

Nationalism and History in Contemporary Japan

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What are the characteristics of contemporary Japanese nationalism? And is there a “surge of nationalism in Japan,” as so often claimed (Kitaoka 2001; Sasaki 2001; Hasegawa and Togo 2008; NYT 2013), or even a “drift to the right” in the country (Kato 2014; Nakano 2015)? Distinguishing between elite maneuverings and popular attitudes, in this article I first identify what I consider to be the major topics of current nationalist discourse, and then introduce the chief proponents of strengthening of nationalist attitudes in society. In the final section, I discuss some recent attempts to instill nationalist attitudes in young people through middle-school education, especially the teaching of history and civics, but also through moral education. I conclude that in light of a political establishment tarnished by never-ending scandals, attempts to force moral education into the curriculum as a way of fostering nationalist and patriotic attitudes² among young people is a particularly duplicitous undertaking, discrediting the very notions so highly praised by its advocates.

History as the core of nationalism

If the coverage given in daily newspapers, weekly and monthly journals, and books dealing with questions of nationalism in modern Japan is anything to go by, contemporary interest in historical issues is buoyant. In particular, journals known for their nationalistic leanings regularly publish “special numbers” (*tokushūgō*) about the “history wars” (*rekishi sensō*), as they call the debates over Japan’s role in World War II in East Asia³. As I

demonstrate throughout this article, these debates, in combination with discussion of the ancient roots of the Japanese nation, have been at the core of nationalist writings in recent decades.

History always has stood at the core of national/ist modes of thinking and of the idea of the nation and nationalism itself (cf. Smith 1996). In fact, the question of whether the nation (or nation-state) has a venerable history – or, by contrast, is a modern construct – has grown directly out of the prominence given to history in national/ist thinking. Some of the earliest definitions of the nation demonstrate the centrality of history as a core element in constructions of nationhood (e.g. Mill 1958 [1861]). At the same time, since the nineteenth century scholars have also argued that the nation is a modern construct. In his famous 1882 lecture on the question “What is the Nation?”, Ernest Renan argued that “nations ... are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them” (Renan 1967 [1882]; on this question, see also Smith 2004).

Also since the nineteenth century, historians in many countries have been busy constructing historical narratives that locate the roots of a particular nation in antiquity in an attempt to strengthen the nation’s claim to legitimacy. These attempts led to the emergence of mytho-religious forms of nationalism, which were often staged in the public arena with the intention to demonstrate the “antiquity of the nation” to the population. For example, in late-nineteenth-century Germany statues were built

to one of the supposed “forefathers” of the German(ic) nation, the chieftain Arminius (aka Herman the German), who had led a coalition of Germanic tribes to victory over a Roman army at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD. In a similar way, in France statues to Vercingetorix, the celebrated opponent of Julius Cesar in the Gallic Wars (58-52 BCE), were erected around the same time.



Monument of Jimmu Tennō in Toyohashi (built 1898, disassembled in 1945, the statue was restored in 1966).

In Japan, the 1870s saw the creation of the cult of Jimmu, the legendary first Emperor (Tennō) of Japan (Brownlee 1997). Statues of Jimmu and other figures from Japan’s ancient mythological past were built in public spaces in the 1880s and 1890s (Saaler 2009). As early as the Edo period (1603-1868), the philosophical school of National Learning (kokugaku) had emphasized the long historical continuity of the Japanese Imperial House as a central element in Japan’s national identity, based on the Japanese myths. While scholars agree that the idea of a Japanese nation was limited to a small sector of the elite before the advent of the modern age (Doak 2007: 36), these incipient threads of national/ist thinking were drawn together in the late nineteenth century and integrated into the new ideology of nationalism. In this context, ideologues and politicians

pressed ancient Japanese mythology into service to create a “historical” narrative of the nation going back to the “age of the gods.” The Sun Goddess Amaterasu-no-ōmikami was identified as the earliest ancestor of the ruling imperial dynasty. The emphasis on the “eternally unbroken imperial line” (bansei ikkei) beginning with Amaterasu and the foundation of the Japanese Empire by her great-great-grandson Jimmu in 660 B.C. became established as a core element of nationhood and explains the strong religious character that came to mark modern Japan’s national narrative. This feature also explains the emergence of State Shinto, a modern and politicized form of Japan’s indigenous religion, which combined ancient beliefs with mythological historiography to create a national discourse (Hardacre 1989).

The influence of religious concepts in constructions of modern nationhood is not specific to Japan. Anthony Smith has emphasized the importance of mythology to the establishment of ethnic-national identities (e.g., Smith 1996: 586). The idea of nationalism as a “civil religion,” emphasizing the religious foundations of national/ist thinking as seen in public rituals, symbols, ceremonies and the creation of sacred places and heroes, takes us in a similar direction (cf. Bellah 1967). Notwithstanding the claim that the twentieth century was marked at the global level by the demystification of national narratives, the rationalization of history as an academic discipline and the secularization of society, mythology-based national narratives with religious characteristics have remained influential or even resurfaced in recent decades in some countries.

Historical Revisionism

Following Japan’s defeat in World War II, the belief in the superiority of Japan with its “eternally unbroken” imperial line stretching back to the age of the gods was shattered.

