

**Overcoming Japan's Imperial Legacies: A Review Essay**

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Yukiko Koga. *Inheritance of Loss: China, Japan, and the Political Economy of Redemption after Empire*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$85 (cloth); \$27.50 (paper/e-book).

Hiro Saito. *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 264 pp. \$62 (cloth).

Japan's war for empire ended in September 1945, as World War II drew to a close. Pinpointing its outbreak, however, is less straightforward: did it start with the July 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, with the September 1931 Manchurian Incident, or, earlier yet, with the 1910 annexation of Korea? The lack of a single accepted narrative is symptomatic of broader divisions over history between Japan and its neighbors, primarily China and South Korea. As a result, the path toward reconciliation has proven tortuous, beset on all sides by persistent disagreements about past events. Two new books approach these disputes from the perspectives of anthropology (Yukiko Koga's *Inheritance of Loss*) and sociology (Hiro Saito's *The History Problem*), highlighting the complexity of imperial vestiges inherited by the current generations in East Asia. From their distinct yet complementary vantage points, both books enrich the debate on the outcomes of the Second World War in East Asia. Their findings illuminate the obstacles on the way to reconciliation, but also highlight the potential for compromise.

Yukiko Koga's *Inheritance of Loss* offers a fresh outlook on the dilemmas faced by current generations in China and Japan, who have inherited a difficult past from their parents and grandparents. Departing from traditional approaches to collective commemoration of

traumatic events, Koga focuses instead on the “shared mechanism of inheritance that connects” the contemporary generations of Japanese and Chinese citizens who live in the shadow of the war and who, “two to three generations removed from the direct experience of Japanese imperialism, now encounter each other and experience and navigate these inheritances” (1).

The perspective of inheritance is refreshing, for it allows the author to break from the traditional (and rather simplistic) binary of victim–perpetrator and to emphasize the entangled, requited nature of the legacies of Japan’s empire. Koga argues that her approach brings to light the “noticeable traces of the past that could not be captured by the framework of memory and trauma” (xiv); to elucidate these traces, she resorts to revealing metaphors. For example, she claims that in 1972, when China and Japan reestablished diplomatic relations by signing a joint communiqué, “the Japanese received a gift—China’s renunciation of war-reparation claims” (12); this gift added a new layer of Japanese indebtedness toward the Chinese, on top of existing feelings of guilt for colonizing China. Describing the way in which Japan and China see each other in relation to the past, Koga uses the analogy of a “double mirror” that “reflects one’s otherwise invisible back, but . . . also reflects the one holding the second mirror” (99). If Japan is pictured as facing a mirror that reflects her past, China holds another mirror from behind, in which Japan sees herself *and* China. In addition to these penetrating symmetries, Koga weaves into the narrative her own rich experience gained during numerous stays and visits to northeast China; as a result, some pages read like a travelogue, while others have the immediacy of reportage. She introduces the stories and struggles of those affected by the broken past, and characters come alive on the book’s pages. The main thrust of the monograph, Koga insists repeatedly, is in the ethnography it offers, but this word falls short in covering the breadth of topics she discusses: urban landscapes laden with intangible legacies; citizen activism produced by unlikely collaboration between Chinese former laborers and Japanese lawyers; social mobility and economic dependencies in the modern Chinese northeast; and other intricate exchanges between employer and employee, private and public, Japan and China.

Yet *Inheritance of Loss* deals not simply with inconvenient imperial legacies, but also with the ambivalent feelings borne out of them. Many of Koga’s Chinese interlocutors face a dilemma between viewing Japan as an evil invader and a model of modernity; on the other hand, many Japanese who visit or live in northeast China are caught between inherited guilt about past Japanese atrocities and a sense of moral indebtedness for China’s gift of

benevolence. Koga's analysis finds spaces, not just imagined but physical, where these choices coincide and coexist. In fact, she herself is not immune to the bequest of history: in writing the book she hopes to repay "the moral debt that I inherited from my grandparents" (xvii), who spent a decade in Manchukuo as Japanese residents in the 1930s and 1940s.

