

Briefing Memo

Outlook for the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee

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Introduction

After an agreement at the Japan-China Summit Meetings, the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee was launched in December 2006 “to deepen objective perception toward history through this research and promote mutual understanding.” Two subcommittees, “ancient, medieval and early-modern” and “modern and contemporary,” were set up to cover the over 2,000 years of Japan-China exchanges, modern unfortunate history, and the history of development in Japan-China relations in the 60-odd years since the end of World War II. I have been participating as a member of the modern and contemporary subcommittee. Until now, discussion of Japan-China relations has often focused on the period of the war, but inclusion of the postwar period in this discussion has groundbreaking significance. In fact, joint research on history had already begun with the Republic of Korea (ROK) from 2002, before that of Japan and China. Until now, there have been three plenary meetings and three subcommittee meetings for a total of six meetings, and work is currently in the final stage of conclusion toward public presentation of the report. Considering the bilateral relationship to date regarding perceptions of history, this is an extremely difficult undertaking. However, deliberations were carried out sincerely and evenly, and were fruitful. Both the Japanese and Chinese sides will write about the general history regarding the agreed upon common period-specific and theme-specific subjects. Then, the report will be completed as a parallel history, comprised of text that has been augmented and revised based on mutual discussion at later meetings.

1. The significance of “public” joint research

Although public committees like Japan-China Friendship Committee for the 21st Century (a committee established in 1984 that makes proposals to the governments of both countries regarding a wide range of areas including politics, economics and culture, and is held almost every year) have already been set up between the two countries, the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee (hereafter, “JHR”) is the first one that deals with history. On the other hand, private sector joint research has been carried out frequently since the late 1980s when disputes over history between Japan and China came to the surface due to the controversies over school textbooks and visits by Japanese officials to Yasukuni Shrine. Among these research projects are multilateral endeavors involving countries such as the ROK and the United States, and in recent years, shared history textbooks have also been edited. Against such a backdrop, what is the significance of “public” joint

research?

First, the discussion between the governments of Japan and China regarding historical perception, which is easily politicized, is left to JHR, an academic forum, and becomes depoliticized. That is to say, the JHR is considered “a kind of insurance” (Japanese Chairman: Dr. Shin’ichi Kitaoka, Professor, University of Tokyo); when there is a disagreement regarding history, leaving it to the JHR makes it possible to make it not into a problem, but instead to focus on important areas that require cooperation between the two countries’ governments, such as resources, finance, food safety, falling birth rates and aging populations.

Second, regarding historical perception issues between Japan and China that are being blown out of proportion with actual repercussions, public joint research reduces rifts and biases between the two countries, and encourages mutual understanding by calmly studying the points of contention and points of agreement, as well as their backgrounds, and announcing the results of such studies.

Dr. Kitaoka said, “We should be able to narrow the real gap, not by trying to have a common historical perception, but by verifying the true extent of the differences and discussing them.” Furthermore, considering the current situation in which discord between Japan and China regarding historical perception is also attracting international attention, if possible, the accurate provision of information regarding the true essence of Japan and China’s historical perception issue to third-party countries through publication in English in addition to Japanese and Chinese would be meaningful.

Third is the selection of participants. While a variety of views on modern and contemporary history have existed in postwar Japan, history has in part been politicized under the influence of conflicting ideologies. As a result, although it cannot be denied that private sector joint research has born much fruit, some imbalance on the part of Japanese participants has been cited. Dr. Kitaoka has mentioned, “Unless the participants from both sides are historians of a certain caliber of intellectual rigor and authority, I think such talks could do more harm than good.” In today’s Japan, where historical perception is divided, a perfectly fair selection will be difficult, even if the evaluation of current committee members is left to a third party. However, a more suitable selection process should be considered. After all, isn’t this what we mean by “public?”

In fact, all of the Chinese committee members are employed by either Peking University or the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, both of which are Beijing-based institutions. The fact that no participants have been chosen among researchers from Shanghai, and other areas in southern China that have been advancing independent research is probably the result of another kind of “public” personnel selection.

2. Future Challenges

At the same time, opposite to the first meaning of “public” described above, another aspect linked to “politics” exists. In other words, Chinese Chairman Dr. Bu Ping, Director of the Institute of Modern History, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has mentioned that JHR should be carried out based on the principles of three political documents: the Japan-China Joint Communiqué (1972), the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People’s Republic of China (1978), and the Japan-China Joint Declaration on Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development (1998). What is particularly related to JHR in the spirit of these documents are “reflection upon and responsibility for the invasion” and “neighborliness and friendship.”

Of course, it is necessary for us as Japanese to undertake “reflection upon” and take “responsibility for the invasion.” However, that does not necessarily mean directly accepting China’s official view of history, that is to say, the “right historical perception.” In particular, as Dr. Bu states, “Since the war, China has consistently made anti-Japanese war memorials an important part of political and social activities.” Thus, to China, modern and contemporary history centering on war between Japan and China is intimately linked to the logic of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the unity of the people. The fact is that there is an especially great gap with the academic perceptions on the Japanese side.

