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# Xi's history lessons

## How China rewrites the past to control the future



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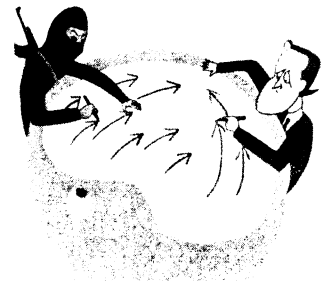
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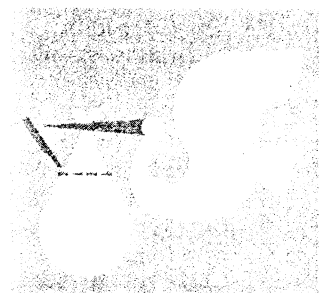
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# Xi's history lessons

The Communist Party is plundering history to justify its present-day ambitions



**I**N EARLY September President Xi Jinping will take the salute at a huge military parade in Beijing. It will be his most visible assertion of authority since he came to power in 2012: his first public appearance at such a display of missiles, tanks and goose-stepping troops. Officially the event will be all about the past, commemorating the end of the second world war in 1945 and remembering the 15m Chinese people who died in one of its bloodiest chapters: the Japanese invasion and occupation of China of 1937-45.

It will be a reminder of the bravery of China's soldiers and their crucial role in confronting Asia's monstrously aggressive imperial power. And rightly so: Chinese sacrifices during that hellish period deserve much wider recognition. Between 1937, when total war erupted in China, and late 1941, when the attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the fray, China fought the Japanese alone. By the end of the war it had lost more people—soldiers and civilians—than any other country bar the Soviet Union.

Yet next month's parade is not just about remembrance; it is about the future, too. This is the first time that China is commemorating the war with a military show, rather than with solemn ceremony. The symbolism will not be lost on its neighbours. And it will unsettle them, for in East Asia today the rising, disruptive, undemocratic power is no longer a string of islands presided over by a god-emperor. It is the world's most populous nation, led by a man whose vision for the future (a richer country with a stronger military arm) sounds a bit like one of Japan's early imperial slogans. It would be wrong to press the parallel too far: China is not about to invade its neighbours. But there are reasons to worry about the way the Chinese Communist Party sees history—and massages it to justify its current ambitions.

## History with Chinese characteristics

Under Mr Xi, the logic of history goes something like this. China played such an important role in vanquishing Japanese imperialism that not only does it deserve belated recognition for past valour and suffering, but also a greater say in how Asia is run today. Also, Japan is still dangerous. Chinese schools, museums and TV programmes constantly warn that the spirit of aggression still lurks across the water. A Chinese diplomat has implied that Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is a new Voldemort, the epitome of evil in the "Harry Potter" series. At any moment Japan could menace Asia once more, party newspapers intone. China, again, is standing up to the threat.

As our essay on the ghosts of the war that ended 70 years ago this week explains (see page 23), this narrative requires exquisite contortions. For one thing, it was not the Chinese communists who bore the brunt of the fighting against Japan, but their sworn enemies, the nationalists (or Kuomintang) under Chiang Kai-shek. For another, today's Japan is nothing like the country that slaughtered the inhabitants of Nanjing, forced Ko-

rean and Chinese women into military brothels or tested biological weapons on civilians.

Granted, Japan never repented of its war record as full-throatedly as Germany did. Even today a small but vocal group of Japanese ultra-nationalists deny their country's war crimes, and Mr Abe, shamefully, sometimes panders to them. Yet the idea that Japan remains an aggressive power is absurd. Its soldiers have not fired a shot in anger since 1945. Its democracy is deeply entrenched; its respect for human rights profound. Most Japanese acknowledge their country's war guilt. Successive governments have apologised, and Mr Abe is expected to do the same (see page 22). Today Japan is ageing, shrinking, largely pacifist and, because of the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, unlikely ever to possess nuclear weapons. Some threat.

## The dangers of demonisation

China's demonisation of Japan is not only unfair; it is also risky. Governments that stoke up nationalist animosity cannot always control it. So far, China's big show of challenging Japan's control of the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) islands has involved only sabre-rattling, not bloodshed. But there is always a danger that a miscalculation could lead to something worse.

East Asia's old war wounds have not yet healed. The Korean peninsula remains sundered, China and Taiwan are separate, and even Japan can be said to be split, for since 1945 America has used the southern island of Okinawa as its main military stronghold in the western Pacific. The Taiwan Strait and the border between North and South Korea continue to be potential flashpoints; whether they one day turn violent depends largely on China's behaviour, for better or worse. It is naive to assume America will always be able to keep a lid on things.