The book's core chapters center on three contemporary cities in northeast China—Harbin, Changchun, and Dalian—that were shaped by Japanese imperialism to varying degrees. Each of these cities perpetuates and puts to use the colonial past in different ways. In Harbin, a vibrant and multicultural city before the advent of the Japanese, nostalgia for that glorious past colors contemporary commemoration. Pride in the city's unique position as a one-time cosmopolitan haven in China's northeast, its architectural legacy shaped as much by Russians as it was by Japanese colonizers, opens up new spaces and ways for commemorating the pre-Communist past. It also provides a platform for criticizing not only the Japanese Empire but also the Mao era, during which cosmopolitan facets of Harbin's past were excluded from official narratives. The lens of inheritance brings to light more than what is inherited from older generations; it also uncovers "secrets contained within what one inherits" (36). Among these are the transgressions of the Mao era.

Changchun, which for twelve years served as the capital of the Manchukuo puppet kingdom under the name Shinkyō/Xinjing, is more deeply rooted in colonial history. This inheritance forms the core of its touristic attraction. As a Japanese citizen who worked in Changchun's museums, Koga is sensitive to the ambivalence of the city's image in Chinese and Japanese eyes. For Chinese mindful of the colonial past and susceptible to official history, Changchun is a monument to national humiliation; for the Japanese tourists who flock to the city each year, it represents both the burden of colonial inheritance and the nostalgic excitement of finding the landscapes of empire in "former Manchuria." By transmitting "unaccounted-for pasts through tourism" (69), sites devoted to Manchukuo—such as the Fake Manchukuo Museum—recreate Changchun as a memorial to the ignominious past for Chinese visitors, while tour groups from Japan come for the Japanese "fantasyland" of the former Manchukuo capital.

Dalian, in the words of a Chinese employee in a Japanese company, "is neither China nor Japan" (122); as such, it seeks to exploit its colonial inheritance to build a competitive metropolis in the world marketplace. Dalianites view Japan as the face of modernity in ways different from Harbin, which is deeply rooted in its pre-Japanese legacy, and Changchun, which is steeped in imperial legacies of Japan as the former Manchukuo capital. Dalian

succeeds in recreating a sense of continuity from colonialism to the postwar era, partly because of the view that “the Japanese didn’t do bloody things in Dalian during the war” (133). This mentality, coupled with the economic interest, has made it easier for Japanese companies to “return” to Dalian in recent decades, and for Dalianites to embrace their city’s unique position in “the political economy of redemption.”

So, what kind of redemption can current generations of Japanese and Chinese hope for? After all, the Japanese predicament can only be resolved through displaying the “right” attitude toward the past, which is difficult considering the reluctance among some Japanese to own up to that past. Rather than seeking to answer this question, Koga uses the vocabulary of “redemption” to highlight the interconnectedness created by modern necessities: “the Japanese desire to make up for the broken promise of Japanese modernity and the Chinese desire to redeem their perceived lack of modernity feed off one another in generating more wealth” (203). This last quote perhaps best sums up this persuasive book.

Packing a well-rounded analysis of such a problematic topic into a single volume, along with the analytical framework and investigative tools it necessitates, would be challenging for any writer, and *Inheritance of Loss* is not without issues. Repetitions and wordy definitions of the book’s main terms, while often helpful, also weigh down the prose, making the book difficult, especially for the general reader. On the whole, however, this is a price worth paying if one keeps in mind that Koga is introducing an original approach to a decade-old subject—a task that requires a specific vocabulary and a conceptual toolbox. The book’s complexity is only natural considering the scope and gravity of the issues with which it engages. *Inheritance of Loss* is an intricate, at times harrowing, but overall insightful account packed with evaluations and images that serve to disentangle the complex inheritances of the past.

