”<sup>12</sup> A year later, when President Obama made the unprecedented visit to Hiroshima on 27 May, China Central Television, the predominant state broadcaster on mainland China, aired on its news channel a short documentary on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki titled “The Choice for Peace” (*Heping zhi xuan* 和平之选). If the title itself was not enough hint about the narrative presented in the documentary, the anchorwoman made it abundantly clear in the introduction that, “under the historical circumstances at the time, the dropping of the atomic bombs on an unsurrendering Japan was a wholly necessary decision to preserve world peace.”<sup>13</sup> The Koreans also were not too contented with the so-called “reconciliation of the century.” One of the leading news media conglomerates in South Korea, *Chosun Ilbo*, while glad that Obama acknowledged the fact that tens of thousands of ethnic-Koreans were also atomic victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, criticized the U.S. President for not visiting the Korean memorial, or attempting to talk to the Korean delegation present in the Hiroshima Peace Park.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 13, 2015* (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015), [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1263642.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1263642.shtml).

<sup>13</sup> “Xīnwén bèijǐng: Riběn Guǎngdǎo hé Chángqí zāo měijūn yuánzǐdàn hōngzhà” 新闻背景: 日本广岛和长崎遭美军原子弹轰炸 [News background: Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings by US military], *CCTV-13*, 27 May 2016, <http://m.news.cntv.cn/2016/05/27/ARTIDuhIGyFby3QDyxwZQeh9160527.shtml>.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Deok-hyeon 조덕현, “‘Bulgwa 2bun georiinde’ Obamaga chatji aneun hangugin wiryeongbieseo hangugin pihaeja ‘nahollo wiryeongje’” ‘불과 2 분 거리인데’ 오바마가 찾지 않은 한국인 위령비에서 한국인 피해자 ‘나홀로 위령제’ [‘Just 2 minutes away’ Obama did not look for Korean victim, Korean victims held ‘memorial alone’], *Chosun Ilbo* 조선일보 朝鮮日報, 27 May 2016, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2016/05/27/2016052703153.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/05/27/2016052703153.html).

Why is this the case, then? Why are the Chinese and Koreans unable to overcome the baggage of history? More than seventy years have passed since the end of the Second World War. China, Japan and South Korea have all become modern, prosperous countries and important actors on the world's stage. To the majority of their populations, as it is mostly the case in America and Europe, the painful memory of their nation's wars and suffering should be something of the distance past. However, unlike in America and Europe, that baggage of history weighs a lot heavier in East Asia. To the Chinese and Korean peoples, even their youth, the memory is not distant, but instead burnt into the very essence of their respective national identities. "In China," notes political scientist Peter H. Gries, "the past lives in the present to a degree unmatched in most other countries."<sup>15</sup> While in Korea, the collective socio-cultural emotion of *han* (한 恨) "encapsulates the grief of historical memory."<sup>16</sup> The two nation's historical memory of the turbulent nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the national identities upon which they are built, not only shape how they look back at the past, but also how they imagine themselves in the present, and ultimately, how they view the world and others.

The current Chinese and Korean national identities are strikingly similar in that they both heavily employ the collective memory of victimization as the basis of their nations' modern historical consciousness. In both narratives, the once-glorious, ancient civilization of the East

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<sup>15</sup> Peter H. Gries, "Face Nationalism: Power and Passion in Chinese Anti-Foreignism" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999), 15, quoted in Christopher B. Williams, "110 Years of Humiliation from 1839 to 1949: China's Grand Strategy" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2016), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow,'" *Korean Studies* 41 (2017): 257, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665890>.

was defeated by superior industrial technology from the West, and consequently ravaged by imperialist aggression and subjected to national humiliation throughout much of the modern period, initially at the hands of Western powers but later, and most horrendously, by Japan, who had successfully Westernized and become an imperialist power itself.

