

Reconsideration of Post-War Understanding of Modern Japanese History: An Examination of War and Colonial Rule of Imperial Japan

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1. Divided understanding of history, or coexistence of diverse understandings of history

The understanding of modern Japanese history has not been uniform during the period from the end of the Second World War through the present. One of the key features of the understanding of modern Japanese history during this post-war period is the existence of different perceptions or understandings of the historical facts and interpretations concerning the Pacific War and the pre-war Showa period (hereafter also referred to as “Showa history”). While we can look at this as a divided or conflicting understanding of history, we can alternatively see this as a “coexistence or competition of diverse perceptions of history or of views of the war” and, further still, as evidence that the coexistence of these different understandings is “ensured” in Japan.¹

First of all, it must be noted that perceptions of history exist on a variety of levels. The three commonly identified are, first, the perception based primarily on individual or personal experience or memory; next, the perception shared within the nation or society; and finally, the perception found in scholarship.² Historical facts are, however, inherently multifaceted and multilayered, and scholarly methods and procedures as well as difficulty of no small magnitude are involved in any effort to objectively examine and interpret the overall picture based on surviving historical documents. Therefore, ideally, the establishment and interpretation of historical facts by professional historians and scholars in other fields should be given greater weight. Furthermore, these should form the basis of the understanding of history on a variety of levels, be shared across a broad range of people and society, and fulfill a large role in the creation of the so-called public memory.

Nonetheless, meanwhile, policymakers and rulers since ancient times have recorded history for the purpose of self-justification and conveyed this as “correct” history. In particular, it cannot be denied that war and foreign policy have been described with political considerations, according to the viewpoints of the rulers. In other words, in some cases, understandings of history are first formed at the political or national level, which is different from the scholarly level, and this in turn becomes public memory. In the modern era, this is observed not only in authoritarian but also democratic nations.

¹ Sumio Hatano, *Kokka to Rekishi (State and History)* (Tokyo: Chuokoron-shinsha, 2011), p. 284.

² Junichiro Shoji, “Sengo Nihon ni okeru Rekishi Ninshiki (Historical Perception in Postwar Japan),” *Boei Kenkyusho Kiyo (NIDS Security Studies)*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (February 2002), p. 100.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that, for the Japanese, the understanding of the history of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period is an understanding of the history of a “defeated nation.” In a “defeated nation,” the understanding of history is shaped in different ways than is the case in victorious nations. For example, an understanding of the history of the war that was lost is more prone to reflect politics after the defeat, the vanquished nationals’ sense of pride, or strong nationalistic sentiments, which would embody issues such as responsibility for the war, apologies for wartime actions, punishment of responsible persons, compensation and reparations, the peace treaty process (return to the international community), damage inflicted and suffered, and the memorializing, remembering, and honoring of the dead. Moreover, there is a greater tendency to question the meaning of the war itself, its legitimacy, and its relevance compared to the case of a war that was won. Additionally, while there is a risk of a misunderstanding, the argument may be made that the understanding of history in a “defeated nation” is, at an emotional level, and notwithstanding the rational level, discomforting to the loser.

As such, the post-war understanding of modern Japanese history in Japan exists on a variety of levels, and it is, as a matter of course, difficult to have a consistent understanding of history. However, from a long-term perspective, the merging of the understanding of history at the scholarly level and in the public memory is believed to be necessary from the viewpoint of passing down an accurate and objective understanding of history (which is not always necessarily a “correct” understanding of history).

Nevertheless, must also be noted that even at the scholarly level, the post-war understanding of modern Japanese history has been inconsistent. Furthermore, a unique factor was closely involved, i.e., the presentation to Japan of an understanding of history by the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) (and the Tokyo Tribunal), as the ruling occupational authority. This further complicated the post-war understanding of modern Japanese history held by the Japanese people.

This paper identifies a number of issues which may be observed in the understanding, shaped in the context of post-war history, of modern Japanese history, and especially the understanding of the history of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period. Through an examination of these issues, this paper explores the significance that those issues have today.³

2. Understanding of history that cannot be freed of a political agenda

In the study of history, there is a notion that a certain amount of time must lapse before historians and scholars in other fields can study an object of study. This lapse of time is believed to be necessary for the academic rigor, objectivity, and scientific integrity of the study to be maintained, taking into account various factors, including whether or not the persons involved

³ For sources closely linked to this paper, see also the following: Fumitaka Kurosawa, “Sengo no Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyu no Kiseki (The Post-war Trajectory of Japanese Modern History Studies),” Fumitaka Kurosawa and Ian Nish, eds., *Rekishi to Wakai (History and Reconciliation)* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2011); and Fumitaka Kurosawa, “Rekishi-Wakai-Jikan (History-Reconciliation-Time),” *UP*, No. 470 (December 2011).

are alive, the situation of surviving historical materials, and the temporal restrictions imposed on scholars. This time lapse was deemed to be around fifty years, according to the prevailing wisdom in pre-war academia.

Considering that 1945—the year of the end of the Pacific War—is the starting point of this fifty year period, it follows that the history of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period may have been “qualified” as an object of scholarly historical research from 1995 onwards. By that time, however, the fact is that the study of Showa history had already been commenced and had made significant advances. By the 1990s, which saw the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, vigorous discords had arisen over past history between Japan and various countries, including China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Britain, and the Netherlands.

