

Entangled Trans-Pacific Memory --Asian Americans and US-Japan-China Relations--

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What part has collective memory played in the recent history of U.S.-Japan-China relations? Any answer to that question must reckon with the impact of memories of World War II in Asia, a time of troubles that continues to be the foundational moment of contemporary U.S.-Japan-China relations. Judging only from one-sided history or media accounts, the answer is fairly simple: recollections of the wartime experience have inflamed disagreements between China, Japan and the United States. Things are more complicated than that, however. In a less obvious but more important way, collective memory has also been responsible for the positive features of the postwar relations between and among the United States, Japan and China.

Undeniably, World War II in Asia has produced many bad memories. Pearl Harbor remains a synonym for treachery in the minds of many Americans, and the use of atomic bombs against Japan continues to provoke accusations of barbarism among many Japanese. Another episode related to the war in China, the “Rape of Nanking” is more important for the Sino-Japanese relations, but it has a powerful secondary resonance in the United States by virtue of large community of scholars and Chinese Americans who, for various reasons, continue to play up memories of this incident. All this confirms the commonsense conclusion that, as many historians put it, the experience of war in the twentieth century has been “a vivid, indeed a traumatic phenomenon, which has left in its wake survivors who engage time and again in acts of remembrance.”¹

To understand the effects of collective memory in the transformation of the U.S. domestic politics and international relations, this paper focuses on how memory of World War II has played a critical role in fostering Asian American identity, which directly influences U.S. relations with its East Asian countries, particularly with Japan and China. In order to reach the goal, first, this paper examines how memory of World War II has contributed to the rise of Asian American identity and how it has continued to be an important factor to foster Asian American consciousness. It also explores the efforts of Asian Americans in the construction of a “memory community” in American multicultural society. Second, it highlights some salient and recent trends and developments of Asian Americans, Chinese Americans in particular, whose trans-pacific memory helps to shape or reshape the US-Japan-China relations.

Picture 1: “A Day of Infamy”--World War II in American Memory



The USS Arizona Memorial located at Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii symbolizes American memory of World War II in the Pacific. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

Picture 2: American Memory of World War II in the Pacific



The National World War II Memorial opened to the public on April 29, 2004, honoring the 16 million who served in the armed forces of the United States during World War II. As a symbol of the defining event of the twentieth century, the memorial is a monument to the spirit, sacrifice, and commitment of the American people. World War II is the only twentieth century event commemorated in the National Mall central axis in Washington D.C. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

1. War Memory and Rise of Asian American Identity

Most Americans who remember World War II think of themselves as agreeing with Studs Terkel's "the Good War."² American historian Philip D. Beidler analyzes how this collective memory, the "Good War" was actually formed by wartime propaganda and reinforced in the aftermath of victory through books, the news media, movies, songs, and television in a particularly American way.³ When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States officially entered the war, the perceived malevolence of "the treacherous Jap" left no room for compromise in the American conviction about the goodness of cause. Current research suggests that time has done little to convince anyone that this conviction was in error.⁴

"The Good War," however, implied a different story in Asian American history. Chinese Americans experienced suffering under the discriminatory laws enacted in 1882, and on the other hand, the internment produced a different memory of the war for Japanese Americans. As the American historian Ronald Takaki points out, the war came to "bomb the color line" and finally won a "double victory," not only a victory over fascism abroad but also a victory over racism in America.⁵ The war directly led to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943 and allowed a 105-person quota for Chinese entry to the United States per year because of the wartime Chinese-American alliance.⁶ The repeal helped to pave the way not only for greater racial tolerance toward Asian in the United States but for multiculturalism in general after the war. Even more important than the changes in American discriminatory laws were the changes in American ideology and in the Asian American community, particularly after the civil rights movement in the 1960s, which resulted in a fundamental shift in immigration policy in 1965 in the United States history. Before the war, the Chinese American community was largely shut out of the mainstream of American society due to the discriminatory laws. American wartime good feeling toward China improved the positive images and reputation of Chinese Americans due to their contribution to the war effort. It is estimated that nearly twenty thousand Chinese Americans served in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II.⁷ Moreover, the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team's combat record in the war prompted President Harry Truman to declare, "You fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice and you won."⁸