In Chinese historiography, the “Century of Humiliation” (*Bainian Guochi* 百年国耻) inflicted by foreign aggressors on a weakened China, a period of modern history spanning over more than a hundred years from the First Opium War of 1839 to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949,<sup>17</sup> “defines the national trauma China uses to identify itself.”<sup>18</sup> Of all the imperialist powers that bullied China, however, Japan inflicted the heaviest damage, both physically and psychologically. To the average Chinese citizen today, the constant Japanese aggression against China during this Century of Humiliation is best symbolized by the Second Sino-Japanese War, or as the Chinese call it, the “War of Resistance Against Japan” (*Kang-Ri Zhanzheng* 抗日战争), from 1937 to 1945. In turn, the innumerable Japanese atrocities committed against the Chinese people in this savage invasion is perfectly crystallized into the “Rape of Nanjing (Nanking),” the six-week long mass murder and mass rape of civilians in the

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars like Wang Zheng in *Never Forget National Humiliation* (60) think that China’s Century of Humiliation ended with the defeat of Japan and the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945. In the book (48), Wang lists the major foreign invasions China suffered during this Century: the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Eight-Nation Alliance intervention during the Boxer Rebellion (1900), constant Japanese encroachment of Chinese territories in the 1930s, and finally the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945); Wang also deems the series of “unequal treaties” (*bupingdeng tiaoyue* 不平等条约) China was forced to sign during this period as an equally important component of the humiliation memory. In the end, whether or not the Second Chinese Civil War from 1945 to 1950 should be considered as a part of the Century is mostly a matter of technicality, the central role played by the humiliation memory in the shaping of China’s modern national identity is acknowledged by virtually all scholars of China Studies.

<sup>18</sup> Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 68.

then capital of China by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1937, a tragedy “worse than the Holocaust,”<sup>19</sup> regarded by one scholar as “the fundamental keystone in the construction of the modern Chinese national identity.”<sup>20</sup> Some Western scholars dismiss this victim consciousness as some kind of “mind-trap” set down by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as its de facto ideology has shifted from Marxism to nationalism.<sup>21</sup> Although the CCP does indeed take advantage of this mentality as a tool to legitimize its single-party state (by casting itself as the liberator of China from such humiliation), the humiliation narrative in fact precedes the communist takeover of China by at least half a century. It is a concept as old as Chinese nationalism itself, which emerged during the late-Qing period, in the wake of the first wave of national humiliations brought about by Western powers.<sup>22</sup> The discourse of national humiliation was further developed by the Nationalist Party (also known as the Kuomintang, or KMT) as an integral part of Chinese national identity during its years on the Chinese mainland, and then on the island of Taiwan after 1949.<sup>23</sup> The collective memory of humiliation is not only a national

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<sup>19</sup> William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternative: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 206.

<sup>20</sup> David Askew, “The Nanjing Incident: Recent Research and Trends,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>21</sup> Gerrit W. Gong, “The Beginning of History: Remember and Forgetting as Strategic Issues,” *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2001): 47, quoted in Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

<sup>22</sup> Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 71-78.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-84; Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

narrative of modern Chinese history, but a “key part of modern Chinese subjectivity” on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>24</sup>

While the Chinese remember Japan for the brutal eight-year long conflict (now officially fourteen-year long<sup>25</sup>) and the immense suffering it brought about, the Korean memory of Japanese imperialism is even more bitter. Subjugated by Japan after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and annexed into the Japanese Empire altogether in 1910, Korea experienced first-hand the impact of wholesale Japanese colonization during what the Koreans call the “Period of Japanese Imperialist Forced Occupation” (*Ilje Gangjeomgi* 일제강점기 日帝强占期). Just like how 18 September 1931, the beginning of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, is remembered as the unofficial National Humiliation Day (*guochi ri* 国耻日) in China, Koreans view the signing of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1910 as the “National Humiliation of the Year of the Yang Metal Dog” (*Gyeongsul Gukchi* 경술국치 庚戌國恥). Although the North and South Korean regimes of today each has its own historical narrative, both can find common ground on their shared ethno-nationalism when it comes to the memory of Korea’s colonial history, and the powerful anti-Japanese sentiment it evokes.<sup>26</sup> In North Korea, schoolchildren worship the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. It is worth noting, however, the Taiwan Area’s history curriculum has slowly begun to change since the Lee Teng-hui leadership in the 1990s. The gradual shift of Taiwan’s identity politics is an interesting topic, but is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> China’s Ministry of Education amended its official history curriculum in 2017 to include the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria as a part of the “War of Resistance Against Japan.”