Around when did the Japanese people begin to form an understanding of the history of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period? This paper assumes that this history is understood through a variety of paradigms which may be observed even today. They include: (1) the view that the wars of the pre-war Showa period from the Manchurian Incident to the Pacific War were a series of consecutive wars of aggression; (2) the view that the Pacific War was primarily a war between Japan and America; (3) the relative lack of an awareness regarding Japan’s aggression and offenses against China and other Asian countries; and (4) the view that the military, especially the army, must bear significant responsibility for the war and was the major driver of Japanese aggression. Accordingly, it can be said that the “historical view of the Pacific War” propagated by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the so-called Tokyo Tribunal) and the GHQ played a large role in forming these paradigms.

In other words, the historical picture presented by the Tokyo Tribunal (and GHQ) as part of the occupation policy immediately after the end of the war, which was typically too early for this subject matter to be an object of scholarly historical research, had a significant effect on post-war Japanese scholarly research of the history of the Pacific War and of the pre-war Showa period, and on shaping the historical consciousness of the Japanese people. Therefore, from the outset, non-scholarly elements, or, in short, a certain political agenda inevitably accompanied the study of this history in Japan.

The study of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period thus started with the historical picture depicted by prosecutors at the Tokyo Tribunal. The study of this period in Japan had an entirely different dimension than the one it would have had if the study started as purely scholarly historical research. It should be reaffirmed that this kind of non-scholarly, politicized historical picture had a major impact on the post-war understanding of Showa history held by the Japanese.

Moreover, the politicized aspect of the understanding of history continued to exist even after Japanese scholars began to study the history of this period. The reason was that Marxist history, which led the study of modern Japanese history until around the 1970s, and which is represented by the theory of emperor-system fascism, retained significant influence among post-war historians.

This Marxist understanding of history, which harshly condemned the aggressiveness of the wars of the Showa period and the emperor system that promoted them, generated a strong backlash from conservatives. The confrontation between the two sides unfolded, for example,

over the content and authorization of history textbooks.⁴

Needless to say, one of the underlying factors of this battle between Marxist and conservative perspectives among Japanese historians was the ideological confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and the international Cold War structure. However, in addition to this, purely scholarly considerations may also have played a large part. In other words, whether sufficient historical materials were available so soon after the war which would enable full-fledged scholarly research of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period came to be questioned. The constraints of conducting historical research at a time when the subject of the study could not have been an object of scholarly historical research, which, as noted earlier, Japan's wars in the late 1930s and up to 1945 still were in the late 1940s and 1950s may also have had some significance.

On the one hand, the study of this period benefited from the Tokyo Tribunal, which resulted in the early disclosure of many historical materials (e.g., official documents, private documents, testimonies) that otherwise probably would not have been made available to the public, including the diary of Koichi Kido and the diary of Kumao Harada. This certainly was "a major contribution to (the study of) history." Nonetheless, this did not necessarily mean that historical documents that would immediately permit the conduct of full-fledged scholarly research were made available.

For instance, while the documents of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy were seized by American forces during the Occupation, they could not be accessed in Japan until they were returned to the Japan Defense Agency in 1958, and to the National Archives of Japan, along with documents of prewar and wartime Japanese Cabinets, in 1974. The records of Japan's Foreign Ministry, which had been similarly seized and taken to the U.S., were returned in thirteen installments to Japan between 1952 and 1962. Many Foreign Ministry records still have not been returned, however, and even now remain in American possession.⁵

As can be seen by the example of Takashi Ito, Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo, who was a longtime leader of the study of Showa history based on archival work, and who recognized in the 1960s that the study of Showa political history was "unexplored territory" and made tireless efforts to uncover vast amounts of historical documents, the historical materials for conducting scholarly studies of the pre-war Showa period were not yet

⁴ While the textbook issue was symbolic of the ideological confrontation between conservatives and progressives, the textbook authorization system also "served as a brake against the Government's intrusion into the interpretation of history" (Hatano, *Kokka to Rekishi*, pp. 282-283). As a result, the interim report of Stanford University's Divided Memories and Reconciliation project that compared the textbooks of Japan, China, and Korea assesses today's Japanese history textbooks as being "most restrained in glorifying war overall, but offering no narrative that interprets the facts and simply present a chronology" (*Ibid.*, p. 273). In other words, Japanese history textbooks are weak in terms of having a "narrative" that is based on nationalistic sentiments as seen in history textbooks in other countries, and are characterized by relatively objective descriptions.

⁵ See Miruko Atsuta, "Beikoku Gikai Toshokan ga shozosuru Senzenki Gaimusho Chosho to sono Haikai (Prewar Research Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan Possessed by the U.S. Library of Congress and their Background)," *Gaikoshiryokanpo (Journal of the Diplomatic Record Office)*, No. 21 (2007); and Fumitaka Kurosawa, "Nihon Gaimusho no Bunsho Gyosei (Document Administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)," Yasuyuki Ona, ed., *Kinsei-Kindai ni okeru Bunsho Gyosei (Document Administration in Modern Times)* (Tokyo: Yushisha, 2012).

sufficiently available in the 1960s.

Thus, it was not without reason that Marxist history, which interprets history from a macro-level perspective and tries to understand it structurally despite, or because of a lack of historical documents and other materials, led the study of modern Japanese history at least until around the 1970s, notwithstanding the post-war intellectual situation and the circumstances of the Cold War.