Asian Americans' "success" during World War II fighting for democracy and freedom enabled them to be the "Model Minority" in the postwar era.⁹ Eventually, Asian Americans came to address the incongruities of "the Good War" in the postwar era. Japanese Americans struggled for an official apology and redress from the U.S. government for their wartime internment, finally triumphing in 1988.¹⁰ Moreover, their decision to build the Japanese American National Museum, in order to "promote understanding and appreciation of

Picture 3: World War II in Japanese American Memory

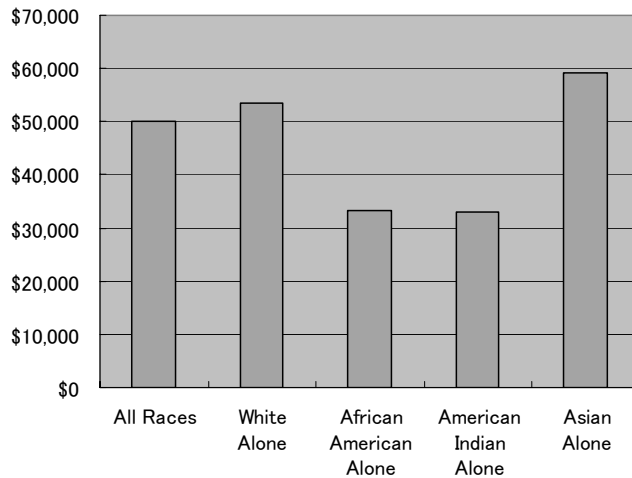


The Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II in Washington, D.C., completed in 2000, honoring the loyalty of Japanese Americans and commemorating the Japanese American heroism and sacrifice during World War II. The numbers and names of Japanese American internment are clearly inscribed in the monument. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

America's ethnic and cultural diversity by preserving, interpreting and sharing the experience of Japanese Americans," implies the emergence of Japanese American consciousness. Recently, Japanese Americans initiated a political campaign asking the federal government to construct the Japanese American Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was successful. In all these endeavors, Asian Americans have exemplified how to sustain ethnic identity in the "memory community" of multicultural America.

On the other hand, the Asian American community had grown dramatically in the past three decades, vastly differing from that of the late 1960s. In 1970, there were only 1.5 million Asian Americans, almost entirely concentrated in Hawaii and California. By 1980, there were 3.7 million, and in 1990, 7.9 million --with major Asian communities in New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and other states except Hawaii and California. But the changes of Asian Americans during the past thirty years have not been simply demographic. Their social-economic status has also changed greatly. By the 1980s, despite being a tiny fraction, less than 3 percent of the population, Asian Americans made up 9 to 25 percent of those who attend enter classes at Harvard, Stanford, MIT, the University of California at Berkeley, Princeton, and the California Institute of Technology.¹¹ With regard to every aspect of education typically treated as measure of success, such as schooling, grades, performance on standardized tests, and fields of study, Asian Americans are regarded as a "Model Minority."

Figure 1: Median Family Income by Race in the United States (2000)



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.

Furthermore, the political landscape has transformed due to the influx of new immigrants and new emergence of young professionals as a vital new force, which contributes to a great upsurge of Asian American consciousness. Chinese Americans, the largest Asian American group, through economic and educational success in the postwar era, have been contributing to a rise of their own identity as Americans. For example, to foster a deeper understanding of America's diverse

Picture 4: "Toward A More Perfect Union"



The exhibits of the Chinese Americans Historical Museum located in the city center of San Francisco illustrate the commitment of Chinese Americans in the building of a multicultural society. The main theme of the museum is "Toward A More Perfect Union," which symbolizes the efforts of Chinese American participation in a diversified society. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

heritage by researching, preserving, and sharing the history and rich cultural legacy, Chinese American historical museums were established in the city centers of San Francisco and New York in the early 1980s. In recent years, Chinese Americans have started a political campaign asking the U.S. government to apologize its enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1882, which subsequently led the California Assemle to pass a resolution to apologize its first discriminatory laws against the Chinese in the U.S history.¹² All these efforts demonstrate that Chinese American consciousness has emerged.