<sup>26</sup> Chris Wilson, Danton Ford, and Alisa Jones, “The History Text: Framing Ethno-Cultural and Civic Nationalism in the Divided Koreas,” in *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 249.

revolutionary history of “Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung” against the backdrop of Korea’s anti-Japanese resistance movement during the Second World War.<sup>27</sup> Across the Demilitarized Zone, in a comparatively more objective manner, South Korean secondary school students learn about Japan’s economic and military exploitation of Korea in state-issued history textbooks.<sup>28</sup>

This notion of constructing national identity around humiliation may be puzzling to some—after all, are such humiliation not evidence of a nation’s weakness? But when the memory of past humiliation and weakness is contrasted against present-day success and strength, it can also function as a vital source of patriotic nationalism. This is especially the case with China. Professor of China Studies William Callahan succinctly summarizes the mentality behind modern Chinese nationalism: “Only China could go from so high a civilization to be the lowest of the low, the Sick Man of Asia, and back again.”<sup>29</sup> This ethnocentric sense of uniqueness (or, at least, perceived uniqueness) of China’s ability to persevere and return to greatness is a source of pride for many Chinese, but the painful memory of a history of foreign aggression also instils a perhaps unconscious sense of apprehension, lest China be visited by such humiliation again. According to Callahan and many others, this apprehension is present in the back of the minds of both China’s leaders and populace when it comes to interactions with the West, and the notion of restoring “the rightful place of China on the world stage” is driven by “a strong sense of

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-240.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 245-248. It is worth noting that South Korea, like most other East Asian countries, also maintains a highly centralized curriculum system under its Ministry of Education. Only until very recently has limited textbook pluralism been legislated. Efforts by the Park Geun-hye government to push for a new state-issued history textbook in 2015 met heavy public resistance, and was officially abolished by the succeeding Moon Jae-in government in 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Callahan, “National Insecurities,” 206.

victimization, insecurity, and righteousness in foreign policy.”<sup>30</sup> Similar sentiments of seeking the “rightful place” can also be found in modern Korean nationalism.<sup>31</sup>

For both China and Korea, Japan’s role as the main victimizer is crucial to the construction of their humiliation memory, which itself is an integral part of their respective modern nationalistic narratives. Consequently, Japan’s refusal to admit to this role is not only perceived as a mere lack of contrition, but a direct affront to the very essence of their national identities. An often-drawn comparison of attitudes towards World War II history is that between Japan and Germany.<sup>32</sup> Many Chinese and Koreans would eagerly point out how the Federal Republic of Germany, although institutionally separate from the German Reich, has managed to face its brutal past and take active responsibility for the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, addressing them in history education and making compensations to surviving victims. The modern state of Japan, on the other hand, being a direct heir to the former Empire of Japan, as China and Korea claim, not only refuses to acknowledge the full extent of its past crimes, but is actively seeking to manipulate history and cast *itself* as the victim of war. China and Korea point to Japan’s resurgent nationalism (although the two are just as nationalistic, if not more so, themselves), historical revisionism, and general failure in answering their relevant history problems as evidence of the former imperialist aggressor’s unrepentance. For China, the problem of the utmost significance is that of the Nanjing Massacre; for Korea, it is perhaps that of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 214; Zhao Suisheng, “Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 961-982, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030913.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Vickers, introduction to *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Philip A. Seaton, *Japan’s Contested War Memories: The “Memory Rift” in Historical Consciousness of World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69.

“comfort women”—women and girls, many of them Korean, who were forcibly conscripted into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied territories. Such history problems have long been evaded, downplayed, and even occasionally outright denied by Japanese politicians,<sup>33</sup> and they consistently prove to be the stumbling block in Japan’s international relations with its Asian neighbours.

The ever so parlous history problem predicament haunting East Asian diplomacy certainly has not been ameliorated by the current Japanese government, whose conservative Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, is a staunch right-wing nationalist, and wishes to restore Japan’s own rightful place as a “normal” power on the world stage.<sup>34</sup> Abe’s openly nationalist agenda to amend the pacifist Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, coupled with other incendiary political gestures such as appointing prominent World War II revisionists to important government positions and visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, has only validated China and Korea’s already firm conviction that an unrepentant Japan has not learnt its lesson from the Second World War, and subsequently strengthened their stance on denying Japan’s quest of recognition for its own wartime victimhood.

