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THE ASIAN BOOKSHELF

HOW DOES JAPAN SAY SORRY?

Accepting apologies is not so easy

By JEFF KINGSTON

JAPANESE APOLOGIES FOR WORLD WAR II: A Rhetorical Study, by Jane W. Yamazaki. London: Routledge, 2005, 256 pp., £65 (cloth).
POLITICS, MEMORY AND PUBLIC OPINION: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society, by Sven Saaler, Munich: Deutsches Institut fur Japanstudien, 2005, 202 pp., 28 euro (cloth).

Reconciliation between Japan and its neighbors remains in limbo because issues of war memory and apology have not been resolved. Japan's shared history with Asia shapes and amplifies ongoing controversies ranging from territorial disputes to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated Yasukuni Shrine visits.

In 2005 former German Prime Minister Helmud Schmidt visited Tokyo and reminded his hosts that Japan has no friends in Asia because it has failed to assume the burdens of history. Its neighbors have witnessed sustained efforts by some Japanese to gloss over the darker chapters of their shared history, generating disputes that impede reconciliation.

Japan has dug itself a deep diplomatic hole by denying, minimizing, shifting blame and justifying its atrocities in Asia. It is only since the 1990s that the government has begun the process of healing these rifts over history by revising textbooks, issuing apologies and making some reparations to former sex slaves. However, a conservative backlash aimed at sustaining a vindicating and valorizing narrative overshadows and undermines these reconciliation efforts.

The two superb books under review help us understand why reconciliation remains so elusive. Both authors note that Japanese public opinion favors reconciliation including the admission of wrongdoing and reparations. Prolonged efforts in the postwar era by the government and rightwing apologists to bamboozle Japanese about their history have thus failed.

Yamazaki's book examining Japanese apologies is cogent and concise, but still probably longer than most skeptics would anticipate. She provides ample evidence that in the 1990s government spokesmen, prime ministers and Emperor Akihito apologized repeatedly to Asian nations victimized by Japanese colonialism and aggression.

Apologies are not easy. She asks, "How are the dignity and political honor of the apologizing nation to be maintained while admitting the undignified (not to mention horrific) crimes of the past?"

Prominent intellectuals such as Saburo Ienaga and Kenzaburo Oe counter that there can be no dignity based on denial and that restoring national honor and winning the trust of neighbors requires a forthright reckoning. Yamazaki is right, however, in pointing out that no nation easily concedes wrongdoing because history is a powerful source of identity and legitimacy.

Why have Japan's apologies failed? Yamazaki gives a complex answer to this important question. Japan's belated apologies are portrayed in the media as grudging and insincere. Since the apologies mostly lack reference to specific crimes, they are not convincing.

The apologies are further undermined by the government's reluctance to incur any legal responsibility, and thus reparations, a concern that affects the wording in ways that comes across as equivocation. Sincerity is also questioned because "Japanese conservatives with strong prewar associations have remained in political power throughout the postwar period."

Sven Saaler examines the politics of memory and the battles over representing history in textbooks, the mass media, films, novels and museums. This is a compelling story of popular resistance to the conservative agenda of popularizing a whitewashed history. Rightwing opportunism has foundered because people reject the jingoist disdain toward Asia that permeates their historical view. He writes, "The Japanese textbook controversy reveals the difficulties of restructuring a nationalism burdened by legacies of the past, above all in its role as an ideological vehicle for the militarism and national mobilization that issued in World War II."

The publication and approval of a conservative text that casts Japan's actions in a favorable light sends an ambiguous message to Japan's neighbors. It is a powerful sign that there is no consensus among Japanese about their shared history with Asia, thus undoing the good will cultivated through apologies. It may be reassuring that fewer than 1 percent of Japanese school boards have chosen this textbook, but the media limelight and brisk sales

of this book and xenophobic manga are seen to reflect an unrepentant historical consciousness. Saaler reminds us that such conservative attitudes are out of step with public opinion and hotly contested, but they do create an unfavorable context for apology.

Saaler may be correct that "most Japanese are not in denial over any part of their nation's past including the aggressive nature of Japan's wars in the 1930s and 1940, and Japanese war crimes in Korea and China." But this is not the prevailing message in the media.

Yamazaki sensibly points out that apologies only work if accepted. Complicating Japan's efforts at reconciliation is the unwillingness of some victims to accept the apologies. Indeed, the hammer of history handed to China and Korea by Japan has proven politically useful in both nations.

She believes the impasse will persist no matter what Japan does because of entrenched opposition to reconciliation. For example, "The comfort women have become a symbol for women's rights in Asia. As such, the leaders of this activist movement have an agenda that goes beyond the immediate needs of the victims, as the refusal to accept the Japanese offer of compensation and apology illustrates . . . . There seems to be little chance of resolution as long as the issue provides a strong rallying point for feminist and anti-Japanese nationalist movements."

While she is right that such activists are holding reconciliation hostage to their agendas, it is worth noting that far larger, lavishly funded and politically influential rightwing organizations in Japan have a longer track record in doing so. They help orchestrate the *bogen* (undue remarks) by politicians that typically deny or justify whatever has recently been subject to apology, thus derailing reconciliation.

And thus the deaf and the mute are not communicating. Perhaps she is correct in suggesting that only a Diet Resolution can break the cycle of apologies, but if that is the case, the signs are not propitious. With the Koizumi Cabinet ineptly scoring own goals, and neighbors shamelessly playing the history card, there is little cause for optimism about regional reconciliation.

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