On the contrary, many Asians worry that China's ambitions set it on a collision course with the superpower and the smaller nations that shelter under its security umbrella. When China picks fights with Japan in the East China Sea, or builds airstrips on historically disputed reefs in the South China Sea, it feeds those fears. It also risks sucking America into its territorial disputes, and raises the chances of eventual conflict.

Post-war East Asia is not like western Europe. No NATO or European Union binds former foes together. France's determination to promote lasting peace by uniting under a common set of rules with Germany, its old invader, has no Asian equivalent. East Asia is therefore less stable than western Europe: a fissile mix of countries both rich and poor, democratic and authoritarian, with far less agreement on common values or even where their borders lie. Small wonder Asians are skittish when the regional giant, ruled by a single party that draws little distinction between itself and the Chinese nation, plays up themes of historical victimhood and the need to correct for it.

How much better it would be if China sought regional leadership not on the basis of the past, but on how constructive its behaviour is today. If Mr Xi were to commit China to multilateral efforts to foster regional stability, he would show that he has truly learned the lessons of history. That would be far, far better than repeating it. ■



## The unquiet past

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HERE can be no more pleasing spot in Tokyo on a July evening than the Yasukuni shrine. The cicadas murmur as you pass along the avenue of ginkgo trees framing the great *shinmon* gate, fashioned out of dark balks of cypress. The chrysanthemum drapes of the worship hall flutter alluringly; lanterns line the way, and the crowds are in a holiday mood and summer robes. Parties chant with gusto as they parade past with the palanquins housing their neighbourhood deities.

Yasukuni's summer celebrations reach their climax on August 15th, the anniversary of Japan's defeat in the second world war. As the date draws closer the avenue expands into a Bartholomew Fair of stalls and revelry. Not everyone is jolly. Sombre groups that include some of Japan's few surviving war veterans and their families remember fallen friends. There are chin-jutting Yakuza thugs in suits a size too small, and strutting military fantasists kitted out with officers' swords or *kamikaze* flight suits. There are protesters—many of them middle-aged or older—and police to keep them in their place.

And there are ghosts. Without them Yasukuni would have no purpose. The shrine honours the souls of those who have died protecting the emperor; they are revered as *kami*, which can loosely though not wholly satisfactorily be translated as "divine spirits". Consecrated in 1869, the year after the Meiji Restoration which launched Japan's modernisation, the striking combination of solemn ritual and popular entertainment that can come as a surprise to people from other cultures was present from the beginning; the first rites of apotheosis were attended by fireworks, cannons and sumo.

The first *kami* so enshrined were those who had fought on the imperial side in the civil wars around the time of the Meiji Restoration. The number of their fellowship, and the size of the festivals, grew with the occupation of Taiwan (1895), Korea (1910), Manchuria (1931), China's eastern seaboard (1937) and South-East Asia (1941). There are now 2,466,532 imperial protectors inscribed in Yasukuni's "Book of Souls". Collectively, they are viewed as a divine shield for the emperor.

By the tenets of the shrine, all these spirits are equal. To the world at large, they are not. No one objects to a nation honouring its war dead, even if the cause for which they fought was a bad one. But in 1978 the priests of Yasukuni surreptitiously enshrined 14 political and military leaders, including General Hideki Tojo, the wartime prime minister, who had been found guilty by the Tokyo War Crimes Trial of planning ►►



*"I'm not an activist or a scholar, just the daughter of a father whom I never met."*

or prosecuting the military aggression of the 1930s and 1940s. All 14 had either been executed by Japan's new American overlords or died in prison. For many—including many in Japan—granting divine honour to such men went beyond the pale. Emperor Hirohito, in whose name millions died, stopped visiting Yasukuni; the current emperor, Akihito, has upheld the boycott. Yet visits by conservative nationalist politicians, including the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, have increased, drawing admonishment in much of the world and stoking anger in China and South Korea.



There are other spirits that stand out, too—less infamous, but more poignant. One is that of Lee Sa-hyon, who was a native of the city that today is Seoul but from 1910 to 1945 was Keijo, the capital of Japanese-occupied

Korea. By the time Lee Sa-hyon was growing up in the 1930s, most of his hometown's city walls and royal palaces had been razed; there was just enough left to make tour parties from Japan think that they were taking in something exotic (Korean brothels were on the tourist trail, too). The huge dome of the governor-general's palace dominated the city centre. The Imperial Subject Oath Tower, built for the celebrations in 1940 of the (wholly fabricated) 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese imperial family, housed written vows of loyalty to the emperor from 1.4m Korean students.