In 2013, during the height of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute between China and Japan, and with a series of other historical controversies still stirring public sentiments, footage emerged of a smiling Abe Shinzo posing giving a thumb-up inside the cockpit of a Japan Air

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<sup>33</sup> Nozaki Yoshiko, “Japanese Politics and the History Textbook Controversy, 1945-2001,” in *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), passim.

<sup>34</sup> Takahashi Kosuke, “Shinzo Abe’s Nationalist Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, 13 February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/shinzo-abes-nationalist-strategy>.

Self-Defense Force jet marked “731”—coincidentally the code number of the infamous Imperial Japanese Army unit that conducted appalling chemical and biological experiments on Chinese civilians and Allied prisoners of war. South Korean media instantly exploded. All three of the country’s largest newspapers ran articles condemning what they perceived as Japan’s callous provocation, *JoonAng Ilbo*, however, brought up the issue of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the most venomous language imaginable, a special column by an editorial writer labelled the two atomic bombings as “God’s punishment and humanity’s revenge” (*Sinui jingbeorija inganui boksuyeotda* 신의 징벌이자 인간의 복수였다) for the Asian victims of Japan’s militaristic nationalism, such as those murdered by Unit 731.<sup>35</sup> The Japanese government immediately lodged an official protest over this article, with an indignant Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga declaring: “We will never tolerate such an attitude [towards the atomic bombings].”<sup>36</sup> The Chinese media, on the other hand, warmly embraced its Korean counterpart’s fervor. Quoting from the Korean column, a *Xinhua* special report again made the comparison between Japan and Germany, proclaiming that “Germany has been ‘reborn as a liberal and progressive country,’ while Japan still refuses to apologize for its ‘past crimes.’”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Kim Jin 김진 金璉, “Abe, Marutau i boksueul ijeonna” 아베, 마루타의 복수를 잊었나 [Abe, did you forget the revenge of Maruta], *JoonAng Ilbo* 중앙일보 中央日報, 20 May 2013, <http://news.joins.com/article/11559123>.

<sup>36</sup> Yang Zhou, “Riběn yāoqǐng gè guó lǐngdǎorén.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Hu Ruoyu 胡若愚, “Hánméi chēng Riběn zāo hébào shì ‘tiānqiǎn’” 韩媒称日本遭核爆是‘天谴’ [Korean media claims Japan’s nuclear bombing was ‘divine retribution’], *Southern Metropolis Daily* 南方都市报, 24 May 2013, AA27.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 finds that, largely unchanged for the past decade, 77% of the Chinese population believe that Japan has not apologized sufficiently for its military actions during the 1930s and 1940s. In contrast, however, 53% of Japanese believe they indeed have apologized sufficiently, a proportion that has steadily increased since 2006, while 17% say that no apology is necessary at all.<sup>38</sup>

While China and Korea continue to accuse Japan of unrepentance, why do more and more Japanese think that enough atonement has already been made? This paper has already discussed the reasonings behind China and Korea's rebuff of Japan's claim of World War II victimhood, but why would Japan feel victimized in the first place? While the Japanese people did suffer greatly during the later years of the war, it *was* their government and military, which they ardently supported, that initiated the conflict and committed atrocities undeniably horrendous beyond imagination—does the Japanese people not remember that? Is Japan really a remorseless nation, fundamentally different from Germany? After examining China and Korea's national identities, it is only fair to also take a look at Japan's side of things.

It should be acknowledged that most Japanese people do not deny that significant destruction and human suffering accompanied Imperial Japan's invasion of Mainland Asia and the Pacific, and the Japanese government *does* officially recognize its aggression during the Second World War. Indeed, throughout the post-war years, multiple Japanese Prime Ministers and Chief Cabinet Secretaries, and in fact even the current Emperor Akihito himself, have made a series of apologies and expressions of regret. But China and Korea question the sincerity of such official statements, especially the newest one given by Abe Shinzo in 2015, on the eve of