Apart from a few hardcore apologists who clung to a prewar ideology (including some who were responsible for creating it (cf. Ueda 2008 and Brownlee 1996 for some examples)), the idea of Japan as a sacred “land of the gods” (kami no kuni) largely disappeared from public discourse. The policies that accompanied the American occupation (1945-52) played a significant role in forcing the secularization of Japanese nationalism (cf. Mullins 2012b). However, nationalism did not disappear – it merely changed its shape. According to Brian McVeigh, different forms of nationalism emerged (and disappeared) over time in Japan, including developments that he has dubbed renovationist nationalism, statist nationalism, economic nationalism, educational nationalism and cultural nationalism (McVeigh 2004). These variants served to preserve the integrity and stability of the Japanese nation in the postwar period while avoiding any reference to the “divine origins” of the nation.

Not least due to the fact that the institution of the Tennō as such was preserved after the war, signs of a re-emergence of the prewar ideology of a sacred Japan with origins dating back to the “age of the gods” became discernible in the 1960s, for example when the prewar national holiday marking the (mythological) foundation of Japan by Jimmu Tennō was re-introduced, albeit under a different name (Empire Day or kigensetsu before the war and National Foundation Day or kenkoku kinen no hi since 1966). Monuments dedicated to Jimmu, hidden away since the end of the war, were re-erected in public spaces such as Toyohashi Park in Toyohashi City. Right-wing organizations in this and other Japanese cities have organized ceremonies near statues of Jimmu Tennō since the late 1960s to commemorate the foundation of the Japanese Empire in 660 B.C. In the city of Tokushima, as recently as 11 February 2015, a ceremony was held in front of a Jimmu statue in Bizan Park to commemorate the 2675th anniversary of the foundation of Japan, showing that the mythical roots of the Japanese nation

continue to play an important role for advocates of a mytho-historical nationalism until today.



“Ceremony to Celebrate the 2675th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Nation in Tokushima” (Tokushima, Bizan Park, February 11, 2015).

In April 2016, the Emperor and Empress visited the alleged site of Jimmu’s tomb, which had been designated as a “historic site” during the process of constructing the historical narrative of the nation in the late nineteenth century. The visit was “part of ceremonies to mark the 2,600th anniversary of his [Jimmu’s] death” (Japan Times, April 3, 2016). Coverage of this event was awkwardly handled. While the Japanese media remained relatively silent about the imperial visit, the English-speaking media reported intensively on the event, but failed to mention that Jimmu was a mythological figure (ibid.), lacking historically authenticated dates of birth and death. They also failed to mention that no serious historian believes that the tomb so designated is really that of an emperor named Jimmu. Given that the website of the Imperial Household Agency still carries a “genealogy” of the imperial dynasty beginning with “Emperor Jimmu,”⁴ its involvement in these activities is less than surprising.

Nationalist pundits are increasingly joining the

efforts to strengthen belief in the historicity of Emperor Jimmu. In the June 2016 edition of the bimonthly journal *WiLL*, in an article titled “The Geopolitics of Jimmu’s Conquest of the East,” self-styled “military journalist” Kaji Toshiki attempts to establish the historicity of Jimmu through an analysis of the military tactics employed during the first emperor’s alleged unification of Japan as recorded in the Japanese myths known as *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (Kaji 2016). He concludes that the myths must contain historical truth, as the stories they record show a high degree of “geographic-strategic rationality” and make good sense from a geopolitical perspective (*ibid.*: 147). It was only as the result of postwar pacifism, Kaji argues, that the analysis of military strategy became a taboo subject in Japan, leading to the neglect of military studies and thus a denial of the historicity of Jimmu Tennō.

A second central feature of nationalist writings on history is their treatment of Japan’s wartime past. While apologetic writings such as Hayashi Fusao’s infamous “Affirmation of the Greater East Asian War” (*Daitōa sensō kōtei-ron*) had some influence from the 1960s, since the 1990s an ever-increasing number of pundits and politicians have been raising their voices in the public arena to denounce critical views of the war and demanding that the historical narrative of modern Japan be purged of its “dark stains.” Most importantly, they are highly critical of the idea that the Asia-Pacific War was a war of aggression. Given this group’s strong advocacy of “revising” existing (and mostly critical) views of the war, they are commonly referred to as “historical revisionists.” However, as we will see below, historians are all but absent from this group.

One of the main targets of historical revisionists is Japan’s education system, and school history textbooks in particular. They claim that the teaching of a “distorted” and “masochistic” view of Japanese history explains why the current generation of Japanese had

failed to develop pride in their nation. In the late 1990s, an organization was formed to “rectify” history and civic education in Japan, the Society for History Textbook Reform (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru-kai*; cf. Saaler 2005). The leading figures of this group, which soon produced its own history and civic studies textbooks for middle schools, had all been members of an internal committee founded by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1993, the History Examination Committee (*rekishi kentō iinkai*), testifying to the political – rather than academic – origins of this strand of historical revisionism.