2. A “Forgotten Holocaust”--Chinese American Remembrance of World War II

In addition to the collective identity formation, numerous Asian American grassroots campaigns were waged throughout the 1980s.¹³ Deeply inspired by the Japanese American redress movement, Chinese Americans initiated various campaigns to integrate World War II in China, the Sino-Japanese War into the community of American public memory. These efforts ushered in a significant change in the image of Asian Americans and visibility of Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans in the social and political life of the United States.

To respond societal and international challenges, Chinese Americans need both a political strategy and a new ideological vision. Politically, they must find ways to expand democracy by creating new grassroots formation and building new pan-ethnic coalitions to reaffirm the commitment to participatory democracy. Thus, sharing the memory of World War II in Asia becomes a common bond for Asian Americans to unite the community and other groups as well. After the 1980s, Chinese Americans began to play an increasingly visible role in channeling the memory of World War II in the United States.

Coinciding with the emergence of Japanese textbook controversy in the 1980s, Chinese Americans staged protests against Japan’s war crimes during this period.¹⁴ Galvanized by the controversy over war history in Japan, many groups located in New York, California, and Canada formed global networking organizations for preserving the history of World War II in Asia. When the American veterans’ movement for Japan’s war redress started in the 1980s, a number of Chinese American organizations and social groups were founded, for example, the Chinese Alliance for Memorial and Justice (New York, 1987), the Alliance in Memory of Victims of the Nanking Massacre (New York, 1991), the Alliance for Preserving the Truth of the Sino-Japanese War (based in California, 1992), the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia (based in U.S. and Canada, 1994), and the Association for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia (based in U.S., and Canada, 1995), etc. These grassroots were created to urge the general public in the United States to force the Japanese government to shoulder responsibility for its wartime atrocities and compensation to the victims.

As we delve into the vitality of Chinese American grassroots, one question comes: Why were these groups able to develop and grow during the 1980s? One

important reason is the internationalization of Japanese textbook in the 1980s. Another critical factor is also worth mentioning. That is the battle in China has been hardly noticed in American public memory in the postwar era. This is mainly due to America's postwar strategy. Chinese communist victory in 1949 and U.S. postwar global strategy, particularly its policy of containment of China by military, political and economic means led to America's ignorance of China's role in World War II history. Notably, the beginning of the cold war in East Asia in the 1950s drastically transformed the geopolitical landscape in the Asia Pacific region. Viewing a threat from communism in Asia, the United States formed a military alliance with its former adversary--Japan at the end of the occupation. So far as the war against Japan could be linked, it is no wonder that many Americans wondered whether their country had fought the right enemy all alone. In 1994, when CBS conducted a survey with the question, "What countries did the United States fight against in World War II?," those who responded Germany formed the largest group, at 39 percent, compared with 22 percent who answered Japan.¹⁵ Indeed, when the war in Asia is remembered, it is America's war against Japan that began with Pearl Harbor and ended with the atomic bombs. American historian Sheila Johnson counted thirty-four *New York Times* bestsellers dealing with Japan between 1942 and 1987. Many of them covered the war years, hardly any dealt with the war in China.¹⁶ Thus the military conflict between China and Japan, the Sino-Japanese War which started from the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and escalated into full-scale war after the Marco Polo Incident of 1937, occupied a remote secondary place for most Americans. It should be noted that before the United States and Japan exploded in a military clash in the Pacific, more than half a million Japanese soldiers had already become casualties in China, with nearly two hundred thousand dead. The loss on the Chinese side, both military and civilian, was in the millions.

The political climate helps explain the waning of the Sino-Japanese War in American public memory. It was not until the early 1970s, when the political environment between the United States and China warmed up, that some American scholars began to publish the American role in the Sino-Japanese War. Probably the first popular history in the postwar United States on the war in China was Barbara Tuchman's *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*.¹⁷ This Pulitzer Prize winning book signaled the return of China in popular historical consciousness in America although it was largely set in the American war against Japan.