3. The “politicization” of “history” and archive-based research, and the “internationalization” of the “politicization” of “history”

As described above, the post-war study of the history of the Pacific War or the pre-war Showa period was affected by political factors from the very beginning, and vigorous confrontations over the understanding of history were seen inside and outside of the circles of historians. In this paper, this phenomenon is referred to as the “politicization” of “history.” In this sense, the confrontation over the understanding of history that is observed even in the present day is similar to the earlier confrontation outlined above and also has deep roots.

However, the situation also showed signs of change. Archive-based research utilizing a vast amount of historical documents and other materials, led by Takashi Ito, mentioned above, made progress from the 1970s onwards, forcing the receding of the theory of emperor-system fascism, which was based more on doctrine and theoretical work. This was also an indication that, nearly thirty years after the war, memories of the Pacific War which were based on personal experiences had begun to fade, making it possible to objectively relativize the pre-war Showa period, and that more of the historical materials which were needed to make this possible had become available. In other words, Showa history was also becoming a domain of full-fledged historical research which was based on many historical documents. This change was also underpinned by the transition from the Showa period to the Heisei period.

Furthermore, the collapse of the Cold War further hastened the retreat of Marxist history. The demise of the era of global ideological confrontation brought about major changes even in academia and historical research.

Consequently, the 1980s and onwards were the start of an era in which full-fledged archive-based studies increasingly was favored, even by former Marxist historians. Value-neutral archive-based research made significant progress, and research on the Pacific War and the pre-war Showa period was not an exception.

For the study of Showa history, the length of time thought to be “necessary” had finally lapsed between the object of study and scholars (by the late 1970s, fifty years had passed from 1927, the de facto start of the Showa period). The study of Showa history had finally reached a stage when full-fledged scholarly research could be conducted.

However, the following must be reiterated. The research approach of shedding light on historical facts through archival work based on definitive historical documents does not necessarily mean such research is free of any political agenda or value judgment. Regardless of whether a Marxist ideology is present or absent, some sort of political agenda or value judgment naturally influences the selection of the object of study and the perspective from

which the archival-based research will be conducted.

Of course, it is also true that an archive-based research approach, coupled with academic modesty, decreases the role of any political agenda or value judgment. However, a key distinctive feature of the fields of archive-based research at this stage was that research topics that were easily tied to a political agenda began to be actively selected as the subject matter of new archive-based research. Such topics included cases of aggression and war crimes in China and other areas of Asia, including the Nanjing Massacre, Unit 731, gas warfare, “comfort women,” and the abuse of Western prisoners, as well as the issue of the war responsibility of Emperor Showa, which was overlooked at the Tokyo Tribunal.

Why then was there a resurgence of archive-based research of these topics? One of the major reasons was that many of the former scholars who supported the emperor-system fascism theory, and who made an issue out of the aggressiveness of pre-war Japan, made these topics an object of archive-based research following the breakdown in the viability of the emperor-system fascism theory.

However, an important factor that can be noted at the same time is the textbook issue, which occurred in 1982 between Japan and China, and Japan and the ROK.

For example, when the authorization of Japanese textbooks became a problem, a former leading proponent of the emperor-system fascism theory described as follows the problems inherent in the study of modern Japanese history to date:⁶

In Japan, the Okinawa Campaign at the end of the Pacific War is given special mention as a miserable experience of a “ground war” that engulfed the general public. However, for China, the Sino-Japanese War was a “ground war” that involved noncombatants from beginning to end. To what extent has our study of history shed light on the truth about this misery—this most specific and intrinsic aspect of aggression and offense? Is it not the fact that these issues, which seem to have but have not necessarily come out into the open, are what the Chinese masses are accusing Japan of through their criticism of the textbook authorizations?

In other words, the remorse over the research approach taken to date and the lack of sufficient archival work, both of which resulted in the “surprisingly low interest in the primary issue of the history of the war, i.e., what the Japanese military did in China, and the lack of Japanese people’s awareness of even the basic facts,”⁷ are what led to the movement to shed light on the specific aspects (the actual situation of war) of pre-war Japanese aggression against China and Asia.

Therefore, this movement holds significant meaning, in the sense that issues were addressed which until then had not been addressed by Japanese academia, and additional

⁶ Keiichi Eguchi, “Jugonen Sensoshi Kenkyu no Kadai (The Challenges of Studying the History of the 15-Year War),” *Rekishigaku Kenkyu (Journal of Historical Studies)*, No. 511 (December 1982), p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8. Eguchi also states as follows with regard to the study of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. “I do not mean to deny the importance of uncovering the truth behind the shooting incident or the expansionist and non-expansionist issue. However, is it not the clarification of the facts regarding what the Japanese military did to the Chinese military and civilians during the hostilities that is more a primary issue for war history? This information is missing” (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

historical facts were brought to light. Furthermore, it was extremely significant that the war responsibility of the Japanese people was once again brought into question (the Japanese are, of course, not only victims of war but also perpetrators⁸) and that the issue of the “post-war responsibility” of the Japanese people, who had placed relatively less importance on clarifying specific acts of aggression, was raised anew.

However, caution must also be exercised because the genealogy of such studies was often closely linked to campaigns to ascertain the responsibility of the Japanese Government and to seek apologies and compensation from it. In other words, this area of archive-based research, which tries to shed light on the specific aspects of aggression against China and Asia⁹ is itself inherently easily tied to a political agenda.