Lee Hee-ja, Lee Sa-hyon's daughter, was born in 1943, a time when Japan's prospects were looking grave. The Americans were fighting their way up through the country's Pacific-island possessions. The war against China that had begun in 1937, and which the Japanese had expected to be a relatively short affair, had developed into a long struggle on an epic scale thanks to the resistance of the ascetic Christian generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, and his Kuomintang (KMT). The demands of the war effort stripped Korea and occupied Manchuria to its north of both resources and people. Thousands of Korean women were tricked and abducted into military brothels; tens of thousands of men were forced into labour in mines and on industrial sites, mainly in Japan. And from 1944 many were conscripted into the army. Lee Sa-hyon became one of those conscripts. In June 1945, just a few weeks before the war's end, he was killed in Guangdong, in southern China.

His daughter is now 72. Like all East Asian septuagenarians she has lived through times of startling disruption. Like China, Ms Lee's country was wracked by civil war and divided into two; like Japan and Taiwan, and later China itself, it was also transformed by remarkable economic growth. Its population has tripled, its GDP risen by a factor of 50. It has become, for the first time in its history, a democracy. From the far end of a lifetime of such profound change the war might be expected to seem distant—as it does, for the most part, in America and Europe. But in ways both great and small, in the details of individual lives and in the relations between states, the war that ended 70 years ago still shapes East Asian worldviews, animating its politics—and its ghosts.

In 1959 the spirit of Lee Sa-hyon was quietly enshrined at Yasukuni; having died fighting for the emperor, he became one of his divine protectors. When his daughter found this out, in 1996, she became determined to have his name, and *kami*, removed from the shrine. "I'm not an activist or a scholar," she says, "just the daughter of a father whom I never met. So I feel I have an obligation to him: to bring him back from Yasukuni." His proper resting place, she has always maintained, should be at Cheonan, south of Seoul, where a memorial honours what is known as the March 1st movement:

millions of Koreans who took to the streets in 1919 to protest against Japanese rule. Thousands were mown down; many more ended up in Keijo's infamous Seodaemun prison.

Moving a soul in Japan proves to be not so easy. Yasukuni's priests were polite but firm. Once a spirit has joined the *kami* there is no going back, whatever the circumstances. Ms Lee turned to the government. Officials told her that Lee Sa-hyon's enshrinement was just evidence that all imperial soldiers had been treated equally. Ms Lee notes, though, that the government never made any attempt to find his remains, as it did those of Japanese soldiers.

Along with others eager to liberate relatives from Yasukuni—including some Japanese—Ms Lee has turned to the courts. They have offered no joy. In the latest set of cases, one of the names for removal is that of an elderly plaintiff, the reports of whose death have clearly been exaggerated—yet even being alive, it seems, does not get you struck from the list of the *kami*. It is rude even to ask, apparently. A recent Tokyo High Court ruling said that the plaintiffs should "show tolerance for others' freedom of religion".

Why, Ms Lee asks, does Japan's establishment not understand the humiliation of families like hers, one it would be so easy to redress? Japanese prime ministers have apologised for their country's aggression; its government has acknowledged its culpability in enslaving women in brothels. And the Japanese know what it is to have people taken from them. Mr Abe made his political reputation when, more than a decade ago, he stood up to North Korea over a number of Japanese citizens kidnapped in the 1970s and 1980s to serve the brutal regime as translators and spies. Every day Mr Abe wears a blue ribbon in his lapel as a reminder of them. Can he not see, Ms Lee says, that her father was abducted too?

But no name has ever been removed from Yasukuni.

## Rich country, strong army

The Meiji Restoration initiated a bout of modernisation the like of which the world has never seen elsewhere. Not even China's transformation since 1978 compares to it. In less than two generations an insular feudal shogunate became a modern power—not just an economic power, but a military one. Japan's leaders never forgot the indignity of American gunships forcing open what Herman Melville called their "double-bolted land". *Fukoku kyohei*, went the rallying cry: "rich country, strong army".

In the 70 years since 1945 Japan has fired not a bullet in anger. In the 70 years before that, war was central to its progress. Its expansionism began in 1874, when it launched a first punitive expedition to Formosa (now Taiwan). In 1879 it annexed the peaceful Ryukyu kingdom—modern-day Okinawa. A war against the Qing dynasty in 1894-95, fought largely on the Korean peninsula, ended in humiliating defeat for China; its centuries-old dominance of East Asia was usurped. In 1905, in the greatest naval victory since Nelson's at Trafalgar 100 years before, Japan sent nearly the entire Russian fleet to the bottom in the Tsushima Strait between Korea and Japan, setting the scene for its subsequent uncontested annexation of Korea.

Given the condemnation Japanese militarism was later to receive, it is worth recalling the admiration Japan's military modernisation inspired in these early decades. It dressed its imperial adventures abroad in a cloak of righteousness, legalism and brute force—just as Western imperial powers did. Impressed, those Western powers could hardly deny their pupil a place at the top table—even if the new member of the club was quick to detect racist slights.