History and politics

One of the leaders of the movement of historical revisionism in the 1990s was a young parliamentarian named Abe Shinzō, Japan’s prime minister at the time of writing. Abe played an important role as one of the organizers of the History Examination Committee (hereafter HEC), the main objective of which was to reject the statements by Prime Minister Hosokawa characterizing the Asia-Pacific War as a “war of aggression” (Saaler 2014). A publication by this committee affirmed that “the Greater East Asian War was not a war of aggression, but rather a war [undertaken] for self-defense and [...] the liberation of Asia” (RKI 1985: 11, 308 etc.). And further:

The Manchurian Incident [1931], the China Incident [1937] and the Greater East Asian War ... were a fight for survival between the colored races and the white race. Since the Russo-Japanese War [1904/05], the colored races had all depended on Japan to be liberated from colonial rule. Since this would be a terrible blow, the whites united in order to suppress Japan. ... The Greater East Asian War was a glorious international contribution, a sacrifice without

precedent in the history of mankind. ... The Japanese are a righteous people. (ibid.: 62-67)

The activities of this HEC were the starting point of the movement for historical revisionism.

As historians Tawara Yoshifumi and Hayashi Hirofumi have shown, Abe Shinzō has been a key figure in the development of the movement for historical revisionism ever since (Hayashi et al. 2013; Penney 2013). Following his work with the HEC, Abe played central roles in numerous organizations promoting a neonationalist agenda, such as the Diet Members Liaison Committee with the Nippon Kaigi, the Diet Member Group to Consider Japan's Future and History Textbooks (a group pressing for the elimination of "masochistic" history teaching), the Diet Members' Roundtable for Discussion with the Shintō Seiji Renmei ("Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership," a group advocating a restoration of Japanese identity through the promotion of Shinto; cf. Mullins 2012b), and the Association of Diet Members Advocating Worship at the Yasukuni Shrine. In 2006, Abe published a book praising Japanese nationalism as an "open nationalism," not a "narrow-minded" ideology (Abe 2006). In his book, Abe lauded wartime suicide attacks (kamikaze or tokkō) on Allied shipping and defended the politics of his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, a minister in the wartime cabinet of General Tōjō Hideki and postwar prime minister (ibid.). On his personal website, Abe clarifies his views on various historical issues in the section headed "Analects" (goroku; Abe 2014). Here, he criticizes the Kōno declaration, voicing doubts that there is sufficient proof to label wartime military prostitution a system of sexual slavery based on a definition of "violence in the narrow sense." However, this section also includes the statement that "judgments about history should be left to historians, and politicians should be

humble" when dealing with these issues.

In pursuing historical revisionism, Abe intends bringing an end to the "postwar regime," as he calls the political, social and educational system in Japan shaped by the reforms introduced by the Allied occupation between 1945 and 1952. Most notably, historical revisionism in this context means, for him and others, a re-interpretation of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial (IMTFE), which established the view that Japan fought a war of aggression. In late 2015, the LDP formed yet another internal committee to discuss historical issues, this time with the main focus on the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, condemned by many party members as an example of "victors' justice" (see [LDP press conference](#)). The committee "was placed directly under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe" and was "attended by party officials including policy chief Tomomi Inada," one of the prime movers behind the establishment of the committee (see *The Straits Times*, 22 December 2015). Given the importance of Japan's military alliance with the United States, this move is a risky endeavor (the issue has become more delicate as a result of the appointment of Inada as defense minister in August 2016). Questioning the judgments of the Tokyo Trials would be perceived as an attack on what is regarded as the cornerstone of a peaceful postwar Japan – the Peace Treaty of San Francisco (1951/52). Because Article 11 of the treaty confirms the judgments of the Tokyo Trials, calling them into question would be tantamount to an attack on the peace treaty itself.



Advocates of historical revisionism

Notwithstanding this existential threat to contemporary Japan, the arguments for historical revisionism have been more strongly advocated in the public sphere in recent years than ever before. A number of writers have used the support given them by ultraconservative and right-wing politicians to publish books and articles that repeat the revisionist claims first laid out in the publications of the LDP's HEC in 1995. Many of the leading figures involved have close ties to Abe Shinzō and have been riding high since Abe came to power.

Some are fellow politicians, such as Tamogami Toshio, former chief of staff of the Japanese Air Self Defense Forces and author of a provocative essay on Japan's war responsibility⁵ that led to his dismissal from this post in 2008 (cf. Bix 2008). Politically active in the neonationalist Sunrise Party (later the Party for the Future Generation) and a candidate in the 2014 Tokyo gubernatorial election, Tamogami is also the chair of a right-wing group called Ganbare Nippon! Zenkoku Kōdō linkai (Do your best, Japan! National Action Committee) founded in February 2010. Trained in electrical engineering, since 2008 he has published a number of books on historical issues, Japan's

defense policy, and on Abe Shinzō himself. In a book titled "Tamogami's Army of the Land of the Gods," he claimed that Japan should have the right to collective self-defense and should arm itself with nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, AEGIS destroyers armed with nuclear missiles, and long-range bombers (Tamogami 2010). In order to finance the vastly increased defense expenditure this would entail, he suggested cutting the child allowance (ibid.: 206). In "On Abe Shinzō," he praised Abe for being "one of the few politicians who is not obsessed with the masochistic view of history" (Tamogami 2013: 9 and ch. 2). In contrast, he judges those politicians who favor a conciliatory approach to foreign policy as "prime ministers destroying Japan," singling out former Prime Ministers Fukuda Takeo, Nakasone Yasuhiro, Obuchi Keizō, Miyazawa Kiichi and Hosokawa Morihiro (ibid.: 77-90).

