

Historical Perceptions of World War II in Japan: The Influence of Textbooks and Film

KATO Nao

Abstract

Our understanding of the past is constantly changing. Though history is factual, the choice of what history to record depends on the people who document it, the authorities, and the era. Some elements of the past are emphasized, others mitigated, often to encourage national pride and highlight threats from ‘other’ countries. Significantly, the more recent the history, the more complicated. Furthermore, when history involves other countries, it can fuel international disputes. Historical perceptions of World War II in East Asia, particularly in China, South Korea, and Japan, are no exception. China and South Korea regard Japanese acts during the war, such as the Nanjing Massacre/Incident, the use of comfort women and forced labor, as clear acts of aggression against them, but Japanese history teaching puts more emphasis on the air raids of its cities, the invasion of Okinawa and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Shin, 2015). As the war recedes from living memory, historical awareness becomes more problematic.

My thesis explores historical perceptions of World War II events in Japan from two points of view, textbooks, and film. First, it describes the chronological change in how the Japanese government has propagated its ideas about the past through textbooks. A textbook is perhaps less of an educational tool than an indicator of the government’s view of history. This view has shifted in Japan over the last two decades. The transnational-centered education policies of the 1980s and 1990s created a political backlash that drove historical revisionism. Since then, the Japanese government has prioritized the nation-centered view and there is more political pressure on schools and textbook publishers to avoid dwelling on the darker episodes of Japan’s past. Second, I look at popular culture, particularly Japanese films. Japanese cinema depicting the war might be seen as shadowing the ideological struggle over textbooks, toggling between progressive and conservative. From the 1990s, some popular culture began to heroize or beautify the war, in response to the growing historical revisionism in politics. The Chinese and Japanese films tend to objectify the enemy as inhumane. Even when filmmakers attempt to transcend the dichotomy of ‘Us’ and ‘Them,’ direct and indirect censorship makes it difficult to engage with mass audiences. Recent war films in Japan seem to avoid contested historical disputes.

However, some films based on historical events may work to counter films eulogizing the war. Finally, my thesis compares textbooks and films. Historical perceptions of World War II in Japan and China are changing over time and appear to be fueling mutual distrust, animosity, and political divisions. These different perceptions are clearly exposed in education and popular culture. The ideas of the nationalist right and conservatives seem to be gradually becoming prevalent. Though the production and maintenance of popular views on the war is complex and shifting, it can hardly be denied that movies and textbooks play a key part in influencing these views.