Signs of Recovery for Japanese Nationalism? The Citizen’s Committee for Reclaiming Cultural Identity through Textbook Reform
by John K. Nelson, Ph.D.

John Nelson is an assistant professor of East Asian religions in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco. He is the author of two books on Shinto in contemporary Japan (A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine [1996], and Enduring Identities: the Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan [2000]), which are the first extended ethnographies of two important shrines, one in Nagasaki and the other in Kyoto. Two of his recent articles include “Shifting Paradigms of Religion and the State: Implications of the 1997 Supreme Court Decision for Social, Religious, and Political Change” (Modern Asian Studies, 33[4], 1999), and “Warden + Salaryman + Virtuoso = Priest: Paradigms within Japanese Shinto for Religious Specialists and Institutions” (Journal of Asian Studies, 56[3], 1997. Nelson has also produced several documentary videos, the most recent entitled “Japan’s Rituals of Remembrance: 50 Years after the Pacific War” (1997).

Among his many scholarly interests are the construction of sacred space, the institutional politics of religious specialists, the anthropology of ritual performances, and the relationship between religion, ritual, and politics. In the past year alone, Nelson has given invited talks related to Japanese religion and society at Kokugakuin University (Tokyo), the Japan Society (Manhattan), the School of American Research (Santa Fe), the Center for Japanese Studies (U.C. Berkeley), and the World Affairs Council of the Bay Area (Oakland). Nelson spent Fall 1999 and January 2000 in Japan working on a film introducing Shinto, as well as researching the topic of spirit calming rituals in Buddhist, Shinto, and broadly East Asian contexts. His next publication will address the continuing importance of Yasukuni Shrine and its strategic engagement with social memory in contemporary Japan.

We gratefully acknowledge the Kiriyama Chair for Pacific Rim Studies at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim for funding this issue of Pacific Rim Report. If you would like to subscribe to Pacific Rim Report, please email us.

NOTE: Due to typographic limitations, the circumflex is used throughout this article to indicate the long Japanese vowels normally marked with the macron.

For five points’ credit towards passing your exam on citizenship, choose which comes first: the nation or the state?

It is a fundamental act of legitimation, as well as vindication, that governments everywhere retell the sequence of events surrounding the birth and development of their nation. The process is linear and always progressive, usually starting from premodern communities which then evolve in fits and starts—triumphing over wars, natural disasters, and conflicts of every sort. More often than not, the prescriptive lessons learned along the way are woven into a narrative heavily dependent upon the strategies and goals of those telling the story: primarily, how best to influence people so they think and act as national subjects. Tactical decisions are made about who to include or exclude, which victories and defeats prove most edifying, how to establish cause and effect when defining key situations—all must be weighed and then selected so the narrative’s cumulative power might extend beyond its telling. Will the audience be moved to action by the shining examples of great heroes and valiant deeds? Will they learn sober lessons from the past that will guide them in future political or ethical decisions? Or will they simply shift attention back to their televisions, computers, and jobs, thinking only of their next paycheck or leisure pursuit, with little thought for their communities, sense of purpose as a people, and responsibility to the nation-state that provides them so much?

Leaders and educators have known since the early 1800s that the time to first engage the general public in narratives of the nation is not during a crisis or electoral campaign but when they are young, impressionable, and held legally captive in the educational system. Here, the social architect’s tool of choice to build a strong foundation for society is the textbook. Mention this word to an average American and eyes usually glaze over, so strong is the association between textbooks and the boredom of compulsory education. But textbooks are really “messages to and about the future... They participate in creating what a society has recognized as legitimate and truthful” [Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991:4].
With a decentralized educational system, as in the United States, textbooks are variously reviewed and selected for adoption by states, local school boards, and sometimes even individual principals or the teachers themselves. But, as Hein and Selden remind us [1998:4], in countries with a centralized, national curriculum (and this is the rule rather than the exception), government officials might actually write the texts (as in China, Taiwan, and Korea) or educational ministries authorize one version out of several (as in Germany and Japan). Thus, textbooks become closely associated with the authority of the state and the educational tastes of its leaders, adding to the raw materials of history a little spice here, an extra ingredient there, sometimes eliminating entirely important parts of a given recipe-for-progress—such is the room for creativity when preparing sustenance for mass consumption.