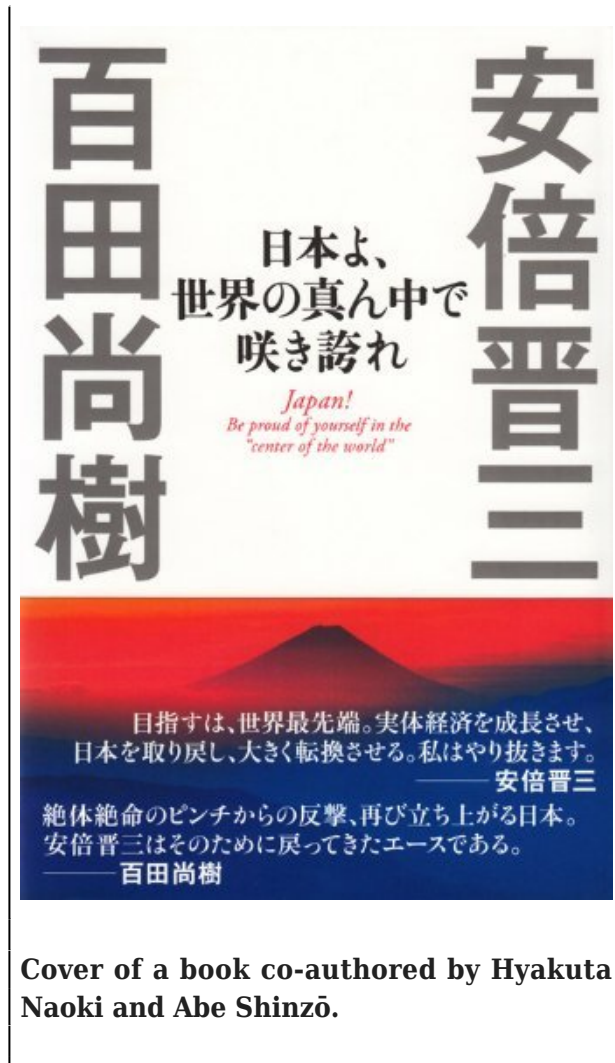


The "destruction of the country" (bōkoku) and the "selling-out of Japan" (baikoku) by "traitors to the nation" (baikokudo) – a group defined to include former prime ministers, academics, and journalists – are stock phrases used by nationalist writers like Tamogami and others discussed below. Recently, the list of "traitors to the nation" has been expanded to include Crown Prince Naruhito and his wife, Princess

Masako. In an article titled “Advice to the Crown Prince” (*Kōtaishi-sama ni kangen mōshiagemasu*), Nishio Kanji and Kaji Nobuyuki (2016) warn that popular attitudes to the imperial house have shifted from disinterest to disdain. Particularly harsh are the attacks by the authors on Princess Masako, a “strange existence” (*fushigi na sonzai*) in the imperial court who is “destroying the lifestyle of the imperial household” and lacking an appreciation of “the joy of preserving (court) ceremonials” (*ibid.*: 41). They openly accuse the family of the Crown Princess, the Owada family, of using language that amounts to “blasphemy” (*fukei*) (*ibid.* 42). They also criticize the couple’s attempts to contribute to reconciliation efforts with Japan’s neighbors and their desire to draw closer to the people, expressing dismay at the fact that Princess Masako had insisted that their daughter, Princess Aiko, queue – like a commoner – during a 2006 visit to Tokyo Disneyland. (The authors fail to discuss the current imperial couple’s attempts to build solidarity with ordinary people, for example during visits to disaster regions when on several occasions the couple knelt down when talking to victims.) The authors put their hope in the “political power of Prime Minister Abe” to fix these problems (*ibid.*: 47), presuming that interference by Abe in the affairs of the Crown Prince and his family would be politically unproblematic and socially acceptable⁶.

Another revisionist writer close to Prime Minister Abe is Hyakuta Naoki, who was appointed to the board of governors of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) by the prime minister himself. The author of the novel *Eien no Zero* (“The Eternal Zero;” a movie version was extremely popular in Japan in 2013/14), Hyakuta has claimed that the Nanjing Massacre of 1937/38 is a Chinese fabrication and that the Americans fabricated Japanese war crimes in order to cover up atrocities committed by their own troops during the war (*Asahi Shinbun*, February 4,

2014). Hyakuta supported Tamogami in the Tokyo gubernatorial election, describing candidates from the left as “human scum.” In 2013, Hyakuta published a book co-authored with Abe Shinzō (a collection of conversations and essays previously published in various weekly and monthly journals) (Abe and Hyakuta 2013). The title of the book, which appears on the cover in English as “Japan! Be proud of yourself in the ‘center of the world’,” is more provocative than its actual contents. However, the claim that Japan should play a more independent and influential role in international relations and reclaim a position of global leadership emerges clearly in the book. While one section refers to the 2012 election slogan used by Abe’s LDP, “Taking back Japan” (*Nihon o torimodosu*), the book fails to clarify the precise meaning of this phrase. Given the book’s harsh attacks on the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which was in power between 2009 and 2012, and on the “postwar regime” “dictated” to Japan by the U.S. during the occupation, the slogan most likely needs to be seen in this context. In particular, the harsh criticism of the DPJ as a treacherous “government selling out Japan” (*baikoku minshutō seiken*, *ibid.*: 111; 136; cf. also Watanabe 2014: 149) embodies the fears of Abe and other conservatives that Japan would once again go down the path of reconciliation, embracing “masochistic” interpretations of history. The LDP, the “true” party of government and, implicitly, the nation’s “owner,” was thus duty bound to “take back” Japan from the DPJ.