Asian nationalists, too, admired this new Japan—among them Sun Yat-sen, the future founder of republican China. Radicals and intellectuals flocked to Tokyo to learn from an Asian power that could foster pride and prosperity at home while standing up to the West abroad. The admiration even extended to Yasukuni, embodying as it did the virtues of loyalty, self-sacrifice and patriotism. In the early 1890s Wang Tao, a Chinese intellectual and reformer, wrote approvingly that it was "easy to understand the

► intention behind the Japanese government's enshrining of the war dead: the enthusiasm of the masses will flourish, and their loyalty will never be found wanting." Imperial China's defeat at Japanese hands followed shortly thereafter.

Like the imperialism of the European powers it sought to emulate, Japan's colonialism was rooted in violence and, often, racism. But by the early 1930s it had also become oddly chaotic—the result not so much of a strategic aim to further national greatness as of a lack of control over adventurism. The last of the oligarchs who had wielded power after the Meiji Restoration, and who had a restraining influence on the armed forces, shuffled off the stage. In 1931 a clique of army officers presented their occupation of Manchuria to the government as a *fait accompli*. After the League of Nations condemned the move, Japan withdrew from the body and entered a pact with Nazi Germany in the name of fighting communism. In 1937 a flare-up between Chinese and Japanese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Beijing precipitated a “war of annihilation”, as Japan's prime minister, Fumimaro Konoe, called it, down the length of China's eastern seaboard.

John Dower, a historian of Japan at MIT, underlines that modern societies are not mobilised for war in the name of committing aggression, and that Japan was no exception. Its aggression was painted at home as either a defence of legitimate interests or a selfless crusade against communism. Condemnation by Western colonial powers was dismissed as so much hypocrisy: Japan was the liberator and natural leader of Asian nations suffering under Western colonialism. Pan-Asianism was the philosophical, and at times spiritual, underpinning of Japanese expansionism. For Japan, as Mr Dower puts it, the years in which it fought to subjugate what developed into its “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” were a period of “beautiful, modern war”.

Many conservative Japanese nationalists still see the beauty of that period. Mr Abe believes that Japan's pursuit of *fukoku kyohei* was essentially right then and still is today, and that its resumption is the key to making Japan what some would call a “normal” nation again. It is what Mr Abe chooses to call “the post-war” which is the shameful historical exception, with its reliance on American tutelage and a constitution that clips Japan's wings abroad.

To take such a position is not to deny that Japan did wrong. John Delury, a historian of East Asia at Yonsei University in Seoul, argues that, instead, it is to believe that imperial Japan behaved in war little differently from other countries. And other countries did grievous wrong. Witness the smouldering aftermath of the fire-bombing of Tokyo, in which 100,000 died; witness the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On this view history places no special obligation of remorse or apology on the Japanese: “in-

deed, not feeling obliged to express special remorse... is a manifestation of Japan's belated return to normalcy”.

Back at Yasukuni, the shrine is bathed in beautiful lies. A visit to its associated museum, the Yushukan, finds the militarism that brought Japan to its knees still glorified. Grim engines of death have pride of place, including the *Kaiten* (“Return to Heaven”) torpedo, a 15-metre, matt-black projectile with a tiny seat inside and a small periscope—in effect, a submersible suicide vest. The atrocities of Nanjing (1937) and Manila (1945), in which Japanese troops massacred tens if not hundreds of thousands of civilians and prisoners-of-war in an orgy of murder and rape, are downplayed or denied. Always, war aims are painted as noble and pure: Japan standing as a bulwark against Western imperialism, communism or the anarchy of Chinese warlords.

## The horcrux theory of history

When Mr Abe paid his respects at Yasukuni in late 2013 he fulfilled a campaign promise and generated a diplomatic storm. Around the world China's diplomats took to op-ed pages with the aim of stoking anti-Japan sentiment. In Britain's *Daily Telegraph* the Chinese ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, called Yasukuni a “kind of horcrux, representing the darkest parts of [Japan's] soul”. He expected his readers to know that, in the world of Harry Potter, a horcrux stores a fragment of a sundered soul in hope of immortality, and can be created only by murder. He hoped they would infer that Mr Abe was the new Lord Voldemort.