For a growing number of Japanese, the word ‘textbook’ (kyōkasho) has become one of the most politically and emotionally charged words in national discourse. The word evokes decades of contention over self-representation, cultural identity, and the rendering of a select history to nurture confident and proud citizens. One dimension of the ‘textbook problem’, which first came before the courts in 1965 and continues to the present, specifically concerns how both ancient and recent historical events become resources for constructing a sense of contemporary citizenship.

Both plaintiff (Tokyo University’s Ienaga Saburo) and defendant (the Ministry of Education) agree that teaching elementary and middle school students about their inheritance as Japanese is vitally important. But the issue is entangled with how far the state can go in editing, revising, and recasting history so it bolsters ideologically motivated agendas. To choose only one example, were the early myths of the eighth century CE composed to legitimate the origin of a fledgling Japanese state (as Ienaga had it in his textbook), or were they, as the government demanded, facts that linked the imperial family to the deities themselves? [1]

In 1994, aided in part by lower court decisions in favor of Ienaga, the approaching fifty year anniversary of the Pacific war, and the end of majority Liberal Democratic rule, school textbooks incorporated cursory mention of the comfort women and Unit 731 issues (Nanjing has been noted yearly since 1985). Opposing this development was a group founded in July 1996 by university educators calling themselves the ‘Liberal View of History Research Group’ (Jiyûshugi Shikan Kenkyûkai). Heavily criticized for calling themselves ‘liberal’ while promoting highly conservative values, they renamed themselves the following year as the ‘Japan Society for Textbook Reform Society’ (Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai, henceforth the ‘Reform Society’).

Believing that current textbooks in Japan’s primary and secondary schools were promoting a debilitating and “perversely masochistic perspective,” the Reform Society will this year disseminate over one million of their own textbooks which, founded on “common sense,” assure “a healthy version” of history for future generations. The Reform Society’s actions, financing, political and bureaucratic networks, and the dogged determination of its key strategists indicate an uncompromising effort to end what they term the “facile self-denunciatory view of history” that (based on the judgements of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials) portrays Japan as “evil.” [Irie 1997:312]

Before providing more detail about this movement and its goals, it is important to note that there is little surprising about finding nationalism alive and well in Japan or elsewhere in the world at the dawn of a new century. After the various horrors inflicted in the name of nationalism during the last one hundred years, John Lennon encouraged us in song to “imagine there’s no countries…”, yet the wedding of global economies to local communities is seen by many as requiring an increased protectiveness and heightened awareness about culture and heritage. If anything, the nature of local/global interaction has created considerable “entropy and slippage” about one’s identity as a member of a national community, producing in leaders anxiety about the allegiances and affiliations of the common person [Appadurai 1996: 191]. We will see in a moment why this is particularly pronounced in Japan.

The politics of cultural identity has become, since the 1980s, one of those comprehensively researched topics for which there is no shortage of theories concerning just how people within nation-states form (or are coerced into) conceptions of citizenship.

From Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” [1983], to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s “invented traditions” [1983], to Michel Foucault’s “technologies of power” [1980] and so on, we have new models and paradigms for the ways in which political and corporate elites manage to fashion, implement, and maintain key ideologies and the social practices that support them.

Through public ceremonies, national holidays, political elections, coordinated media coverage, and of course the educational system, these “conditions of felicity” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term [1991: 116]) bring about a general compliance with (and are often accompanied by a lack of awareness about) select social conditions needed to promote stability and predictability—key ingredients for sustaining market capitalism. Bourdieu, like many social scientists, understands that the orderings of society and politics are neither natural or preordained. Their current manifestation, which (like democracy in the United States) most people take for granted, is brought about through the usual struggle over resources and decision-making powers. But it is also wrought through strategic negotiations and temporary victories over the meaning of key values, symbols, and orientations to pivotal historical events.

Social and Political Problems as Calls to Action

To the Reform Society and its allies, evidence of the failure of contemporary educational curricula to teach a sense of positive and responsible cultural identity is everywhere. Focusing on the 1990s alone, the Gulf War of 1991 humiliated many Japanese because, due to restrictions imposed by their American-drafted postwar constitution and educational emphasis on peace, they could not participate militarily other than to contribute $13 billion to the allied cause—a contribution for which they were never thanked publicly. Next, Japan’s highly acclaimed economy, praised the world over as a model for growth and innovation, stumbled into a prolonged recession from which it has still not emerged. Japanese confidence was further rattled in 1995 by the Kobe earthquake in February, which toppled buildings and superhighways...
thought to be quake-proof, and by the deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways in April by the religious group Aum Shinrikyô.

