Historical Memory and Shiba Ryōtarō: Remembering Russia, Creating Japan

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the historical narrative on Japan and Russia in the works of the novelist Shiba Ryōtarō, whose writings have had unrivalled influence on the development of contemporary Japan’s historical narrative. Historical narrative has a broader meaning than ‘history’ – it is a particular understanding of the national past, which emphasizes certain events over others, but also provides interpretations and evaluations of those events.

Historical narrative plays a vital role in the construction of national memory. Unlike the memory of individuals, the collective memory of a nation is rarely based on direct experience of the whole population or even a large part of it. There can be no doubt that national memory is related to certain events and experiences of certain individuals or groups that occurred in the past. However, in order for these events to become genuinely national, i.e. shared by a large part of the national community and related to the present, these events are recreated and reinterpreted through museums, monuments, works of art, but also through historical narratives, which are present in texts such as school textbooks, historical novels and memoirs. Collective memory of the national past is an integral part of the national present, or of the present national identity. A particular construction of the past provides a link between the present and the future and creates a certain cognitive lens through which the nation is imagined by the members of the present national community.

The role of poets, writers and artists in the construction of national memory (and hence, the national identity) and as producers of narratives
that are likely to evoke nostalgic feelings, has been an integral part of the general discussion of nationalism.\textsuperscript{3} As Edward Said has demonstrated in his celebrated \textit{Orientalism} and \textit{Culture and Imperialism},\textsuperscript{4} literature plays an important role in the formation and reproduction of the identity discourse and can be an integral part of ‘historical memory’. ‘Literature’ has always been related to other kinds of discourses, some of which were used to define national identity and engaged in the process of writing the ‘nation’ against other nations and forms of imagined communities.\textsuperscript{5}

This paper argues that Shiba’s literary accounts of Russian history and Russo-Japanese relations, just like other academic works on Russian national character that emerged in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, have created a hierarchical relationship between the two national identities. Through internalization of the Western ‘othering’ discourse\textsuperscript{6} on Russia, which depicted her as abnormal and inferior to the ‘normal West’, Shiba has attempted to create a place for Japan within the realm of ‘universal normalcy’.

Shiba, born in Osaka in 1923 as Fukuda Te’ichi, majored in Mongolian studies at the Osaka University of Foreign Languages and served in an Imperial Army tank division in Manchuria during the last two years of the war. After the war he worked for a few years as a newspaper reporter, while also writing fiction. After receiving the prestigious Naoki Prize in literature for his novel \textit{Owl’s Castle} in 1961, he retired from his job at the daily newspaper \textit{Sankei Shinbun} and became a full-time novelist.

From then on, Shiba devoted himself to writing historical novels (\textit{rekishi shōsetsu}) and became probably the most widely read Japanese writer of the historical novel genre till the present day. His works, including historical novels, essays, travel writings and conversations are still widely read. As of 2005, the 600 books, which carry Shiba’s name as their author or co-author, have sold over one hundred and eighty million copies.\textsuperscript{7}

Shiba has written on a variety of subjects but in one way or another, all of his works were related to Japan’s national past or present. Even when Shiba was writing about a different country, the actual narrative has been about Japan.\textsuperscript{8}

Shiba’s essays have been published (and re-published) in the most popular magazines and two of his historical novels, one related to the Russo-Japanese War 1904–05 and the other to the Meiji Restoration (\textit{Meiji ishin}) of 1868, are all-time bestsellers.\textsuperscript{9} In 1999, one of them, entitled \textit{The Cloud on Top of the Hill}, which deals with the history of the Russo-Japanese War 1904–05, was chosen by the readers of the popular magazine \textit{Bungei Shunjū} as the most valuable book to be left for the future from all the books written in the twentieth century and was chosen to be the best historical book on Japan by the ‘representatives of the intelligentsia’.\textsuperscript{10} Shiba’s works have become a source of inspiration to many politicians and important public figures, and have been quoted in Diet policy speeches by at least two Prime Ministers.\textsuperscript{11}