Even now, when the study of Showa history has become a full-fledged scholarly discipline of historical research, a political agenda remains attached to it. Moreover, the “politicization” of “history” that is observed today is largely different from that of the past in the sense that the resurgence of the study of the aggression against China and Asia is mutually closely associated with the “politicization” of “history issues” with China and the ROK. The “politicization” of “history,” which until then had only existed in the form of confrontations within Japan, was “internationalized.” This is one of the major distinctive characteristics from the 1980s onwards. In turn, confrontations over the understanding of history increased in complexity, including at the level of archival work that is conducted to shed light on historical facts.

4. The complexity of the wars of the Showa period

As this paper has discussed, the understanding of history is divided as a result of the persistent existence of political agendas, although some changes have taken place over time, as well as the circumstances in and outside of Japan, which influence post-occupation Japanese historical circles that cannot shed these political agendas. On one dimension, the continuing split may also reflect the difficult situation in Japan, in which the actors who were involved in the wars continue to be present from before, during, and after the wars. This is in contrast with Germany, which could cut its ties to the Nazis.

In addition, of course, because the studies cover a period that is proximate to the “present,” a contemporary sense of values tends to be easily projected onto the studies. This

⁸ See Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Kusanone no Fashizumu (Grassroots Fascism)* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1987) for an examination of the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War which focuses on the consciousness of the masses.

⁹ Today, very few of the young scholars who study these fields seem to embrace Marxist history. Rather, it seems that students who held a victim mentality through media portrayals, including TV and film, were shocked to know about the atrocious acts of the Japanese military in Asia, and their desire to find out why these acts occurred during the war motivated them to start their research. In this sense, the people undertaking research of these fields are changing from before. In addition, as Asia is the subject of the study, naturally the people undertaking the research are increasingly not limited to scholars of modern Japanese history. Furthermore, the scope of what is being uncovered with regard to the situation of the aggression against Asia is expanding. Today, a variety of issues are being studied, including the abuse of captured Allied Forces as symbolized by the Thai-Burma Railway, for example, or the issue of forced Asian laborers.

unavoidable fate of the study of modern history in turn makes it easier for political agendas to be attached to the understanding of history.

It must be pointed out, however, that the complexity of the wars of the Showa period, which are the object of such historical understanding, is another factor behind the divided understanding of history.

For example, Shunsuke Tsurumi¹⁰ proposed the concept of the “15-Year War” in the 1950s to clarify the aspects of Japan’s invasion of China (or Asia) and Japan’s responsibility for this. His proposal was in response to criticism that the Japanese people’s view of the war since the occupation era had been focused almost solely on the war between Japan and the U.S. In his article, “Nihon Chishikijin no Amerika Zo (The Image of America among Japanese Intellectuals),” Tsurumi stated that the “Japanese people separate the latest war into two parts and understand the Manchurian Incident, the Shanghai Incident and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident as a series of wars against China, while the Pacific War was a war against the United States, and believe that the latter was the result of poor judgment. . . This view demonstrates the structure of the peculiar sense of responsibility harbored by the Japanese ruling class, which believes Japan was responsible only for the major war against the United States.”¹¹

Yoshimi Takeuchi, a leading intellectual of the post-war era, also described the distinction made between the wars fought with the West and other wars in his article entitled “Senso Sekinin ni tsuite (Regarding War Responsibility).” He noted, “The wars that Japan fought were simultaneously a war of aggression and a war among imperialist nations. . . Although the Japanese people are responsible for the war of aggression, the Japanese need not shoulder sole responsibility for the war among imperialists.”¹²

In short, as both Tsurumi and Takeuchi point out, the Pacific War or the wars of the pre-war Showa period have at least two dimensions. The first dimension is wars fought with the West, while the second is wars fought with China and Asian countries.¹³ Furthermore, these wars ultimately become intertwined in a complex manner. It must be noted that the fundamental nature of such multifaceted wars itself formed the basis of the emergence of the varying understandings of Showa history.

In later years, Tsurumi explained why he coined the term “15-Year War” as follows. “By viewing the Pacific War or the Greater East Asia War as a war against the United States and interpreting this part of the war as being the result of poor judgment, we cannot grasp the

¹⁰ See Shunsuke Tsurumi, “Chishikijin no Senso Sekinin (War Responsibility of Intellectuals),” *Chuokoron* (January 1956).

¹¹ Shunsuke Tsurumi, “Nihon Chishikijin no Amerika Zo (The Image of America among Japanese Intellectuals),” *Chuokoron* (July 1956), p. 176.

¹² Yoshimi Takeuchi, “Senso Sekinin ni tsuite (Regarding War Responsibility),” *Gendai no Hakken 3: Senso Sekinin (Contemporary Discoveries, Vol. 3: War Responsibility)* (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 1960), p. 13.

¹³ Shoji, “Sengo Nihon ni okeru Rekishi Ninshiki (Historical Perception in Postwar Japan),” describes the multifaceted nature of the Pacific War, noting that the war dimension includes the various aspects of the war with the U.S., the war with the Soviet Union, the war with China, the war with the colonial powers in Southeast Asia, and the issue of the colonial governance by Japan in Korea and Taiwan, whereas the war’s implications include diverse interpretations of a war among Asians between Japan and China, a racial war between Japan and the West where Asia as the battlefield, and an ideological war with the Soviet Union (p. 113).

structure of these wars. This blurs the war responsibility for the Japanese people.”¹⁴ Indeed, the reason that Tsurumi created the term “15-Year War” is closely associated with the issue of how the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period is understood in their entirety.