These differences are occasionally found at JHR in debates on methodology and statements by the Chinese side. On the Japanese side, there is a strong tendency to look over individual specific “facts” and investigate their objective causes through the policymaking process. One result is the contention that various other choices and possibilities other than war existed between Japan and China at the time. On the other hand, the Chinese side focuses on an inevitable flow of events that underlies modern Japan-China relations, in an attempt to understand this history as a pattern of intentional and consistent “invasion” on the part of modern Japan and “resistance” on the part of China. For example, regarding the Marco Polo Bridge Incident that set off the war between Japan and China, while the Japanese side points out its accidental nature, based on investigation of the first shot, the Chinese side stresses the continuity with Japanese “invasion” going back to the Manchurian Incident, and even further to the First Sino-Japanese War, and interprets it as the natural result of such “invasion.” Moreover, the Japanese side analyzes Japan-China relations not only as a bilateral relationship, but also from the standpoint of relations with East Asia and the world at large. At the same time it focuses on both countries’ internal factors that had an influence on political, military, and diplomatic aspects of Japan-China relations, and mentions mutual linkages.

However, the Chinese side has pointed out that this Japanese approach ignores things like the

inevitable cause and effect relationships of incidents. As Dr. Bu states, “An unstructured historical view that stresses the non-continuity, accidentalness, and extraneousness of certain items and affairs obscures judgment on the root issues.” Further criticism pointed out that the Japanese side’s analysis is shackled by nitpicking positivism that minutely analyzes individual facts, and results in not only efforts to avoid responsibility and make excuses, but also hurts the feelings of the Chinese people, and further results in contributing to Japanese revisionism. Herein is illustrated the difficulty of academic debate between what we can broadly describe as Japan, the victimizer, and China, the victim.

China often repeats the words, “Using history as a mirror and heading towards the future” in Japan-China discussion forums. “Using history as a mirror” means we must learn the lessons that were brought about by the invasion. Moreover, these were “lessons” that should have relied upon certain value judgments, such as political or ethical right or wrong. Such an assertion speaks to the subtle differences between Japan and China regarding “positivism” and “lessons.”

Additionally, in regard to “neighborliness and friendship,” the objective of JHR for the Japanese side is encouragement of mutual understanding as well as “insurance,” but for the Chinese side encouragement of “friendship” and finally, a common historical perception, are considered the primary goals. Incidentally, according to one public opinion poll, 40% of Chinese expect the history issue between Japan and China to improve through the JHR, a figure that represents high expectations of the committee compared to that of Japanese (only 19%). In Japan, even domestically there exist many different and diverging perceptions of history and intense debate is taking place. Therefore, many probably believe it would be even more difficult to achieve a common historical perception with China. In contrast, most of China’s people tend to think that there is only one “right historical perception,” and it is likely that the people are hoping that Japan will agree with China’s historical perception through the work of JHR. Therefore, the way the Japanese side describes things is an important issue to China, and concerns have been cited that if significantly disparate views were voiced in JHR, not only would anti-Japanese sentiment once again increase, but also backlash against the Chinese committee members and the Chinese Communist Party and government might be brought about. In any event, it is thought that the “friendly” relationship between Japan and China in recent years since Prime Minister Abe’s visit to China would be lost. In general, concerning historical perception, even if acceptance is possible among researchers, a considerable length of time would be necessary until acceptance spread among the people. In particular, even though it is debatable whether or not there is a widespread and shared “public opinion” in China, in recent years, assertions of “patriotism” have been made on the Internet and elsewhere. In this way, in the case of China, it probably cannot be denied that JHR’s “public” joint research has an aspect of difficulty due to the fact that it must be conducted while giving consideration to domestic public opinion.

Conclusion

In these ways, Japan and China's "public joint research" at this point in time has significance as well as challenges. Although the governments of the two countries agreed during President Hu Jintao's May 2008 trip to Japan to continue JHR, how should we face these challenges moving forward? In doing so, many things should be learned from the German-Polish Textbook Commission, which was a reference example for JHR. First is the debate over individual "facts." Regarding the recognition of "facts," which is a prerequisite for historical perception between Japan and China, differences exist on several important points. The seemingly simple task of mutual verification while relying on primary historical sources is probably needed before a common historical perception is shared. Second is the participating researchers' maintaining full professionalism as historians, and carrying out discussions on equal footing based on self-criticism not based on nationality, but from the "personal" and academic standpoints. On this point, Dr. Bu has stated, "Both China's researchers and Japan's researchers have a responsibility as researchers to protect national interests." It is also a fact that the environments surrounding nationalism and academics differ widely between Europe and East Asia. Third are stabilization of the political environment, strong conviction on the part of politicians, rational treatment by the media and propagation of the results to society at large.

The German-Polish Textbook Commission was founded in 1972 during the Cold War. In this year, its 36th, agreement was finally reached on the production of a common textbook. Dialog between Japan and China has only now just begun and it goes without saying that the circumstances of Europe and East Asia differ greatly. From now on, it will be important to continue dialog without impatience and setting long-term goals.

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