The last three years have only compounded general unease and angst, with a number of shockingly violent crimes and murders (decapitations, bus hijackings, matricide, ‘just for fun’ serial executions of the homeless or of random grade-schoolers on a playground) committed by seemingly normal young men in their middle-to-late teens. Social critics also point to the highly publicized activities of young women involved in teenage prostitution (enjo kōsa), casually exchanging sex for money to buy brand-name goods. Girls, like their male counterparts, have also been charged in the violent bullying and harassment of weaker classmates in middle and high schools.

What the Reform Society sees as indications of a severe moral and ethical decay includes the selfishness of adult sons and daughters who fail to care for their parents or who postpone marriage and having children in order to prolong their independence and buying power as trendy consumers. Disillusioned with society, raised in the lap of material luxury, and isolated from their workaholic fathers laboring to extract Japanese corporations from the decade-long recession, young people seem like boats without navigation. There is a lack of adherence, writes Andrew Gerow [1998:32], to any metanarrative, whether Marxism, democracy, or ‘Japan’ itself. Hip young people dye their hair blonde, identify with African-American hiphop culture to the point of darkening their skin, and look to transnational Asian, American, and European cultures for the latest movies, fashion, actors, and foods.

To Reform Society leaders and its membership, many of whom are old enough to remember the utter devastation by incendiary bombs of Japan’s major cities at the end of World War II, today’s youth manifest a dangerously anti-Japanese behavior that can only serve to “corrode, pulverize, melt and disintegrate” Japan [Fujioka 1996: 30]. “Without a solid national identity (it is thought), Japan cannot compete in the international arena which is, in Hobbesian terms, a mean and brutish place” [Gerow p. 33]. Obviously, when presented with this kind of crisis scenario, many people would feel that something has to be done.

**Signs of Recovery for Cultural Nationalism**

After a conservative coalition failed in 1986 to win approval for a revisionist textbook, the new Reform Society learned from past mistakes and crafted remarkably effective strategies that have systematically advanced their agendas. Because of space limitations, I will touch upon only their ‘greatest hits’ of the last three years, organizing the “signs of recovery” for Japanese cultural nationalism into four categories: publishing and information dissemination, corporate and organizational support, influence upon Ministry of Education officials, and changes in the Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines which teachers are legally obligated to follow.

Scholars, writers, journalists, and bureaucrats supporting the Reform Society’s proposals and mentioning it within their publications account for over ninety books from 1997 to 1999. A two-volume edited series by chairperson Fujioka Nobukatsu entitled *Japanese History Not Taught in Textbooks (Kyūkasho ga oshienai rekishi)* was on the top ten bestseller list of 1997. According to a group monitoring Reform Society activities [Tawara 1999: 66-74], nearly every publication references what they see as the unhappy condition of elementary and middle-school textbook content.

Himself a professor of education at Tokyo University, Fujioka has written time and again that the power of a leftist coalition is responsible for the selection of current textbooks, which have slandered and distorted history into an “anti-Japanese,” “masochistic perspective” [Fujioka cited in Irie 1997:307]. There are other culprits as well: “The ‘indirect aggression’ of foreign countries that begrudge Japan’s prosperity has reached near completion in the history texts that form the framework for the nation’s common store of knowledge. Using government funds to pay for textbooks so full of hatred against our own country and forcing them on schoolchildren represents a grievous violation of the people’s right to education [ibid].”

The new textbook commissioned, edited, and now published by the Reform Society, *Kokumin no rekishi* (*A Citizen’s History*), puts forward the view that Japan’s history is best characterized as “unique and superior,” with “little influence from China” [all quotes from Tawara 1999:68-69]. This lays the foun-dation for a defense against current perspectives suggesting that “all kinds of different ethnic people came to Japan.” In the Reform Society’s view, this pluralism is one of many factors undermining Japanese identity.