Meanwhile, there was already confusion at the time over the naming of the war as the “Greater East Asia War,” which was formally decided in the Cabinet meeting of December 12, 1941. This confusion also cast a large shadow on the splitting of the post-war understanding of history. Namely, a discrepancy in understanding existed over whether it was a regional name, as conceived by the Imperial Navy, or whether the name encapsulated the war’s objective of the “construction of a new order for Greater East Asia,” as announced by the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau. Major Shiro Hara, a staff officer of the Army Section, Imperial General Headquarters, criticized the announcement of the Intelligence Bureau. As noted by Hara, Japan could not, in the first place, decide whether its objective in the war was “self sufficiency and self defense” or “the construction of a New East Asia Order.” This lack of a single, clear war objective made the truth behind the naming of the war “Greater East Asia War” ambiguous, and this in turn was one reason why the understanding of the “Greater East Asia War” was made difficult and fragmented among later generations.¹⁵

Moreover, while the name “Greater East Asia War” was deemed to “also include the Second Sino-Japanese War,” there was not necessarily a uniform interpretation at the time of what was meant by the phrase “also include the Second Sino-Japanese War.” In other words, the issue also had to do with an important facet of the post-war understanding of history, namely, how to distinguish the “Greater East Asia War” from the “Second Sino-Japanese War,”¹⁶ and this facet is linked to the important issue of how the connection between the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War should be understood.

As such, as the wars of the Showa period shifted from bilateral wars to a multilateral war, a discrepancy in understanding emerged even among contemporary policymakers and over how the new phase of war, which started from December 1941, should be connected to the previous wars between Japan and China and what position the aspect of the war with China should occupy in the context of this new phase of war. Also, especially in the case of the “Greater East Asia War,” which was fought against multiple countries (with even the Soviet Union becoming a belligerent in the end) and which became a part of the Second World War, the war itself had an extremely multi-layered complexity. Accordingly, this complexity of the wars of the Showa period had a significant impact also on the division of the post-war understanding of history.

This impact is in part reflected in the existence of a large number of names for the war. We currently have a great variety of names for the wars of the Showa period, including

¹⁴ Shunsuke Tsurumi, *Senjiki Nihon no Seishinshi, 1931-1945 (Intellectual History of Japan during the War, 1931-1945)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1982), p. 241. The absence of the perspectives of China and Asia in the affidavit submitted by Hideki Tojo to the Tokyo Tribunal is an example that demonstrates Tsurumi’s argument. For more on the affidavit, see Yuko Tojo, ed., *Daitoa Senso no Shinjitsu (The Truth about the Greater East Asian War)* (Tokyo: WAC, 2005).

¹⁵ Junichiro Shoji, “Nihon ni okeru Senso Kosho ni kansuru Mondai no Ichikosatsu (A Study of Names of Wars in Japan),” *Boei Kenkyusho Kiyo (NIDS Security Studies)*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (March 2011), pp. 44-46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

“Pacific War,” “Greater East Asia War,” “15-Year War,” “Asia-Pacific War,” “Asia Pacific War,” and “Second World War.” While there are theorists who do not place any significant weight on what the war is called, the very existence of so many names is emblematic of the divided understanding of history or the existence of diverse understandings of history.

The diversity of understandings has not only resulted in a plethora of names for the war. There is even disagreement among historians and others regarding the period that is included in, for example, the “Greater East Asia War.” For some, the “Greater East Asia War” only includes the fighting after 1941, while others include the fighting from the 1937 outbreak of the “China Incident.” Similarly, historians cannot agree on whether the “Pacific War,” or for that matter, the “Asia-Pacific War” or the “Asia Pacific War,” begins in 1931, 1937 or 1941. There is thus a wide variety of perceptions, including this sort of complexity about the commencement of the war, whatever it is named.¹⁷

Therefore, unless, at the very least, it is clear when the beginning and end is of any war being discussed, as well as which countries are the main belligerents in the wars, disagreements will naturally arise in any discussion of the understanding of history concerning the wars of the Showa period.

We examine, for example, how the nature of a war is understood. Simply speaking, if America and Britain are considered Japan’s main opponents in the war, the period of the war is understood as after 1941 and the tendency is to understand the nature of the war as a war of self-defense, a war to liberate colonies, and a war between imperialist nations. On the other hand, if China is deemed to be the opponent, the war is understood primarily as a war of aggression (while even in this case there is also the understanding that the Manchurian Incident is a war of self-defense; this understanding, however, cannot be applied to the Sino-Japanese war from 1937).¹⁸ However, in the case of a war in which a war against America and Britain was fought concurrently with a war against China, as was the situation after December 1941, is the nature of the war both a war of self-defense as well as a war of aggression? In any case it is complex.¹⁹

¹⁷ See *ibid.*

¹⁸ For example, does the understanding of the nature of the Sino-Japanese War after December 1941 change?

¹⁹ For example, if the nature of the Pacific War after 1941 is understood as a war of colonial liberation, how was this philosophy handed down to post-war Japanese politics and diplomacy? This is an intriguing question. With regard to the start of Japan’s wars with Britain and America, it could be said perhaps that Japan, while announcing that “With the outbreak of the war in Europe, the Empire will not intervene in the war and will push forward solely towards the settlement of the Second Sino-Japanese War” (Statement by the Japanese government) would be its policy on the occasion of the outbreak of the war in Europe in 1939, —conceived that participation in war was possible if “the time comes when it is wise for the Empire to join the war” (Outline of Overseas Measures and Policies), and finally took the bold course of joining the war. With Japan’s entry into the war, the war in Europe and the war in Asia were linked together, making the Sino-Japanese War the Second World War as well as the War in Europe the Second World War. The nature of the wars after 1941 is thus complex, and as is stated in the main text, a common understanding is difficult to obtain. However, when examining the wars today, perhaps we need not necessarily be caught up in only the “nature” of the wars.