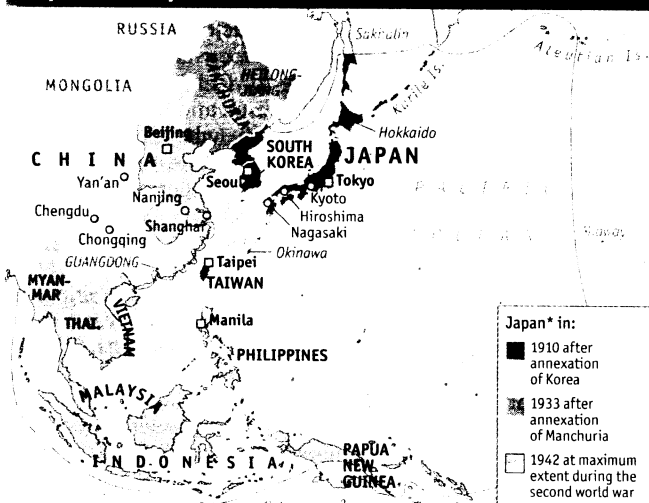
It was a smart stroke of rhetoric. It was also more than a little disingenuous. China's Communist Party has a horcrux of its own on which until not long ago it pinned all hopes of immortality—the corpse of Mao Zedong. His violent rule saw the murder in purge and famine of millions of his countrymen. Yet since his death in 1976 his remains have lodged under a huge and ugly mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, the symbolic centre of Chinese power, embalmed but very slowly putrefying.

Mao is a necessary source of legitimacy for China's rulers, but no longer a sufficient one. There is enough awareness of the violence and misrule that he oversaw that even the Communist Party has had to avow that his rule was only “70% good”. And as China's economic and diplomatic clout grow, prestige matters to its rulers in ways that never really interested Mao, and which his legacy can do nothing to promote. So a reinvigorated nationalism has joined economic growth and military strength as part of the “Chinese Dream”—a nationalism defined above all in opposition to wartime Japanese aggression. President Xi Jinping clearly sees the memory of that struggle as a tool for shaping Chinese identity.

China's leaders think memories of its role in the war should matter abroad, too. America's claim to a Pacific presence rests on its defeat of Japan. China's claim to leadership in its region rests on its role in that same defeat—a role for which, after all, it was at the time rewarded with one of the permanent seats on the UN Security Council reserved for the victors. In Mr Liu's horcrux op-ed he referred to Chinese soldiers standing “shoulder to shoulder” with Allied troops. Last month he sent this correspondent an invitation to a 70th anniversary commemoration of August 15th that refers to “the Victory of the World Anti-Fascist War and the Chinese People's War against Japanese Aggression”.

China's contribution to the second world war certainly deserves a reappraisal, as Rana Mitter of the University of Oxford argues in a recent book on the Sino-Japanese war, “Forgotten Ally”. From the outbreak of hostilities at the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937 to December 7th 1941, when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor forced America into the war, China fought Japan alone. Mr Mitter argues that, had China surrendered in 1938, as seemed all too likely at the time, East Asia might have been a Japanese imperium for decades. Instead it fought on, at enormous cost. Perhaps 15m Chinese soldiers and civilians died in the war of 1937-45, with 100m made refugees; of the other nations at war only the Soviet Union suffered losses on a similar scale. True, China failed in the end to beat the ►►

### Spheres of power



Source: The Economist

\*On modern borders



Chongqing, 1941

► Japanese. But its dogged resistance tied down hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops.

This is the legacy that Mr Xi insists be recognised. But there is an inconvenient truth. For decades the official Communist Party narrative had little space for the KMT and Chiang Kai-shek; if they were mentioned at all, it was as anti-communist forces too cowardly, corrupt or unpatriotic to take on the Japanese. China's "liberation" came not in 1945 but in 1949—that is, with the Communists' defeat of the nationalists in the civil war that followed Japan's collapse. Communism's victory over nationalism was thus framed as the end point of its victory over fascism.

Yet it was in fact the armies of the anti-imperialist, fiercely nationalist KMT that offered the chief resistance to Japan's army, drawing it ever deeper into the mire. It was they who shared in the suffering, hardship and endurance on the part of hundreds of millions of Chinese civilians that marked the eight wartime years beyond the relatively small and secure Communist base areas. It is quite possible that, had the KMT not spent so much of its force in that struggle, Chiang would have won the subsequent civil war.

Viciously suppressed in the decades following the war, this part of the country's history is now being cautiously and selectively rehabilitated as part of the new nationalism through which China is expressing its regional and global aspirations. Among other things, this serves the purpose of uniting the stories of Taiwan—to which Chiang and the KMT fled in 1949—and mainland China, stressing the common struggle of the Chinese against Japanese aggression rather than their division by civil war. Beyond reasons of state, though, it is also bubbling up from below, as regions of China previously marginalised manifest a new desire to tell their own war stories.