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<sup>38</sup> Bruce Stokes, *Hostile Neighbors: China vs. Japan* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2016), 9-10. The survey was conducted only in China, Japan, Australia and India, and does not provide data on Korean opinion on the issue.

the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan's surrender, which merely reiterated his predecessors' previous statements, and only made oblique references to the specific issues of the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women.<sup>39</sup> In light of Abe's nationalist drive, many Chinese and Koreans scoff, not without justification, that Japan's words have not been matched by its actions. More importantly, as Iriye Akira, a distinguished scholar on U.S.-East Asian relations, incisively points out, "these [official apologies] have not been incorporated into [Japan's] public memory."<sup>40</sup> While individual, private memories of the Second World War are innumerable and wide-ranging, the Japanese people as a whole has somehow failed to develop a collective, public memory of this specific period of history; this is in stark contrast to China and Korea, both of which, as this paper has already explained, not only have coherent public memories of Japanese imperialism and aggression, but have thoroughly incorporated them into their national identities.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, while memory of the rest of World War II history broke down into a disparate jumble among the Japanese public, that of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was ingrained in the Japanese historical consciousness.

For the Japanese, the fact that their country is the only one to have ever been attacked by nuclear weapon plays an important role in the construction of their national identity,<sup>42</sup> and out of this a kind of victim consciousness very different from that of China and Korea is born.

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Soble, "Shinzo Abe Echoes Japan's Past World War II Apologies but Adds None," *The New York Times*, 14 August 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2jDFuE8>.

<sup>40</sup> Iriye Akira, "Introduction: Historical Scholarship and Public Memory," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>42</sup> Asada, Sadao, "The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 95.

Originating during the Cold War years, caught between the titanic Soviet-American power struggle in Asia, the Japanese construction of a post-war national identity was driven by an intimate sense of nuclear victimization. As the very real fear that Japan would once again become the victim of nuclear warfare pervaded the public, the 1950s gave rise to the anti-nuclear weapons peace movement and anti-military pacifism that would influence Japanese politics for decades to come.<sup>43</sup> But while the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki played its lead role under the spotlight, those of Japan's own wartime atrocities were quietly, and conveniently, forgotten. The prominent American scholar on modern Japanese history, John W. Dower, gives a crisp analysis on the very special Japanese sense of victimization in his essay "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory":

Hiroshima and Nagasaki became icons of Japanese suffering—perverse national treasures, of a sort, capable of fixating Japanese memory of the war on what had happened to Japan and simultaneously blotting out recollection of the Japanese victimization of others. Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that is, easily became a way of forgetting Nanjing, Bataan, the Burman-Siam railway, Manila, and the countless Japanese atrocities these and other place names signified to non-Japanese.<sup>44</sup>

Such is Japan's historical memory, or the lack thereof, of the Second World War. One perhaps would wonder, then, if the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is so indispensable to Japan's modern national identity, the United States must have been cast as the ultimate victimizer behind such tragedies. However, this is not the case.

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<sup>43</sup> John W. Dower, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 135.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Unlike those of its Asian neighbours, which put emphasize on the victimizers as well as their atrocities, Japan's victim consciousness focuses almost entirely on the memory of human suffering. While a significant portion of the Japanese are still bitter over the dropping of the atomic bombs when confronted by survey questions,<sup>45</sup> there is no deep-seated resentment towards the United States among the general public, certainly not to the degree as there is towards Japan in China and Korea.<sup>46</sup> The profusion of atomic bomb literature in Japan focuses on the human element of the bombing survivors' (*hibakusha* 被爆者) personal experience, not American decision-making. While the Chinese and Koreans remember themselves as victims of Japan, the Japanese remember themselves as victims of the atomic bomb, not the United States. As a matter of fact, contemporary Japanese history textbooks give the atomic bombings only a perfunctory mention, and sometimes do not even say who dropped the bombs.<sup>47</sup> Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monkashō* 文科省, formerly *Monbushō* 文部省), the authority in charge of the screening and approval of all textbooks, has been furtively pushing an agenda to downplay the atrocities and horrors of war, including the atomic bombings.<sup>48</sup> As more than one scholar have pointed out, today's Japanese remember the atomic

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-101.