Many conservatives feel a distinguishing feature of this Japanese cultural identity is (as Prime Minister Mori rather bluntly reminded everyone on May 15, 2000) having the emperor at the center of the nation. Speaking at a thirty-year anniversary celebration for a political action group espousing a “correct” relationship between the religious tradition of Shinto and politics (*Shinto Seijirenmei*), Mori referred to Japan as “a divine country with an emperor at its center.” Part of the domestic and international uproar over his comments (aside from the fact that, while apologizing for the misunderstanding they caused, they were never retracted) is precisely because the imperial lineage has never been repudiated as an active player within Japanese politics and society. Scholars such as Pulitzer Prize winner John Dower (*Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*) and Herbert Bix (*Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*) argue persuasively that despite the postwar wrappings of democracy and pluralism, the Shōwa emperor remained an aristocrat whose ultimate loyalty was to his ancestors and position rather than to his people. One look at the Imperial Household Agency’s ample staff and resources indicates how “divine” heritage (reaching back to the earliest mythological accounts of the founding of the islands) continues as a political resource that anchors and, whenever possible, attempts to legitimate this important component of Japanese cultural identity.

Not surprisingly, we find Mori’s statement has written precedent in the Reform Society’s new textbook. Divided into two parts, one dealing with ancient history and the other with more recent events, the author of the latter, Sakamoto Takao, describes Japan’s history as “very exceptional, unique, and wonderful.” This is a claim available to textbook historians of any nation, but few could then add that the reason for this happy state of affairs is because “…the emperor was at the center (of society)” [Sakamoto in Tawara 1999:68].
Sakamoto’s “wonderful” version of the contemporary era can only be sustained by his adherence to Reform Society policies regarding some of the decidedly horrific events associated with Japan and the war. In glossing the ‘Asia Pacific War’, Sakamoto eliminates references found in current textbooks to the Nanjing massacre, to the practice of recruiting or forcing women to serve as sex slaves for soldiers (the ‘comfort women’ issue), and to the infamous Unit 731’s gruesome biological experiments upon live prisoners of war in China. These exclusions are justified on the grounds that a term like ‘comfort woman’ is inaccurate because it was not in use at the time, that testimony from former comfort women, survivors of the Nanjing massacre, or members of Unit 731 are not credible, and that to teach about these incidents “denigrates the Japanese and only the Japanese.” Tokyo University’s Fujioka writes, “Nothing is to be gained from delving into the darker aspects of human nature at this early stage in students lives” [Irie 1997:310]. In fact, so strongly do the leading figures in the Reform Society feel about this issue that another director, Namikawa Eita, equates it with the mistreatment, crimes against, and even “torture” of children in the classroom [Namikawa 1998:15].

Many of these and other writers have been featured speakers at regional and local meetings held under the sponsorship of what appear to be grassroots organizations formed by Reform society regional leaders. With innocuous-sounding names—the Parents’ Group for Protecting Children, the Osaka Citizen’s Group for Correct Education, the Network for Rebuilding Education, or the Group of 100 Regional Representatives and Citizens for Reviving Education—elected officials have also attended, lending further legitimacy to these events. Since 1997, there have been more than 350 symposia held nationwide, all on textbook and ‘correct’ history-related topics [Tawara 1999:63].

One of the more publicized gatherings receiving national media coverage was the fifth nationwide symposium, convened in September 1998 in Tokyo. Titled “Contemporary Japan’s War and Peace”, it featured popular manga (comic) artist Kobayashi Yoshinori’s new book, Reviewing Discussions on the War, and packed a hall with 2,200 mostly young people while more than 200 stood outside. The symposium was repeated in Osaka for similar crowds and Kobayashi went on to sell more than 620,000 copies of this volume within the next year. “I see textbooks as the landmark for moves to change trends in society,” commented Kobayashi. “If you rewrite the texts, you rewrite social trends” [Irie 1997:310].

We have seen that part of this historical revisionism includes eliminating references to the Nanjing massacre. On January 24, 2000, Osaka’s International Peace Center hosted a highly controversial symposium—“Verification of the Rape of Nanking: The Biggest Lie of the 20th Century”—intended to challenge Japan’s record of atrocities during its occupation of China. Reacting in part to Iris Chang’s 1997 problematic bestseller *The Rape of Nanking: the Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* as well as nearly fifteen years of mention in middle-school textbooks, the event was roundly criticized by China’s leading daily and prompted official diplomatic protests as well, not to mention challenges from Japan’s peace-related activists. Although the Reform Society was not listed as a sponsor, it seems likely that through affiliations and other networks, the Society’s advocacy for eliminating the Nanjing massacre from textbooks help set the self-righteous tenor of the event. The fact that the symposium was held at all certainly indicates an increased willingness on the part of city officials and the general public to entertain revisionist perspectives regarding Japan’s actions in the war.