In a large apartment in a brand-new suburb of Chongqing, a city in China's south-west, Wang Suzhen, a diminutive lady in floral pyjamas, disappears into a vast faux-leather sofa surrounded by three generations of her family. Opposite, a television covering the entire wall pumps out a reality programme devoted to parental indulgence: a father takes a girl in a tutu to a ballet lesson; a little emperor in sunglasses drives a scale model of a BMW. Outside, Chongqing is Dickensian in its smog and nearly hellish in its summer heat, the Yangzi river winding brown and swollen at the feet of its steep hillsides.

Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Chongqing with his government in 1938, the year after Nanjing, then the capital of the Republic of China, fell to the Japanese amid great slaughter—an infamous victory which put the invaders in control of nearly all of China's

coast, including Shanghai. Millions of Chinese followed Chiang to Chongqing; it was the provisional capital until the end of the war.

They were seven hard years. Though geographical remoteness and mountain topography offered the city a degree of protection, the war was always present. Many civilians died in air raids; on June 5th 1941 some 1,500 civilians died from suffocation in a single shelter. Boatmen were paid half a kilo of rice per body to take the corpses out of the city.

The Wang family did better than most. Living outside Chongqing in a town called Shilong, they escaped the air raids. Just six days before the defeat of Japan, Ms Wang was born. Soon after the family moved to Chongqing proper where they made a living selling the silk embroidery they made in the city's wholesale markets. But the Communist victory in the civil war changed the city. Chongqing's sense of itself as a centre of resistance, and its price in its wartime experience, were suppressed. Its Monument to Victory in the Anti-Japanese War was renamed the Liberation Monument. People with a "bad" class background—that is, evil "landlords" and nationalists who had come to the region with Chiang Kai-shek—were stigmatised. Ms Wang's family was forced out of the city and into the countryside.

One political campaign after another washed over the agricultural collective where Ms Wang's mother struggled to feed eight children. Ms Wang remembers a cow being brought to the production team in winter, but having no hay with which to feed it. Then people started eating grass themselves, leading to bloating and sometimes starving all the same. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards dragged evil "landlords" outside and beat them. "We didn't ask questions," Ms Wang says. "We didn't dare speak, or we'd get beaten too."

In 1987 Ms Wang and her family left the commune and prospered growing their own crops for market. The government gave her daughter, a teacher, a flat, into which they all moved. In 1989 they got their first television, and a fridge. In 2005 they bought their first car. No one in the family imagined that things could change so fast. A few years ago Ms Wang found spiritual comfort, too. It happened when an elderly relative died, leaving behind her troubled ghost. A Taoist master was called in to appease the ghost but it did not work. "Then some Christian friends said that their kind of prayers could bring peace, and they did." The ghost no longer troubles the family; Ms Wang goes to church each week.

In her spiritual development Ms Wang is somewhat unusual; in her family's enrichment she is quite typical of her city. And as the south-west has grown richer, so it has started to tell the story of its wartime experience more openly. On August 15th Chongqing's newspapers used to spout the same national narrative one might read in Beijing. Now they celebrate local wartime heroes. The air-raid shelter that suffered the disaster of 1941 has been designated as a memorial site. In Chiang Kai-shek's hilltop hideout of Huangshan visitors are welcomed by a young actor decked out in the generalissimo's scholarly gown and thin moustache.

If Chongqing is reclaiming its past—and China as a whole coming to acknowledge the role of imperialism, and not just communism, in fighting the forces of imperialism—what does that mean for relations with the Japanese? There are signs it may improve them; a more nuanced view of Chinese history permits a more nuanced view of its adversary.

On the face of it, Ms Wang still sees things the old way: the Japanese, she says, are cruel and she dislikes them. Has she ever met one? No, she admits, but—nodding at the television—she sees them all the time. Reminded that the Japanese in the war movies on television are Chinese actors in costume, she laughs. "It's just propaganda, I know," she says, before becoming absorbed along with the rest of the family in the girl in the pink tutu.

Mr Xi's use of old antagonisms to buttress a modern nationalist identity is a worrying one. But there is a lot else shaping the ideas of a richer society than any China has known. As if to underline the point Ms Wang murmurs, as much to herself as to this correspondent, "Who would miss the past?"

## The displaced

The spirits of Yasukuni are not the only ones with whom Mr Abe communes. After his election victory in 2012 he went straight to the tomb of his grandfather to make a promise. Like his grandson, Nobusuke Kishi rose to be prime minister, serving from 1957 to 1960. A fervent nationalist, he had nonetheless accepted, in the face of Japan's surrender to the United States and its neutered post-war role as little brother, that the restoration of wealth had to come before the resumption of power. But—and Kishi was clear on this point—this was to be only a temporary expedient.