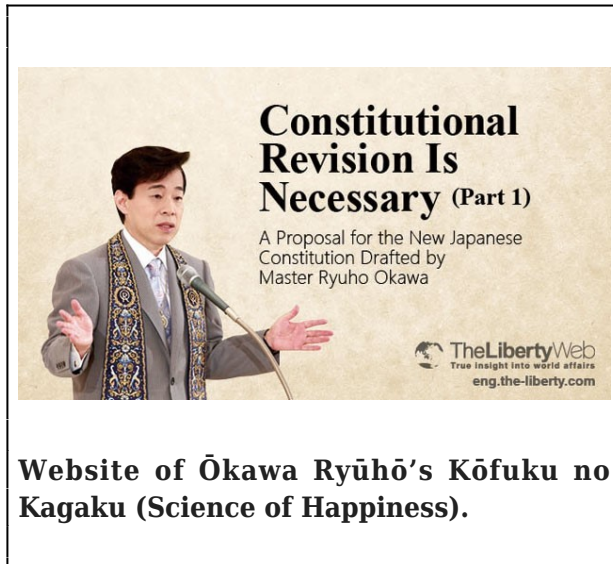


A long-term member of the revisionist movement is English literature scholar Watanabe Shōichi. Since 1965 Watanabe has authored 612 books – an average of 11-12 books (!) per year⁷. In addition, he is listed in the journal database Zassaku Plus as the author or co-author of 695 articles published in Japanese journals between 1955 and 2014. Watanabe began writing about historical issues in the mid-1990s, at a time when debate over Japan's recent history and apologetic rhetoric regarding the war was escalating and the LDP formed its History Examination Committee (see above). Watanabe became particularly notorious for his claims that the Nanjing Massacre never occurred. Recently, he has added sharp attacks on Korea and Korea-friendly circles in Japan to his polemical

repertoire, claiming that “all Korean heroes are terrorists” (Watanabe 2012). In his most recent book, he offers readers a wide range of conspiracy theories, praising Prime Minister Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin as “flag-bearers of nationalism” while criticizing European governments as well as the U.S. as promoters of globalization and enemies of Japan (Watanabe and Mabuchi 2014: 142). In language reminiscent of prewar rhetoric, and making explicit links to Japan's prewar and wartime history, he argues that Japan, “a unique country,” once again needs to become “a model for the rest of the world” (ibid.: 244f).

A further example is drawn from the religious sphere – Ōkawa Ryūhō, the founder and leader of the new religion Kōfuku no Kagaku (Science of Happiness) and its political arm, the Kōfuku Jitusen-tō (Happiness Realization Party) founded in 2009 (on Ōkawa and the emergence of religious nationalism since the 1990s see Mullins 2012a and Astley 1995). The policies espoused by Ōkawa and his party include doubling Japan's population through child-friendly policies, a revision of the pacifist article 9 of Japan's Constitution, an active military stance in face of a perceived threat from North Korea, and the nuclear armament⁸ of Japan. Also a prolific writer with more than 175 books published between 1987 and 2015 to his name, Ōkawa is strongly opposed to Chinese and South Korean approaches to the history of the war in East Asia. He and his party claim that the “‘Nanking Massacre’ and [the] ‘comfort women issue’ are fabrications” and a “distortion of historical facts.”⁹ Ōkawa has written numerous books on historical subjects and challenged mainstream interpretations from a revisionist perspective, claiming to tell the “truth about the Greater East Asian War” (Ōkawa 2013a) and criticizing government apologies dating from the 1990s (Ōkawa 2013b). While the numbers claimed for Ōkawa's sect makes his writings potentially explosive, his party's poor showing in recent elections illustrates the limits of

neonationalistic rhetoric in contemporary Japan¹⁰.



No discussion of neonationalist writers would be complete without a mention of Sakurai Yoshiko, who has spearheaded the revisionist movement since the 1990s. A former television announcer, Sakurai is a frequent contributor to journals and still appears on TV as a commentator, particularly on the private Channel Sakura, a major outlet for neonationalist pundits¹¹. In 2007, she founded the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals. Like her fellow revisionists, she has fiercely criticized what she calls the “Tokyo Trial view of history” and has denied the factual basis for the Nanjing massacre as well as the treatment of the comfort women (JINF 2014).



Fundamentals.