The Reform Society has had considerable assistance in furthering its agendas, thanks in part to their alliance with the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Association), itself a merger between “The Society to Protect Japanese Citizens” and “The Society to Protect Japan.” In addition to broad-based local support, the Nippon Kaigi counts some 204 elected officials as high-profile members, all of whom support its five part platform (an agenda shared by other groups as well, including the group of legislators [Shinto Seijirenmei] to whom Prime Minister Mori delivered his controversial remarks).

Topping the list is to increase respect for and veneration of the imperial family, as well as to strengthen the emperor’s role in government. Second, the (U.S. written and imposed) postwar constitution must be amended so as to revoke the anti-war clause (Article 9’s, “Japan will never have a standing army”), and to permit official visits to Yasukuni Shrine (where the spirits of the military dead are enshrined [see Nelson, forthcoming]). Next advanced is a thorough reform of educational policy, part of which would address “moral education” (dôtoku kyôiku) and lead to the fourth point, raising awareness and appreciation about the “glorious spirits of the military dead” (eirei). Finally, they promote increasing Japan’s defense budget so the nation’s military forces can be deployed, like any “normal country,” to protect national interests wherever they are threatened.

Since the early 1990’s, Nippon Kaigi supporters blitzed rural and urban areas with annual summer ‘caravans’ (trucks and vans with loudspeakers blasting and banners flying) supporting a bill in the Diet to legalize the rising sun flag and kimigayo anthem (which praises the continuity of imperial rule). *Nippon Kaigi* slogans exhorted people to think about an intersection of flag and anthem with cultural identity: “Recognizing the flag and anthem, let’s convey pride in being Japanese to today’s young people!” (Kokki, kokka o tsujite, seishonen ni Nippon no hokori o tsutaemashô!) After considerable debate, this bill passed into law in August 1999—a major victory not only for the Nippon Kaigi but for virtually every neo-conservative group currently operating in Japan.

**Partners in High Places**

The momentum propelling flag and anthem to the forefront reflects a sea-change in public advocacy of neo-conservative issues since the early 1990’s. Yoshino Kosaku’s work [1992] on the ways in which ‘Japaneseness’ is advanced through company brochures, training films, and guidelines alerted scholars to an obvious but overlooked dynamic in constructing cultural identity: the corporate connection. Anyone familiar with Japanese society knows that self-introductions usually link one’s name with their employer (“Hello, I’m the Bank of Tokyo’s Tanaka Hiroshi”), providing an unambiguous first step in the dance of status, hierarchy, and propriety characterizing not only business but social relations as well. Thus, when we survey some of the key executives in the Reform Society and its partner the Nippon Kaigi, we might think at
first what an employee chooses to do with his or her political affiliations is a private affair.

But when an association with a brand name company is leveraged during organizational and promotional activities, the play is to evoke legitimacy and draw upon established networks of alliance and support. The company or organization can always say they have neither control over nor knowledge of their employees’ private activities, yet at the same time the company name is inextricably associated with and thus enhances that employee’s affiliation with revisionist agendas.

And so, the Reform Society’s board of directors bring in associations with Tokyo University and with six other institutes of higher learning (Taisô, Meisei, Kokugakuin, Gakushuin, the Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, and the University of Electro-Communications). At its regional branches, the Reform Society lists executives from major construction firms (Ohayashi, Kajima, and Taisei), steel companies (Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Kawasaki), auto makers (Isuzu, Hinô, Mazda, Yanase, BMW Tokyo), oil companies (Maruben, Maruzen sekiyû, Idemitsu), electronic companies (Toshiba, Fujitsu, Canon, NTT Wireless), banks (Tokyo/Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Asahi), and food suppliers (Ajinomoto and Kentucky Fried Chicken). Likewise, Nippon Kaigi board members include the managing director of one of the Osaka region’s private railways (Kinki Tetsudô), the publisher of a newspaper agency in Shimane prefecture (north of Tokyo), and the managing director of Kumamoto’s main television station [Tawara 1999:65].

