The Memory of the Second World War and the Essence of ‘New Japan’: The Parliamentary Debate Over Japan’s Democratic Constitution

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The debates over the essence of ‘New Japan’ (post-war democratic Japan) reveal a fundamental polemic on the country’s attitudes towards the Second World War. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for comprehending post-war Japan, and especially the real significance they ascribe to its raison d’être as a democratic nation. It is of importance to discuss whether the Japanese were aware of their wrongdoings in regard to the Second World War, and if that is indeed the case, was that awareness considered a drive to retain and develop the country’s post-war democratic regime; or, were the political changes that followed the Second World War perceived in Japan in purely instrumental terms – as a means for recovering from the war and regaining powerful status? What is more, questions about Japan’s memory of the Second World War naturally address specific issues, such as the contemporary political culture of the Japanese elite and the goals of its domestic and foreign policies since 1945. This issue, however, also relates to a far more general question, namely, the extent to which people can learn retrospectively from history – especially from their wrongdoings – and redraw their future on the basis of recognizing their negative past. On the historian’s task, Carol Gluck goes even further by insisting that recognizing past wrongs must play a considerable role in regime transitions. Historians, she maintains, are obliged to write good history in a manner that generates ambitions warranting a better future (Adelson 1999: 1).
Discussing New Japan means considering two main issues. On the one hand, Japan’s post-war regime was imposed by its American occupiers (1945-52) – who, among other demands, handed the Japanese government a pacifist democratic draft to be discussed and ratified by the Japanese Imperial Diet, as Japan’s new basic law. This, of course, was due to the country’s militaristic aggressiveness since the 1930s and particularly during the Second World War – a conduct that often took the form of ‘crimes against humanity’ towards other nations. On the other hand, unlike countries that turned their backs on enforced democracy (such as the Republic of Korea), Japan has remained loyal to its democratic structure ever since formally adopting it. Despite its militaristic past, since the ratification of the post-war constitution in 1946, Japan has exemplified a thriving parliamentary culture and a civic society (Shillony 1997: 318–30). All the same, as noted previously, scholars still debate whether, and if so to what extent, Japan embraced its imposed democracy as an expression of deep self-criticism. Or rather, was it a means to overcome the crisis it was undergoing as a defeated nation and a practical means to re-emerge as a leading power?

More precisely, many assert that post-war Japan rebuilt itself on the basis of a sense of responsibility for its past conduct and was intent on ‘repairing’ its damaged infrastructure. Some underscore the fact that, after 1945, Emperor Hirohito favoured a full pacifist democratic regime for his country. The former grand steward of the Japanese imperial household, Tomita Tomohiko, records that as of 1978 the emperor ceased visiting the Yasukuni shrine, where Japan’s fallen soldiers in its modern wars are honoured due to the enshrinement of the worst of the Second World War criminals in the shrine (Cited in Takahashi 2007). Others cite the apologies for past deeds, expressed by Japanese political figures. Among the latter is the former chief cabinet secretary, Kôno Yôhei, who in August 1993 addressed the issue of the ‘comfort women’ and declared ‘We [the Japanese people] shall face squarely the historical facts . . . instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake . . . ’ (Hongo 2007). One can also mention the June 1995 National Diet resolution expressing ‘deep remorse’ for Japan’s wartime actions and the ‘heartfelt apology’ by socialist prime minister Murayama Tomiichi on 15 August 1995, for the damage and suffering caused by Imperial Japan (Cited in Dower 1995). In a similar vein, the historian John W. Dower refers to many more statements and documents where politicians and intellectuals denounce Japan’s conduct during the Second World War. Dower, who concedes to the ambivalence of some of these texts, nevertheless concludes that viewed collectively, they convey the impression of a serious engagement with fundamental issues concerning the country’s past, present and future (1995).

Other scholars point out that Japan never assumed true responsibility