<sup>46</sup> Ben-Ami Shillony, "Auschwitz and Hiroshima: What Can the Jews and the Japanese Do for World Peace?" *IHJ Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2007): 9. When it comes to academia, however, Japanese scholars have widely adopted the "atomic diplomacy" school of thinking, first introduced by English physicist P. M. S. Blackett. The orthodox interpretation of the atomic bombings in Japan reflects the American revisionist view, concludes Asada Sadao in "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and the Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1998): 481. Again, there is a contrast to China and Korea, whose academia is dominated by an interpretation in line with the American orthodox view.

<sup>47</sup> Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud," 113

<sup>48</sup> Ienaga Sabuō, "The Glorification of War in Japanese Education," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993/94): 113-133; Ienaga Soshō Shien Shimin no Kai 家永訴訟支援

bombings almost like some sort of natural disaster that simply “happened,” without much thought or reflection on the lead-up to and reasoning behind the American planning and decision.<sup>49</sup>

According to the Jewish Japan scholar Ben-Ami Shillony, the Japanese mentality regarding the Second World War is to “forgive and forget”—forgive what others had done to Japan, and forget what Japan had done to others.<sup>50</sup> To many on Japan’s political right, their country’s experience in the war is an unpleasant episode of the past, and a major hindrance to the reconstruction of Japanese nationalism. The sooner the psychological scars of that devastating trauma can be healed, and its memory be expunged from the nation’s historical consciousness, the sooner Japan can be restored as a “normal” country. Thus, Japanese atrocities in China, Korea, and other Asian countries are covered with euphemism and circumlocution, while the firebombing and atomic bombings of Japan are treated as natural disasters. Promoted by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (which has effectively ruled Japan as a single-party state for much of its post-war history), aided by the right-leaning *Monbushō* bureaucracy, and riding on the resurgence of right-wing nationalism, this narrative stood firm through the Cold War years, as Japan was diplomatically severed from its neighbours who have turned communist, and the common “red menace” kept silent any discussion of potentially divisive history problems with its remaining capitalist allies.<sup>51</sup>

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・市民の会 [Ienaga Litigation Support Citizen Council], ed., *Taiheiyō Senso to Kyōkasho 太平洋戦争と教科書* [The Pacific War and Textbooks] (Tokyo: Shisō no Kagakusha 思想の科学社, 1970), passim, quoted in Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud,” 113.

<sup>49</sup> Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud,” 113; Shillony, “Auschwitz and Hiroshima,” 8.

<sup>50</sup> Shillony, “Auschwitz and Hiroshima,” 9.

<sup>51</sup> Nozaki, “Japanese Politics,” 291.

However, after the Iron Curtain fell, those history problems that had been smothered by Cold War dispensation finally began to surface as focal points in East Asian international relations. When it comes to imperialism, atrocities, and the Second World War, the Chinese and Koreans are about remembrance, while the Japanese wish to forget. As these incompatible attitudes collide on the international arena, the few anecdotes given in this paper provide only a glimpse of the ugly aftermath. Caught in the crossfire of conflicting historical memories and national identities, the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have sadly been reduced to a chess piece for diplomatic leverage in the great game of nationalism between the East Asian peoples.

When it comes to the question of addressing history problems, time and again, the comparison between Japan and Germany is made. Germany, many would say, is the only mentor that can offer lessons to East Asians on successful reconciliation. Although the German government has been largely reticent about involving itself in the East Asian history feud,<sup>52</sup> Chancellor Angela Merkel did leave behind some words for thought when she visited Japan in March 2015, just weeks before the diplomatic incident erupted at the NPT Review Conference. Against the backdrop of an approaching 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Merkel urged Japan to confront its wartime history as Germany had “faced its past squarely.” However, she also stressed the importance of the “generous gestures by [Germany’s] neighbours” in accepting their former enemy’s re-integration into a post-war European

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<sup>52</sup> “Xi Jinping’s Germany Trip: Berlin Nixes Holocaust Memorial Request,” *Spiegel Online*, 3 March 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/no-holocaust-memorials-for-china-president-xi-on-trip-to-berlin-a-956574.html>. Quite notably, Germany declined overtures from both Chinese President Xi Jinping and then South Korean President Park Geun-hye to target Japan on addressing World War II history when the two visited the country in 2014.