Thanks in part to the willingness of these individuals to align themselves (and, by association, their companies) with Reform Society goals, membership has increased dramatically in the last two years, now totaling over 12,000. Before scoffing at what might seem an insignificant number, we should remember that Japan’s grass-roots organizations, or groups involved in class-action lawsuits, have had, despite limited membership, considerable impact on national policy in areas of the environment, election reform, consumer rights, and religion/state separation. As in the debate over the legalization of the national flag and anthem, one can also assume considerable support beyond the number of actual Reform Society members. Groups such as the six million strong Bereaved Families’ Association (Izoku Kai), any number of veterans’ organizations, the Shinto Seifiremenai as well as the Central Association of Shinto Shrines, several new religions, and the Boy Scout organization would all be boosters of Reform Society goals. Thus, once an appeal or campaign has been endorsed by like-minded organizations, and appears to have the support of major corporations through the affiliations of their employees, a momentum slowly builds—one both capable and ready to influence policy.

**Influencing and Reforming National Educational Curricula**

We can cite concrete evidence that a new sense of Japanese cultural nationalism, modeled closely along Reform Society’s guidelines, has already found its way to the level of the nation’s educational curriculum. Since the final selection and adoption of Ministry of Education-approved materials takes place at the local committee level, jockeying for influence during the selection process has been an area of considerable Reform Society emphasis. Lobbying, appeals, and petitions to the Ministry of Education and local curriculum committees (“Open the eyes of the 14,000 (local) educational curriculum committees!”) have been part of the strategy and slogans of the Reform Society since its inception.

One of the most successful accomplishments thus far has been the cultivation of top Ministry of Education officials, including its director in 1997, Machimura Nobutaka. Despite constitutional guidelines prohibiting this kind of solicitation, Machimura remarked in a 1998 session of the Diet that “when you think about the balance of history, textbooks are missing some parts... giving us a negative impression” [Tawara 1999:69]. In a similar vein, Fukuchi Toru, the deputy minister for reviewing textbook manuscripts prior to their selection and publication, remarked in a column published in the Sankei newspaper, “Japan was forced by circumstances (yamu ni yamaren) into the war. If Japan did not advance into Korea and China, China would have been divided between Russia and England. Japan’s advance into China stopped that kind of move by the Russians.” In this context, he also remarked that “war is not evil” (sensô wa aku dewa nai), but the resulting firestorm over these remarks, (including his use of “advanced” rather than “invade” or “attack”) forced his resignation. After a short respite however, Fukuchi was reappointed to a higher position within the Ministry where he met with and coordinated the activities of educational curriculum committees nationwide.

Acting upon his opinions about “the negative impression of history texts,” in 1998 former Education Minister Machimura (who, after a brief hiatus, was reappointed to the same position in late 2000) helped implement new guidelines for middle school courses on civics and history. Its opening statement reads, “We must deepen our love for the history of our country in order for its citizens to nurture self-consciousness as Japanese.” (Waga kuni no rekishi ni taisuru aijô o fukame, kokumin toshite no jikaku o sodateru.) A June 30, 2000 report from the Kyôdô News service indicates that textbook authors and publishers submitting textbooks for the 2002-2003 school year are trying indeed to cooperate with these new guidelines. Only four out of the seven submitted manuscripts mentions the issue of military comfort women, whereas eight out of eight textbooks from the previous year had discussions of the issue. Similarly, treatment of the Nanjing massacre has been truncated as well: two textbooks had a specific number of casualties (200,000) whereas all other versions mentioned only that casualties were “many” or that the exact number is not known. There are also revisions of key terms, with ‘invasion’ by the Imperial Army now replaced with ‘advance’.

If this is the beginning of a trend of “self-restraint” among textbook authors and publishers, perhaps in as little as ten years’ time Japanese students will be reading textbooks very close in tone and content to those published in the late 1930s—learning that Asia was “liberated” from colonialism by Imperial Army forces, that the war’s causal “circumstances” point to American and British racist conspiracies hatched in the 1920s, and how all criticism of Japan’s actions—internal as well as external—is an attack on the nation itself [Hein and Selden, 1998:12].