In 1965 Kishi argued that rearmament was necessary as “a means of eradicating completely the consequences of Japan's defeat and the American occupation. It is necessary to enable Japan finally to move out of the post-war era and for the Japanese people to regain their self-confidence and pride as Japanese.” The words could have come from Mr Abe's manifesto. The promise Mr Abe made by his grandfather's grave was that he would “recover the true independence” of Japan.

This is not to say that Mr Abe is anti-American. Like his grandfather, he needs America to ensure his country's security. He has strengthened the countries' military alliance, agreeing to revised defence guidelines in April in the face of a rising China. But he feels deeply America's role in “the history of Japan's destruction”—by which he means not the physical devastation of the war, but the subsequent period of American-imposed order. He hates the war-crimes tribunal that sat in Tokyo: what hypocrisy to hang the Japanese leaders who conquered Asia at the same time as the Western powers were reasserting their rule in Asian colonies. He sees the constitution imposed on the country as constraining Japan's legitimate ambitions. A left-wing conspiracy in education inculcates war guilt and an aversion to patriotism.

The role of that post-war order in the subsequent seven decades of peace, prosperity and democracy from which Mr Abe's Liberal Democratic Party has been a great beneficiary is passed over in such analysis. Yet America is in no position to call Japan's nationalists out on the grounds of double standards. It was, after all, General Douglas MacArthur who chose not to prosecute Emperor Hirohito for the crimes that were committed in his name and by a political system to which he was central, on the unprovable but implausible grounds that a crushed people would be more biddable with their emperor still in place. That decision made it harder for Japan to examine its actions, and make a full accounting of them, both to its victims and to itself. The cold war, for which America needed experienced, conservative allies in Japan, removed any lingering chance of such a reckoning. Almost immediately after the Tokyo tribunal handed down its first batch of sentences, the other people indicted for Class A crimes were released from Tokyo's Sugamo prison and put in positions of authority.

Notable among them was the mastermind of Japan's Manchurian puppet state, known as Manchukuo, in north-east China. By harnessing private capital to a heavily state-directed economy, he had turned Manchukuo into the engine of Japan's war machine. Mark Driscoll of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has written of the system's “necropolitical” vision of dehumanised Chinese labour. Yet the brutal human cost of this experimental, hyper-modern state is now largely forgotten, while its marriage of private capital and heavy state direction was a direct inspiration not just for Japan's post-war development, but also, subsequently, for that of South Korea—and China, too. And the



*“I did what they said. And then they started hitting me.”*

mastermind behind this? Nobusuke Kishi himself.

Mr Abe's uncritical belief that his country's essence is inextricably bound into the institutions of the Meiji Restoration and all that they went on to spawn is wrongheaded. But it is equally wrong to decry all aspects of continuity between Japan's pre-war and post-war. On all sides ghosts are kept locked away. Instead they should be allowed to speak and also to listen—to hear and voice the complex truths of war, responsibility and victimhood.



Xu Ming remembers the first time she found herself outside without her mother holding her hand. She asked a group of children if she could play. “No”, said one. “Why not?” I asked. “Because you're a *xiao riben guizi*—a little Japanese devil.” Then the tallest child intervened. “Okay”, he said, “You can play. But you have to be a dog. You must crawl between our legs and say bow-wow.” So I did that. And then they started hitting me.”

Ms Xu was born in Heilongjiang province in north-east China, part of Manchuria, in 1944—three years after Kishi had been recalled from his position there to serve as industry minister in Tokyo. She was an only child brought up by loving and protective parents. And she was badly bullied. When she was seven her class were taken to see a war film that showed Communist troops in glorious battle against the murderous, evil Japanese. The children around her starting shouting “Down with the Japanese”. And then they were spitting at her. After the film the teacher held a roll call, but Xu Ming was missing. The teacher found her crouched under her chair, her eyes red with crying. She scolded the class: Xu Ming, she said, is only a child; and the film is only a film. That day, Xu Ming determined to be a teacher.

A year later an officer from the Public Security Bureau came to her house. Xu Ming was sent outside but craned to hear the conversation. The officer was shouting: “You had better admit it: the child is Japanese and you adopted her.” Her mother burst into tears. Xu Ming ran in to comfort her. Mother and daughter cried so much that the officer gave up any further questioning.

It was then that Xu Ming asked: “I'm Japanese, aren't I?”

“Yes”, her mother replied, “you are.”

According to John Dower, there were over 6m Japanese stranded overseas when the war ended. Their story is strangely little told, even in Japan. Something over half of the stranded were servicemen, many wounded, malnourished or diseased. The rest were administrators, bank clerks, railwaymen, farmers, industrialists, prostitutes, spies, photographers, barbers, children. For them and for their families and friends back home, just as for conscripted and exiled Chinese and Koreans in similar situations, August 15th was far from a definitive end. A year after its defeat 2m Japanese had still not made it home. Many never did. A national radio programme, “Missing Persons”, was launched in 1946. It went off-air only in 1962.