She is also an outspoken advocate of a more important role for the Imperial House in Japanese society. On the occasion of the marriage of Princess Noriko, the daughter of a cousin of the present Emperor, and Kunimaro Senge, son of the head priest of the Izumo Taisha (Grand Shrine), in 2014, she contributed a piece to the journal SAPIO in which she described the central significance attributed to the Imperial House by Japanese neonationalists:

Japan has a unique (dokuji) civilization that has developed since olden times. (...) While the royal families of other countries have achieved their position through the use of military or financial power and integrated the state through the exercise of power and authority, the Japanese imperial family has its origins in the age of the myths and, based on the spirit of the Japanese people (Nihonjin no kokoro), it has become the central force making for national unity. (...) The most important factor that has contributed to the formation of the Japanese national character (kunigara) and the qualities of the Japanese people is nothing other than the spiritual unity created by the Imperial House. (Sakurai 2014)

To sum up, a former general trained as an engineer, a novelist, a scholar of English literature, a religious leader and a journalist stand at the center of recent discussions of Japan's wartime past and related issues. We could add to their number scholars of German literature such as Nishio Kanji, the educational scholar Fujioka Nobukatsu, manga writer

Kobayashi Yoshinori, business leaders such as Maeno Tōru, author of a book purporting to tell “the truth”(!) about Japanese history (Maeno 2003; on the backgrounds of these individuals see Saaler 2005), TV entertainers such as Kent Gilbert¹² and representatives of other professions. Historians are almost wholly absent from the ranks of historical revisionists. As a matter of fact, even historians of a more nationalist colour are offended by the ideas of Tamogami, Hyakuta, Watanabe, Gilbert and their like. For example, Hata Ikuhiko, a well-regarded historian – who has, however, minimized the impact of the Nanjing Massacre – criticized the prize-winning (!) essay by General Tamogami mentioned above as being “of extremely low quality,” adding that “‘even a high school student’ can easily point out its mistakes” (Japan Times, April 14, 2016).

The future of education

As I have shown elsewhere, the activities of the historical revisionists have so far not led to any major changes in perceptions of the nation’s recent history or national/ist attitudes in Japanese society at large (Saaler 2005; 2016). In the early 2000s, attempts by the Tsukuru-kai to introduce its history and civic textbooks to Japanese middle schools ended in total failure. With a market share of less than 1%, the group lost support and eventually split up. For a while, it seemed that the historical revisionist movement had run out of steam. However, Abe Shinzō’s ascent to power in 2006, and again in 2012, has changed the political landscape once again.

Disappointed with the results of the Tsukuru-kai’s activities, in 2006 the society’s third president and law professor Yagi Hidetsugu formed his own organization – the Nihon Kyōiku Saisei Kikō (Foundation to Revive Japanese Education, abbreviated hereafter as NKSK). In 2007, the NKSK set up yet another body, the Kyōkasho Kaizen no Kai (Society for the Improvement of Textbooks, abbreviated as

KKK), testifying to the importance given by historical revisionists to history education (rather than to academic research on history). Yagi was an advisor to Prime Minister Abe during his first stint in office (2006/2007) and many of his hobbyhorses found their way into the educational reform policies of the first Abe cabinet. In what seems to be an imitation of educational policy in the US, these included an emphasis on “patriotism education” (see Koide 2014, McNeill and Lebowitz 2008), an objective strongly pushed by none other than Abe Shinzō’s grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, at least since the 1980s (see Fujita 2014: 59f) and, since the late 1990s, by the Tsukuru-kai’s Nishio Kanji, a scholar of German literature and author of a book titled “The People’s Morals” (Kokumin no dōtoku). Yagi’s KKK has published its own textbooks since the late 2000s, which showed conspicuous similarities to the Tsukuru-kai textbooks for schools, leading to the publishers involved taking out lawsuits against each other. Published by Ikuhōsha, part of the powerful Fuji Sankei Communications Group, the KKK textbook soon left its rival Tsukuru-kai publication trailing in terms of market share. While the latter never gained more than 1% of market share, starting at a modest 3.7% (for the period 2012 – 2016) the KKK publication captured ca. 6.5% of the textbook market for the four-year period starting in April 2016. (Middle school textbooks are always selected for a four-year period; see Saaler 2005: ch. 1 and Cave 2013 for the adoption process.)

A number of mayors with nationalist leanings have pushed for the KKK text in their municipalities, where decisions regarding textbook selection are made (rather than in individual schools); they include Hashimoto Tōru, former mayor of Osaka, and Nakada Hiroshi, former mayor of Yokohama. Although the KKK textbook is mainly in use in schools in these two cities, the two largest municipalities the country, during the selection process that took place in summer 2015, a number of cities

in Ishikawa Prefecture, including the city of Kanazawa, also adopted the KKK/Ikuhōsha textbook for the first time.

Advertised as a means of “making the Japanese DNA (sic) awaken,” the KKK history textbook itself is relatively anodyne in terms of its content, but the civics textbook shows a high degree of conformity with the current agenda of the LDP under Prime Minister Abe. The inclusion of more than ten photographs of Abe speaks for itself. The organization’s desire to steer Japanese education in a more nationalist direction is particularly evident in the materials for teachers distributed with the textbook. These materials emphasize the importance of teaching Japanese mythology, without addressing whether this should be done in history lessons rather than in, say, literature. The resources for teachers emphasize that mythology reflects a nation’s spirituality (*seishinsei*), and the suspicion that this topic would be taught in history classes (Anonymous 2012: 10) reveals the authors’ intention of turning history into a matter of belief rather than a body of knowledge open to academic inquiry and critical thinking. These materials also illustrate the KKK’s emphasis on Japanese superiority in almost every field. Section headings attribute to Japan “the world’s oldest ceramics” (p. 12), the world’s “most advanced technology” (p. 18), “the world’s oldest company” (p. 20), “the world’s highest level of education” (p. 22), “the world’s largest city, Edo” (p. 22) and refer to Japan as “the world’s oldest country” (p. 14). Education marked by such a superiority complex is unlikely to contribute to the development of citizens capable of dealing with the challenges of an internationalized Japan in the twenty-first century.