Hiro Saito’s *The History Problem* is also concerned with the contentious historic issues that mar relations between East Asian nations. The eponymous “problem” is the collective term for “a set of complexly entangled controversies” (3) between Japan and its nearest neighbors—and former “victims”—South Korea and China. Some of these controversies are long-standing and have dominated the debate for decades, such as the legacy of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE, or Tokyo Trial), or the issues surrounding comfort women. Some are recurrent and flare up at irregular intervals, such as visits by Japanese prime ministers to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Decades of postwar interaction have added layer after layer of disagreement to these disputes over war

commemoration, which have snowballed to a size that obstructs any prospects for reconciliation between East Asian nations.

Saito sets off with two broad, complementary questions: “How did the history problem become such a point of contention in Japan’s relations with South Korea and China?” and “Can the three countries resolve the history problem and, if so, how?” The first query concerns the past, while the second looks toward the future. Saito lays out his answers in six chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion. The first four chapters trace the evolution of the history problem over seven decades. In chapters 5 and 6, Saito tackles two obstacles that hinder the settlement of differences over history in the future: the so-called “Tokyo Trial view of history” and the role of historians in the history problem, respectively.

According to *The History Problem*, the logic of nationalism has dominated the ways in which people memorialize past traumatic events. It has also augmented the history problem in East Asia, where exclusively nationalist commemorations have prioritized the suffering of conationals and played down the suffering of others. Because of the fraught past between Japan and its neighbors, nationalist versions of history and memory in these countries have been difficult to reconcile. As a result, coupled with nationalism, “a historical problem, which is rather commonplace in itself, becomes an intractable point of contention in intergroup relations” (6). Nationalists in all three countries have had a disproportionate influence in the evolution of the history problem: “Japanese nationalists criticized the Japanese government for failing to honor Japanese war dead enough, whereas South Korean and Chinese nationalists criticized it for failing to commemorate South Korean and Chinese victims enough” (17). Nationalism has recently given way to more cosmopolitan commemoration, which calls for inclusive versions of the past. Nevertheless, the nationalist hold on history and memory remains strong, especially in East Asia.

Far from centering his argument solely around nationalism, however, Saito employs “field theory” to untangle the elaborate controversies behind the history problem. According to this sociological approach, collective memory is a heterogeneous, dynamic process that “occurs in multiple fields—artistic, social, political, and so on” (10); among these, the political field, where the government and other political groups operate, serves as a “metafield.” In other words, while interested parties compete for their versions of history in every possible field of social interaction, it is the political realm that is more conspicuous and decisive. Struggles for the “correct” versions of the past go beyond pride and patriotism; the dominant version of the “truth” often influences such diverse issues as pensions,

compensation, erection of national memorials, and the content of history textbooks for future generations.

One of the biggest merits of Saito's volume is its lucid and dispassionate historical summary of the long unfolding of the history problem in East Asia. Chapters 1–4, in particular, will be a welcome addition to the literature for the sake of not only scholars but also students, who will benefit from Saito's clear-eyed, readable account of the changeable seas of East Asian international relations. In the first two postwar decades, Saito writes, when there were no diplomatic relations and little interaction between Japan and its neighbors, the history problem did not yet exist; war commemoration evolved in a fragmented way, within the three nations' respective containers, as Saito impressively summarizes in chapter 1. Somewhat surprisingly, it was the restoration of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea in 1965, and between Japan and China in 1972, that gave birth to the history problem, as both the governments and nongovernmental groups on all sides started to interact more actively. The gradual spread of the cosmopolitan logic during this period also meant that Japanese and foreign groups put increasing pressure on the Japanese governments to incorporate the victimhood of the Asian peoples in the official commemoration. These demands from homegrown leftists and Chinese and Korean governments and groups also had a side effect—the resurgence of nationalist, exclusivist arguments that urged the government to resist foreign pressure. In the 1980s, this nationalist viewpoint gained an upper hand, seen in the Japanese government's revision of school history textbooks aimed at downplaying Japanese aggression in the war and thus appeasing nationalist groups. Saito lucidly documents how the official position oscillated between the nationalist and cosmopolitan in the turbulent domestic political scene in Japan from the early 1990s until the present; first, the end of the Showa era in 1989, the eruption of the “comfort women” issue in 1992, and the Liberal Democratic Party's loss of power in 1993 all contributed to a period of political turbulence that resulted in changes of government position on the past. This period gave birth to official apologies from the leaders of the coalition governments, most notably the Kōno Statement of 1993 and Murayama Tomiichi's prime ministerial apology in 1995. These apologies, while they did not help achieve reconciliation with China and South Korea, led to increased attacks from the Japanese nationalists and attempts to present alternative, “less masochistic” history textbooks to the nation's youth. Saito characterizes the period of the last two decades as one in which nationalism and cosmopolitanism have coexisted, although numerous attempts to reconcile national versions of history have met with obstacles.