The signs of recovery presented in this report indicate substantive steps towards the realization of long-standing conservative goals. Though ideologically charged in scope and design, it is probably good to remember that, as Carol Gluck reminds us, ideological agendas appear to be
everywhere when traced from the center outward, “but by embedding ideology more evenly in its context, its proportions are more realistic” [Gluck 1985:14]. Should the revisionist textbook of the Reform Society be promoted for adoption in schools by the Ministry of Education, it must still be approved at the local level and will, I believe, come under increasingly harsh scrutiny by both domestic and international critics. Or at least we have to hope so, for the alternative of a conscious whitewashing of history evokes a “been there, done that” kind of fatalism hardly conducive to the first years of what will surely be, in national narratives the world over, the most progressive century ever.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Dr. Barbara Bundy of the USF Center for the Pacific Rim for extending the opportunity to discuss this timely issue in a Pacific Rim Report. My thanks also to Dr. Stephen Roddy for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All shortcomings of interpretation are my own entirely.

Endnotes

1. A full account of Ienaga’s persistence, as well as court decisions encouraging incremental steps towards more state control regarding textbook content, can be found in Inokuchi and Nozaki, 1998. BACK TO TEXT

2. Though its leader and top officials are in prison on murder charges, Aum carries on via the internet, and through its business wing Aleph. It was revealed early in 2000 that Aleph had provided high-tech assistance as a subcontractor employed by several large corporations as well as by Japan’s armed forces. BACK TO TEXT

3. The economic boom of the 1980s gave rise to a more confident and assertive nationalism, especially with Nakasone Yasuhiro as prime minister. When textbooks were revised to portray Japan as “advancing” rather than “invading” into Korea and China, a major international controversy developed. Forced to back down and even apologize officially for this move was deeply troubling to the neo-conservative groups supporting it and other nationalist causes (such as Nakasone’s equally provocative official visit as prime minister to Yasukuni Shrine in April, 1983). Nakasone is still active as a senior statesman, and recently had a secretive dinner to discuss Japan’s course in the 21st century with prime minister Mori and outspoken Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro (Asahi News, September 2, 2000). BACK TO TEXT

4. High school textbooks have a closer adherence to established historical facts. However, students are studying so frantically for university entrance exams, which heavily emphasize early historical periods, teachers rarely devote time in class to cover the contemporary era. The material is indeed in textbooks, but students are told to study it on their own—knowing full well from decades of precedents that it will not appear on the entrance exams. BACK TO TEXT

5. Groups singled out for inclusion are the main teachers’ union (Nikkyô So), publishers’ unions (shûppan rôren), The Society of History Educators (Rekishi Kyôikusha Kyôgikai), and a Liberation League for Oppressed Ethnic Japanese (Dôwa Kankei Dantai). BACK TO TEXT

6. One of the key words in this debate over an inclusive versus an exclusive Japanese identity is toitsu sei, implying that whoever came to the archipelago encountered and quickly adopted its unique social arrangements and culture, thus becoming wholly ‘Japanese’. It is doubtful this magical assimilation will work for Japan’s many guest laborers from Brazil, Iran, the Philippines, and elsewhere in Asia. BACK TO TEXT

7. Gavan McCormack argues that, unlike Germany’s clear historical break with their Nazi past and embrace of a regional integration, Japan’s political system remains continuous with prewar structures. After all, charges against the emperor were dismissed on political grounds, and, as Japan’s wartime head of state, he remained in power until 1989. The emperor remains the “quintessential Japanese self: unsullied, sublime, and imperial.” (McCormack 1998:19, 22). BACK TO TEXT

8. In this 55th year after the war, controversy continues over what to call it in school textbooks as well as in political records. Should it be the conservative, Reform Society choice, “The Greater East Asian War” (Dai Tôa Sensô) that evokes Japanese policies to liberate East Asia from imperialist oppression? Or should it be the victors’ term, “The Second World War” (Dai Niji Sekai Taisen) or the more recent and politically correct “Asia Pacific War” (Ajia Taiheiyô Sensô)? BACK TO TEXT

9. After the passage of this law, the new school year beginning in March/April of 2000 saw dramatic compliance. Schools that previously had neither sung the anthem nor raised the flag, such as most high schools in Osaka, were reported to be 100% in compliance. There was considerable protest and resistance however, with an extreme incident occurring in Hiroshima prefecture. Due to the pressure brought upon him by the local school board to comply with the new law, a local principal killed himself in protest before the new school year began. (Japan Times Online, June 1, 2000). BACK TO TEXT

Works Cited