The Allies took advantage of surrendered servicemen. The Americans used 70,000 as labourers on Pacific bases. The British, in a supreme irony, made use of over 100,000 Japanese to reassert colonial authority over parts of South-East Asia that had just been “liberated”. In China tens of thousands of Japanese fought on both sides of the civil war.

The worst fate was to be under Russian “protection”. The Soviet Union, which entered the war in its last week, accepted the surrender of Japanese forces in Manchuria and northern Korea. Perhaps 1.6m Japanese soldiers fell into its hands. About 625,000 were repatriated at the end of 1947, many having been sent to labour camps in Siberia and submitted to intense ideological indoctrination. Others were able to make their way south to the American-controlled sector of the Korean Peninsula. In early 1949 the Soviets claimed that only 95,000 Japanese remained to be repatriated—leaving, by Japanese and American calculations, over 300,000 unaccounted for.

In August 1945 there were also 1m Japanese civilians in Manchuria. Some 179,000 are thought to have died trying to get to Ja- ▶▶



pan in the confusion and Soviet-perpetrated violence following surrender, or during the harsh winter of 1945-46. Children returned to Japan as orphans, the family's ashes in a box hung around their neck. In Manchuria parents begged Chinese peasant families to take in their youngest children.

That is what Ms Xu's natural mother had done. Her father, serving in the imperial army, had been dragged off to Siberia. Her mother thought Ming, the youngest of her daughters, would not survive the journey to Japan. She begged a couple to take the baby. When that couple later had more children of their own they sold Ming on to the Xu family.

In due course Ms Xu passed as a teacher. She qualified with flying colours that might have hinted at a stellar career. But the following years were spent teaching the children of loggers in dismal mobile camps deep in Heilongjiang's forests. "There's nothing you can do about it," her professor had said: "You're Japanese." In the timber camps they ground up sweetcorn husks and tree bark for bread, but living in such remote places shielded Ms Xu from the worst madness of the Cultural Revolution. Back in her home town the ethnic-Japanese dentist, gentle and diligent, was dragged to the crossroad with a sign around her neck denouncing her as a Japanese spy. Every time she was asked whether she was a spy and denied it she was hit. Three days later she was dead.

In 1972 the Japanese prime minister, Kakuei Tanaka, visited China, initiating a programme of billions of dollars of bilateral aid for its former foe. Japanese people started coming to Heilongjiang to look for family members. A visiting journalist promised Ms Xu he would place advertisements on her behalf in Japanese publications so that she might find her birth family. An old soldier in Hokkaido responded to one, certain she was his daughter. In 1981 a visa was secured for Ms Xu. She was intensely excited to go to Japan; her meeting with the old soldier was emotional. Then a DNA test showed they were not related. The old soldier would have no more to do with her.

Japanese bureaucrats threatened to deport Ms Xu: Chinese court documents affirming her Japanese blood counted for nothing. While fighting through the courts to stay, she volunteered her help at a local NGO dealing with the "Manchurian orphans". One morning, in a nearby café, two Japanese women on the way to the NGO asked whether they could share her table. Of course, Xu Ming said, in her still accented Japanese. The women asked whether she was Chinese and if so from where? Heilongjiang, Xu Ming replied. That's where our mother left our sister, the women said. The coincidences grew: the town, the name of the family, Li, that first adopted Ms Xu, the Li home being right by the railway track. The three sisters were together again for the first time since 1945. For Sumie Ikeda, as Ms Xu now knew herself to be, the elation was tempered only by her learning that their mother had died just months before. But now her ghost, at least, could rest.

The lives scarred in the second world war are nearing their ends. The Asian history they are part of continues to shape the worlds of those people's children and grandchildren, though. In some places it is distorted, in others denied. Some victims and some victors are commemorated. Others are forgotten.

In the 1960s a head priest at Yasukuni more liberal than today's put up a tiny shrine in a corner of the grounds to pacify the spirits of fallen enemies. It is now surrounded by a high metal fence, and out of bounds to visitors. On its annual feast day in July a young priest unceremoniously places a bowl of fruit outside the shrine as an offering and shambles off. As for the Japanese victims of aggression—the young soldiers, let down by their generals, who died of hunger and disease in New Guinea jungles, the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed as the war came to the Japanese home islands: they are nowhere to be seen. Yasukuni remembers only glorious deaths.

"Who would miss the past," asks Ms Wang, from her sofa in Chongqing. Who indeed? But the past is not just there to be missed. ■