Why have the sides failed to come to an agreement over the decades, despite the Japanese government's issuance of numerous apologies and the abundance of opportunities to build bridges? One reason, according to Saito, is that the perpetrator government (Japan) and the victims in China and South Korea have largely failed to agree on "what wrong was committed" (182). Much of the disagreement and discontent originates from the legacies of the Tokyo Trial, which is a source of grievance for both sides. The Japanese nationalists believe it was "victor's justice" that singled out Japan for punishment, while the Allies have not answered for their own atrocities; the Asian victims have been aggrieved because the Tokyo Trial failed to address Japanese colonialism. In Saito's words, the Tokyo judgment's "problematic nature gave the Japanese government and citizens an excuse to discount their past wrongdoings and evade their war responsibility, while providing South Korea and China with a justification to blame Japan entirely for the history problem" (153).

What can be done to resolve the history problem, then? Another major reason for the continuing stalemate is the absence of reciprocity, aggravated by the lack of efficient communication between the Japanese government and the victims of Japanese aggression. Intergovernmental, inter-agency connections based on trust are indispensable; despite the blossoming of nongovernmental contacts and the growing role of non-state groups in the debate, "the governments in East Asia remain the most important actors" in the resolution of the history problem. Interestingly, Saito diverges from Koga's view about inheritance, emphasizing not bequeathed responsibility but a more pragmatic concern about the future: "younger generations of Japanese citizens do not have commemorative responsibility because they have inherited war guilt but because the 'present situation'—the persistence of the history problem—demands commemoration of Japan's past wrongdoings" (186). Crucially important is the role of historians from all three countries, who should be open to collaborations with their counterparts, willing to mediate disputes and to dispassionately uphold the facts of history. Finally, although Japanese military and wartime government were ultimately responsible for the atrocities committed against the Chinese and Koreans, reconciliation is not solely the responsibility of Japan—all three nations have a stake in it. Saito concedes that Japan has been vilified—rightly—for too long, but efforts toward reconciliation cannot rest on criticism alone.

The author's willingness to state the problem squarely makes this book a refreshing addition to the literature on the difficult topic of Japanese imperial legacies in East Asia. Yet even such a lucid analysis is not without shortcomings. Most conspicuous, for this reviewer,

is the way the book attempts to do more than it sets off to do. Opening the book with meditations on the possible causes of and solutions to the history problem, Saito ends it with what reads like detailed policy prescriptions for the three governments, historians, and other interested groups. The insistent tone of the last two chapters is in dissonance with the curiosity and lucidity of the opening parts of the work. Also, while the book is generally well edited, typos remain, and misspellings of the names of several distinguished statesmen have managed to escape the attention of the author and editors. Thus, on page 70, Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi's first name is spelled "Masahiro"; another prime minister, Hosokawa Morihiro becomes "Morihiro" on pages 8, 93, and in the index; and, on page 125 and in the index, U.S. President Barack Obama's first name is spelled "Barak."

Saito's solution to the history problem, simply put, is this: "While Japan needs to embrace a greater degree of contrition first, South Korea and China will have to meet Japan halfway" (180). This is sound advice, delivered at the back of an impressive analysis of the many obstacles to reconciliation, and it is for such recommendations that Saito's book will be valued in the years to come by scholars, students, and, one hopes, decision makers.

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