5. How to understand the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period

As this paper has discussed, the complexity of the wars of the Showa period itself is one of the factors behind the divided understanding of Showa history. This, ultimately, is closely linked to the question of how to understand the entire “structure of the wars” of the Showa period.

In retrospect, in the post-war period, the Japanese have remembered the history of the Showa period most of all as a “history of war.” Even in the study of Showa history, “war” has been the principal theme. This was because this was an unavoidable, very familiar, and compelling theme for the Japanese people who experienced the fierce total war that the Pacific War was, and moreover, suffered defeat.

However, this understanding of the war originated from GHQ’s occupation policy and history policy, which were aimed at the democratization and demilitarization of post-war Japan. This was the historical picture and the “historical view of the Pacific War” set out at the Tokyo Tribunal. This was framed by the view that “the Pacific War was a war between Japan and America” and by the understanding of the history as “a series of wars of aggression during the Showa period which led to the Pacific War.” This view and understanding were thereafter largely supported both within and without academia and became a fundamental part of the understanding of Showa history by the Japanese until today.

If so, the implication is that in fact there are already such lenses (or eyeglasses) through which we are seeing when we try to understand the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period. Are these lenses helping us to have an accurate view of Showa history? It is certain that until now there was a historical picture that we were able to see very clearly through these lenses. However, now, are these lenses actually clouding our vision of Showa history, making it difficult to get an overall grasp of the “structure of the wars”?

Regarding the theory of the “15-Year War,” the question has been raised previously as to whether the various incidents and wars, i.e., the Manchurian Incident, Japan-China War, and the Pacific War, may be really understood as a series of successive wars.²⁰ In addition, the question has been raised concerning whether the Pacific War was actually not fundamentally a war between Japan and Britain.²¹ In order to understand the complete picture of the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period, now may be a good time to research the documentation again and reconsider from a fresh perspective the theory of “series of successive wars” and the theory that the “Pacific War was a Japan-U.S. war.”

Of course, it is essential that this reconsideration, above all, be based on definitive

²⁰ For example, see Akira Iriye, *Nichibei Senso (Japan-U.S. War)* (Tokyo: Chuokoron-sha, 1978); Michio Fujimura, “Futatsu no Senryo to Showashi: Gunbu Dokusai Taisei to Amerika ni yoru Senryo (Two Occupations and Showa History: Military Dictatorship System and U.S. Occupation),” *Sekai* (August 1982); Katsumi Usui, *Chugoku wo meguru Kindai Nihon no Gaiko (Diplomacy of Modern Japan Over China)* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1983); and Ikuhiko Hata, *Showashi wo juso suru (Showa History from Beginning to End)* (Tokyo: Gurafu-sha, 1984).

²¹ See Chihiro Hosoya, ed., *Nichiei Kankeishi (The History of Japan-U.K. Relations)* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1982); and Chihiro Hosoya, “Taiheiyo Senso towa Nichiei Senso dewa nakatta noka (Was the Pacific War Not a Japan-U.K. War?),” *Gaikoshiryokanpo (Journal of the Diplomatic Archives)*, No. 25 (2012) (a transcript of Hosoya’s speech from 1979).

historical documents. Because the wars of the Showa period are complex, historical materials not only in Japan but also around the world must be searched and verified. Even if the scholar has a different understanding of history, it is demanded that he share, criticize, and carefully study these historical materials, and bearing them in mind, reconsider the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period based on such archival work.

6. Confrontation and reconciliation from “not forgetting history”

Why is the understanding of history a vexing international issue in the first place? Above all, this largely has to do with a new peacebuilding concept which emerged following the Second World War. In other words, instead of the pre-20th century concept of restoring post-war peace by “forgiving and forgetting” (e.g., as seen in the Peace of Westphalia), reconciliation between former enemy states was to be achieved based on a new concept of “forgive but don’t forget.” Following the Second World War, history became something which “must not be forgotten” so that the same tragic mistake would never be repeated.²²

However, this was necessarily also a framework of reconciliation that encapsulated a certain kind of risk—namely, not knowing when the “past history that must not be forgotten” will occur again, this time accompanied by a new sense of “animosity” and “prejudice,” even if a peace treaty such as the San Francisco Peace Treaty is concluded and post-war reconciliation is established for the time being.

In this sense, modern-day reconciliation is not an easy affair which, simply because it was established for the time being, will last eternally. It is fragile and delicate by nature like glasswork, and requires tireless reviewing and a willingness to mutually seek reconciliation to continually maintain the reconciliation, even as circumstances change.

It then follows that what is important in this endeavor is not to make “history” the cause of confrontation among relevant countries, but how to turn it into a catalyst of reconciliation.²³

In reality, however, different understandings of history exist even within Japan and between Japan and other countries, such as China and the ROK. Moreover, the understandings are at odds with each other. In this context then, what can be done to make “history” a catalyst of reconciliation?

One approach may be the concept of “a shared understanding of history.” However, major difficulties are de facto entailed, because the understanding of history is more or less prescribed by the nationalistic sentiments of the nation to which it belongs. In other words, “history” is more or less accompanied by a narrative and “justice” which are founded on nationalistic sentiments. These are the conflicting factors which fuel the often fierce confrontations over the understanding of history.