The second Abe cabinet has also succeeded in changing the textbook examination criteria (textbooks need approval by the Ministry of Education to be used in schools), resulting in the disappearance of critical content relating to

Japan’s wartime history and an emphasis on, for example, very minor territorial issues (disputes with neighboring countries over the ownership of uninhabited rocks; see Tawara 2015). Even in elementary school civics textbooks, these territorial disputes are blown up into major issues¹³. Since 10-year-old children are unlikely to grasp the significance of international debates over uninhabited rocks in distant oceans (not to speak of the underlying regulations of international law¹⁴), they are effectively being brainwashed into believing that these must be important matters, leading, in turn, to a growth of contempt for the nation on the other side of the conflict. Needless to say, the same dynamics are at work in those nations, in particular in China and Korea.

The manipulation of students through the addition of highly political content shaped by the government and elite ministerial bureaucrats has also become an issue in the debate over moral education in Japanese schools. In addition to history lessons, children’s attitudes to the nation can be powerfully shaped in morals classes. In prewar Japan, moral education (*shūshin*) was a central element of “national education;” as a consequence of its role in mobilizing the population for the war effort, it was abolished under the Basic Law of Education in 1947. Abe’s first cabinet recommended that morals, this time under the name *dōtoku*, be once again made a part of the school curriculum. Therefore, since 2007, controversial materials have been distributed to elementary school students titled “Notes of the Heart” (*kokoro no nōto*), the contents of which is a mix of simple instructions regarding “manners,” of lessons on the importance of “tradition” and the family, as well as guidance regarding values such as honesty, diligence, compassion and solidarity. A reform of the Basic Law of Education in 2007 resulted in the inclusion of “deepening love for the nation” as a central objective of education, a change that has influenced the contents of

history and morals textbooks in recent years and which has been identified as a sign of a resurgence of prewar approaches regarding the education of nationhood.

Initially, the Ministry of Education rejected the idea of reinstating morals as a formal subject (*kamoku*), as this step would require standardized textbooks, unified exams, and specialized teachers (see the summary of objections in an editorial in *Kyōto Shinbun*, February 18, 2014). Its objections were ignored and a close ally of Abe Shinzō, Shimomura Hakubun, was appointed Minister of Education in 2012 to oversee the introduction of morals education in schools. A major lobby behind this development is the KKK under the leadership of Yagi and yet another group spawned by the society, the Association of Experts for the Promotion of Moral Education (*Dōtoku Kyōiku o Susumeru Yūshikisha no Kai*), presided over by Watanabe Shōichi¹⁵.

In 2016, teachers are struggling with the reality that they are not trained to teach morals education, and with the fact that – as opposed to mathematics, natural sciences, or linguistics – there is no academic basis for moral education (i.e. no academic discipline called “morals,”), as well as with the problems posed by the growing internationalization and diversification of classes, particularly in Japan’s largest cities (see the analysis of morals textbooks in use in Tsuruta 2014). While since the 1960s ministerial guidelines have stipulated that “moral education aims to develop a Japanese citizen,”¹⁶ it remains to be seen how the needs of Japan’s growing foreign population can be reconciled with ministerial directives to deepen “love for the nation” through *dōtoku* education. The dilemma involved in simply explaining to the son of a, say, Filipino resident of Tokyo why the highly subjective term “my country” (*waga-kuni*) used in his textbooks does not refer to the Philippines illustrates the nonsensical character of *dōtoku* education in the twenty-

first century (not only in Japan).

Another point of controversy relates to the reality that the very party pushing so strongly for the introduction of morals education in schools, the LDP, has been involved in numerous scandals that shed serious doubt on the morals of the party’s leading representatives. Recent cases include a major bribery scandal implicating Minister of Economics Amari Akira (early 2016); adultery scandals involving Lower House member Miyazaki Kensuke (February 2016) and to-be-candidate Ototake Hirotada (March 2016); dubious deals with unlisted stock shares (and a sex scandal) involving LDP Diet member Mutō Takaya in August 2015; and frequent discriminatory comments made by lawmakers against female politicians, women in general, gay people and other minorities¹⁷. In addition, at the time of writing, General Tamogami (not a member of the LDP, but, as we have seen, closely linked to LDP politicians including Abe) has been arrested “on suspicion of violating the election law by paying cash to campaign staff members who supported him in his unsuccessful bid for the Tokyo governorship in February 2014,” as well as using campaign donations for private purposes (*Mainichi Shinbun Daily News*, 14 April 2016¹⁸). In May and June 2016, LDP-backed Tokyo Governor Matsuzoe Yōichi was accused of using public funds for private purposes. All of these scandals show a striking lack of the very moral values propagated through the recently introduced morals textbooks such as “Note of the Heart” (see above).