community. Reconciliation is a process that involves both the victimizer *and* the victims; the French and British have made “just as valuable a contribution as the Germans have.”<sup>53</sup>

To truly resolve any history problem, an answer needs to be submitted by *all* sides involved. From the disagreement over the interpretation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the controversies regarding Nanjing and the comfort women, all these problems are manifestations of the fundamental conflict of historical memory and national identity. If one wishes for an East Asia of mutual understanding, free from the tethers of a disagreed history, then the only fundamental solution to this fundamental conflict is the creation of a shared historical memory, an international perspective bridging national identities. As Iriye Akira puts forward in his introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombings, “shared historical memory remains a worthy goal for all nations if they are to understand each other better,” but he also acknowledges that “public memory, once constructed, is very slow to change.”<sup>54</sup> The biggest obstacle to World War II reconciliation in East Asia, unlike some would argue, is not solely Japan’s stubborn impenitence of its crimes, or just China and Korea’s perverse obsession of the past, but the widespread ethno-nationalism and institutionalized animosity between the East Asian peoples. The construction of an universal interpretation of the past, as replacement for the existing nationalistic historical narratives, is an endeavour that can only succeed through the open dialogue and honest cooperation of historians from across China, Japan and Korea. Without active support from these respective governments, the challenges of this Herculean undertaking will be enormous, and the

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<sup>53</sup> “Germany’s Merkel addresses WW2 reconciliation in Japan,” *BBC*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31792313>.

<sup>54</sup> Iriye Akira, “Introduction,” 91-92.

reshaping of public memory through scholarly history is a process that can only be measured in generations. However, historians should not be daunted. In Iriye's words, the very *raison d'être* of this profession is the dispassionate inquiry of the past, not for the purpose of serving any nationalist dogma, but of enlarging the realm of shared knowledge for all.<sup>55</sup> History as rebuilt by modern historians, as true as the contemporary availability of resources and evidence allows, should be one without national boundary, and with only one international identity. In time, the establishment of this scholarly history will have to influence the conflicting national memories of the past.

In East Asia, the baggage of history weighs heavy; it is the historians' job to help the future let go of it.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

## Bibliographic Essay

Two sources proved to be crucial in the writing of this paper. One was the 2015 *History Education and National Identity in East Asia* edited by Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones, an outstanding collection of academic essays by international scholars on the identity politics surrounding history education across East Asia, including mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the two Koreas and Japan. A compendium, in English nonetheless, on this very specific subject, of such range, covering some societies still underexplored in Western academia (for example, Korea), and in such depth, examining not only East Asia's complex national and regional identities but also the thorough history of their development and construction, is indeed a very rare find. In fact, the book proudly introduces its content as the "first significant comparative study" in this area. Due to a dearth of generally available English material, this comprehensive collection of essays was of enormous help to me at various points of this paper. Especially for my very brief overview of the Korean historical memory, the essay, "The History Text: Framing Ethno-Cultural and Civic Nationalism in the Divided Koreas," by Chris Wilson, Danton Ford, and Alisa Jones, turned out to be the only detailed English account of modern Korean nationalism and national identity that I could find in my limited research.

Decidedly more resources are available for China. *History Education and National Identity in East Asia* has a number of essays on the topic of the role of history in China's national identity construction. William A. Callahan's "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism" also offers some valuable insights into the historical consciousness behind modern Chinese nationalism. However, the book that I relied on the most, the second source crucial to this paper, was Wang Zheng's book, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. Published in 2012, *Never Forget National Humiliation* provides a more up-to-date evaluation of China's historical memory and national identity. Most importantly, however, compared to other essays and journal articles, this book is able to provide a much more in-depth analysis on the relevant topics. If more time was available for research, I would have liked to explore some Chinese resources, but the work by Wang Zheng, a native Chinese himself, was more than enough for the scope of this term paper.

Regarding Japan, I mostly relied on readings from class. John W. Dower's essay, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory" in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, combined with Iriye Akira and Asada Sadao's in the atomic bombings fiftieth anniversary special issue of *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, together manage to paint a mostly complete picture of Japan's peculiar historical memory and post-war identity.

For the numerous anecdotes given in this paper, a wide range of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and English news media sources was used.

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