As Masao Nishikawa, a renowned scholar of modern German history, stated, “historical

²² Nobuko Kosuge, *Sengo Wakai (Postwar Reconciliation)* (Tokyo: Chuokoron-shinsha, 2005).

²³ See Fumitaka Kurosawa, “Jo: ‘Rekishi’ no ‘Seijika’ kara ‘Rekishi’ no ‘Rekishika’ e (Prelude: From the ‘Politicization’ of ‘History’ to the ‘Historicization’ of ‘History’),” Kurosawa and Nish, eds., *Rekishi to Wakai*.

facts can be shared but an understanding of history cannot be shared.”²⁴ Therefore, “a shared understanding of history” necessarily must be embraced with a certain degree of skepticism.

Assuming that “history” cannot be cleansed of a nationalistic narrative and justice,²⁵ what reconciliation needs from a scholarly and long-term perspective is, first, “the sharing of historical documents,” in line with the following statement made by Yoneo Ishii, a leading authority of Southeast Asia studies, when he was Director-General of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records. “Even if it is nearly impossible to have a shared understanding of history, it is possible to share historical materials. If mutual understanding may be deepened even slightly on the basis of such vast materials, this in and of itself gives the Center a *raison d’être*.”²⁶

If an accurate understanding of history (not necessarily a “correct” understanding of history) is formed based, at least, on definitive historical facts, then, needless to say, historical materials are essential for uncovering those historical facts. It is most critical and essential for scholarly historical research that scholars and people in and outside of Japan share historical materials as well as information regarding the circumstances that surround them, including what historical materials were utilized to uncover historical facts and what relevant historical materials remain, i.e., the process that was taken and the extent to which a greater or lesser number of historical materials is available for various topics.²⁷

The next item which is needed is the development of professional and academic relations among historians, as was candidly noted as follows in the Prelude (p. ix) of the “Japan-China Joint History Research Report Vol. 1 (original text in Japanese and Chinese)” published in January 2010. “Scholarly research has reached a phase in which Japanese and Chinese scholars, ‘even if they could not agree with the other’s opinion, are able to understand to a certain extent

²⁴ Hisaki Kenmochi, “Rekishi Ninshiki Kyoyu no Jikken (An Experiment of Sharing Understandings of History),” Kurosawa and Nish, eds., *Rekishi to Wakai*, pp. 209-210.

²⁵ Compared to the history textbooks of many countries, it is found that Japanese history textbooks are characterized as weak in terms of “narrative.” See also footnote 4. This issue asks us how the two different description styles adopted by textbooks, i.e., relatively objective descriptions that present historical facts one after another and “offer no narrative that interprets the facts” as seen in many Japanese textbooks, and descriptions with a “good narrative” which is based on nationalistic sentiments, can be evaluated.

²⁶ “Kaisetsu Sannenme wo mukaeta Ajia Rekishi Shiryō Senta (Japan Center for Asian Historical Records Celebrates Third Year Anniversary),” *Akaibuzu (Archives)*, No. 17 (December 2004), p. 76. See also Kurosawa, “Sengo no Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyū no Kiseki,” p. 52.

²⁷ In this sense, the initiative of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records to digitize and disclose, domestically and internationally, official documents from the collections of the National Archives of Japan, the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, and the Military Archives of the National Institute for Defense Studies is invaluable. The preservation, management, use, and disclosure of these historical official documents are issues that each and every one of us must carefully consider today. The poor handling of official documents, which are at the source of the creation of the history of Japan, could lead to the history of Japan being described based primarily on the records and historical materials of other countries. In this sense, it is essential that official documents are handled carefully (Hatano, *Kokka to Rekishi*, p. 27). To this end, we must at the minimum set aside a sufficient number of personnel and budget for public historical archives. With regard to the issue of personnel in particular, archivists or experts who are thoroughly capable of handling historical materials are naturally demanded. As the number of personnel is increased, their quality will also be called into question.

why the other feels the way he does.’’²⁸ In other words, it is vital that the differences in the intellectual contexts that underlie conflicting understandings of history are understood.²⁹ To this end, mutual exchanges and dialogue among those concerned are indispensable.

Accordingly, even if “a shared understanding of history” is assumed as the goal which we should be aiming towards, as long as its immediate realization is difficult, it is imperative, at least from a scholarly perspective, that, for the time being, the coexistence of different understandings of history as a fact be affirmed, mutual understanding through exchanges and dialogues on history among those concerned be deepened, and the disclosure and sharing of the historical material which should serve as the basis be promoted.

In this sense, a vast amount of time is still needed to make the issue of understanding of history a catalyst of reconciliation. For those who have resolved to tread the path of mutual understanding and reconciliation with regard to the understanding of history, it is incumbent on them, even if they were to be overcome with despair, to take persistent steps forward without forgetting to have some optimism.

7. “Structure of wars” and “structure of history”

Lastly, in concluding this paper, the following point must also be noted. Namely, this paper has made little reference to the perspective and views of “Korea.” Part of the reason was that the focus of this paper has been on the understanding of history as it relates to the studies of the Pacific War and the pre-war Showa period.

Of course, it is not the case that “Korea” issues of the pre-war Showa period were not addressed previously by scholars, including the issues of the change of names from Korean to Japanese names, forced recruitment, comfort women, and Korean prison guards. However, it is undeniable that with respect to relations with “Asia,” the primary interest of scholars has been on “China,” with interest in “Korea” being considerably less in comparison. For example, as has already been noted, even when the 1982 textbook issue drew significant attention to the actual situation of Japan’s war with China, “Korea” did not garner primary interest as an issue of Japan’s aggression in Asia during the relevant period.