In addition to all this, the Abe government has often been caught violating its own rules – ironically, even in relation to the history and *dōtoku* teaching materials currently in use. While educational guidelines are extremely strict regarding political education in schools, which should be absolutely non-partisan¹⁹, a 2015 *dōtoku* textbook issued by the Ministry of Education itself clearly promotes the agenda of

the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. In the discussions around the draft constitution drawn up by the LDP in 2012 (for an excellent analysis of this draft, see Repeta 2016), advocates of constitutional reform insisted that the granting of rights should be dependent on the fulfilling of certain duties. The background to this discussion was the allegation made by LDP politicians that the majority of Japanese would reject the notion of voluntary military service if Japan was faced with the prospect of war (Saaler 2005: ch. 1). Art. 12 of the draft states:

The freedoms and rights guaranteed to the people by this Constitution shall be maintained by the constant endeavor of the people. The people shall refrain from any abuse of these freedoms and rights, shall be aware of the fact that there are responsibilities and duties that accompany these freedoms and rights, and shall not infringe the public interest and public order²⁰.

The 2015 textbook "Our Morals" (Watashitachi no dōtoku) for elementary grade years 5 and 6 includes a two-page section explaining why rights and duties as defined in the Constitution have to be kept in balance, implicitly denying the notion that rights and freedoms are inherently based on natural law and instead insisting that they are conditional, dependent on the fulfillment of civic responsibilities (MEXT 2016: 124f). This is precisely the argument made by the LDP for constitutional revision. The propagation of this new interpretation of the Constitution advocated by the LDP (but not any other party) in education constitutes a gross violation of the Ministry's own rules, prohibiting partisanship in education.

The changes to Japanese education brought about by the first and the second Abe

administrations might lead, in the long run, to changes in public attitudes to nationalism. Without doubt, they have the potential to contribute to the growth of nationalist and xenophobic attitudes in Japanese society. Whether this will turn out to be the case largely depends on how successful Japan's civic society, which is still rather critical of these developments, will be in mobilizing opposition to these disturbing trends and in mobilizing voters in future elections.

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Notes

¹ This essay is a revised and updated version of Saaler 2016.

² In recent discussions in Japan, a distinction between patriotism and nationalism (often paired with the adjective “healthy”) is usually not made.

³ See, for example, SAPIO 12/2014 (“Chūkan tainichi ‘rekishi sensō’”), Voice 3/2015 (“Nikkan ‘rekishi sensō’”), Voice 1/2016 (“Rekishi sensō, Nihon no gyakushū”). An author affiliated with the New Religion Kōfuku no Kagaku (discussed below) also has used the term in the titles of two monographs (Wakasa 2015a and 2015b).

⁴ See [here](#) (last accessed 10 May 2016).

⁵ Accessible in English translation [here](#).

⁶ Interestingly, the July number of the journal WiLL included an article strongly critical of the Nishio/Kaji piece (Tokoro 2016). Further, a group of violent right-wingers, in a reaction to the Nishio/Kaji piece, attacked the offices of the journal WiLL, see [here](#) (last accessed 30 May 2016).

⁷ According to a search of the CiNii, Scholarly and Academic Information Navigator database, run by the National Institute of Informatics, on 6 May 2016; this includes translations, edited volumes, co-authored books and translations of Watanabe’s work into other languages.

⁸ See, for example, [Ōkawa’s PR video on constitutional revision](#).

⁹ See the [party’s website](#) and [Ōkawa’s PR video](#).

¹⁰ The same holds true for another ultranationalist party founded in 2012, the Japan Restorationist Party, which also strongly advocated revisionist views on history, but dissolved in 2016 due to a lack of success.

¹¹ See [here](#).

¹² See [here](#) and the [YouTube “Kent Channel”](#) for his statements on history.

¹³ See, for example, the textbook Arita Kazumasa et al. (2014), Shōgaku Shakai 5-jō. Tokyo: Kyōiku Shuppan, pp. 10-13.

¹⁴ See Gavan McCormack, “[Much Ado over Small Islands: The Sino-Japanese Confrontation over Senkaku/Diaoyu](#),” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 11, Issue 21, No. 3, May 27, 2013.

¹⁵ See [here](#).

¹⁶ See [here](#).

¹⁷ In June 2014, LDP Tokyo Prefectural assemblyman Suzuki Akihiro shouted sexist remarks at a female assembly member, telling her “to get married” and asking whether she was “not able to have a baby.” See *The Guardian*, 24 June 2014. In 2015, Masumi Tsurusashi, a member of the Municipal Assembly of Ebina City posted a message on Twitter in which he called gay people “abnormal animals” (ijō dōbutsu). Although Masumi was urged to resign from the municipal assembly (*Japan Times*, 3 December 2015), he is [still a member of the assembly](#) (last accessed on 10 May 2016). Although he is not an LDP member, he shares the same

ideological outlook as the government party.

¹⁸ It is estimated that around 50 million Yen were spent by Tamogami on karaoke, nightclub visits and golfing. Asahi Shinbun, 2 May 2015.

¹⁹ In a recent article on this issue, the Japan Times stated that “political debate is virtually nonexistent in Japanese classrooms.” (Japan Times, 3 May 2016) Many schools have banned political activities by pupils, even outside school hours.

²⁰ [Translation of Japanese text.](#)