A variety of factors may be conceived for this. Nonetheless, what is important is that first, as a result of the incorporation of the Korean Empire and its people into “Imperial Japan” due to the annexation of Korea, “Korea” issues became issues of “Imperial Japan.” Second, therefore, it is not the case that Japan and “Korea” were at war in terms of the wars of the

²⁸ With history issues being given increasing exposure, a variety of forms of joint historical research is being conducted with the involvement of private and public organizations in recent years. Regarding this, as starters, see Lionel Babicz, “Higashi Ajia ni okeru Kyotsu no Rekishi Ninshiki no Tankyu (A Search of a Common Historical Perception in East Asia),” Hisaki Kenmochi, Nobuko Kosuge, and Lionel Babicz, eds., *Rekishi Ninshiki Kyoyu no Chihei (Horizon of a Common Historical Perception)* (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2009); and Hiroshi Mitani, “Rekishi Ninshiki no Genzai, 2008 (Current Historical Perception, 2008),” Liu Jie and Shin Kawashima, eds., *1945 Nen no Rekishi Ninshiki (The Historical Perception of 1945)* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2009).

²⁹ See Toshio Motegi, “Higashi Ajia ni okeru Wakai no Mosaku (Exploring Reconciliation in East Asia),” Kurosawa and Nish, eds., *Rekishi to Wakai*.

pre-war Showa period. For Japan of the pre-war Showa period, “Korea” issues were issues of colonial rule and were not issues of war.

As has already been discussed, the view that the war was a “Japan-U.S. war” diluted the perspectives towards Asia, and it was the criticism against this which led to the emergence of the concept of the 15-Year War. However, as long as the wars were viewed as a “series of wars of aggression,” they in short referred to the wars with China, making it more likely for “Korea” perspectives to have been given less consideration.

In other words, it demonstrates a structural problem with the understanding of history—namely, given a post-war understanding of history which centers on “war,” i.e., an understanding revolving around the theory of the “Japan-U.S. war” and the theory of the “series of wars of aggression,” “Korea” issues were bound to be given little consideration since they were issues of “colonial rule.”

Although it need not be reiterated, Japan, prior to the war, was “Imperial Japan,” a “colonial empire,” and it was this “Imperial Japan” that executed the wars of the pre-war Showa period. Thus, unless the history of the pre-war Showa period is examined from both the aspects of the issues of “war” and the issues of “colonial rule,” a complete picture of the history cannot be obtained.³⁰

It was back in the 1950s when Shunsuke Tsurumi noted that the Japanese people did not have a proper grasp of the “structure of the wars” of the Showa period, pointing out “the structure of the peculiar sense of responsibility harbored by the Japanese ruling class, which believes Japan’s responsibility for the major war lies only with the United States” and the inextricably linked impoverished perspectives towards “Asia.” Now, however, when this history continues to be understood by separating the context of the Japan-U.S. war and the context of the aggressions against Asia, perhaps the following question needs to be further asked. Namely, did the people of post-war Japan and scholars of modern Japanese history in fact have a proper grasp of not only the “structure of wars” but also the “structure of the history” of the Showa period?

This question possibly needs to be asked because the lack of “Korea” perspectives may represent a certain type of structure of the understanding of modern Japanese history in post-war Japan. In other words, the fact that Japan suddenly lost all of its colonies, including “Korea” and Taiwan, along with its defeat in war (i.e., the fact that the colonies were not lost as a result of losing in a fierce struggle for colonial independence, and the fact that many Japanese had to rapidly evacuate from overseas countries and return to Japan due to its defeat) made post-war Japanese less conscious (or oblivious) of Japan’s pre-war identity as a “colonial empire.” It is believed that this in no small part was also projected onto the understanding of history.

In this sense, the causes of the aforementioned lack of “Korea” perspectives owes not only to the perspective of the “wars” of the Showa period, but are also inextricably linked

³⁰ Of course, “Asia” is not limited to “China” and “Korea.” In terms of colonial rule, the issues of other Asian regions, such as Taiwan, are also included, similar to the case of “Korea.”

to post-war Japan's loss of consciousness of its "Imperial Japan" identity.³¹ In other words, the lack of consciousness of the identity of "Imperial Japan" as a colonial empire or the desire to forget served as another major undercurrent that prescribes the post-war Japanese understanding of the "structure of the wars" and the understanding of the "structure of history" of the Showa period.

³¹ The way in which Japanese history is understood since the war, which is underlain by the lack of consciousness of Japan's "colonial empire" identity or the desire to forget, plays a large part in the issue of Japan-ROK understanding of history. See also Shin Kawashima, "Nitchukan no Rekishi Kyodo Kenkyu kara mita Kyokasho Mondai (The Textbook Issue from the Perspective of Japan-China Joint History Research)," Kenmochi, Kosuge, and Babicz, eds., *Rekishi Ninshiki Kyoyu no Chihei*, pp. 167-168. Also, for information on a division of labor of sorts existing between the study of the history of Japanese diplomacy and the study of the history of colonies, see Shinichi Yamamuro, "'Kokumin Teikoku' Ron no Shatei (The Range of the 'National Empire' Theory)," Yuzo Yamamoto, ed., *Teikoku no Kenkyu (A Study of Empire)* (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2008).