Even more importantly, geopolitical calculation always plays a critical role for politicians as they balance history with contemporary interests. The historic visit by President Richard Nixon in 1972 proved to be a turning point of sorts in America's knowledge of China in general, and public memory of the war in China in particular. After diplomatic relations between the United States and China were normalized in 1979, China appeared from the American public memory in the 1980s. During this period, many American journalists and scholars worked

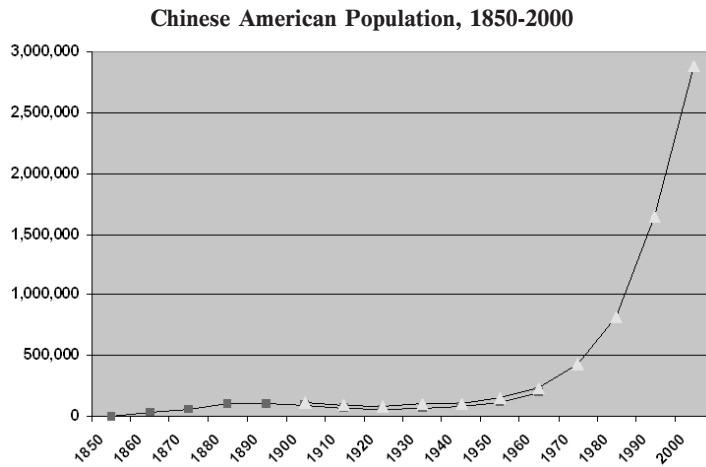
together to publish a journalistic record about the war in China.¹⁸ At the same time, During this time, various movies including portrayal of the war in China were made in Hollywood and reached a wide audience. *The Last Emperor* directed by an Italian Bernard Bertolucci gave unprecedented focus to the Japanese invasion and occupation of northeast China. Another well-known movie *Empire of the Sun*, directed by Steven Spielberg and released in 1987, gave a vivid description of Japanese invasion in Shanghai and also gave Americans another close look at the war in China. Memories of past war, therefore, are given a current touch.

Meanwhile, the changing international and domestic environments encourage Chinese American grassroots to fight for their own rights. During this period, history dispute between China and Japan which eventually led to the emerging of Sino-Japanese conflict contributed to an upsurge of Chinese American identity.¹⁹ Particularly, some Japanese high officials' repeated denials of Japan's wartime crimes and moral responsibilities provoked the profound resentment in Chinese American community. The outrage within the Chinese Americans intensified when then Congressman Ishihara Shintaro, currently serving as governor of Tokyo, stated in the public that the Nanjing Massacre was totally a lie. Even then Minister of Justice Nagao Shigeto proclaimed in a media interview that Japan's war was to "liberate East Asia" and "the Nanking Incident was just a fabrication."²⁰ The Japanese nationalists' denial of the Nanjing Massacre and their statement that the massacre was "the greatest lie of the 20th century" further infuriated the Chinese people. Chinese Americans denounced these statements in protests in New York and San Francisco. But Japanese denials also prompted them to consider other responses to Japan's historical amnesia.

On the other hand, the rapid development of globalization in the 1990s led to the influx of new immigrants to the United States, i.e. the emergence of a high percentage of foreign-born Americans. As Figure 2 shows, a large number of Chinese Americans were not born in the United States. Among those were a large number who achieved success in the high-tech business and academia. They became a strong influence on U.S.-China relations.²¹ In their memory, no Asian peoples had suffered from Japanese tyranny as much as the Chinese had. From the Chinese American perspective, the war in Asia, particularly the Sino-Japanese War, matched and even exceeded the casualties and destruction on the whole European front. Moreover, Japan's wartime crimes, such as the Nanjing Massacre, biological warfare and human experiments of Unit 731, so-called "comfort women" and the slave labor, etc. were especially abhorrent and rank as one of the modern era's most horrifying acts of barbarism and inhumanity. Japan's war crimes though still loomed painfully large in Chinese American memory, seemed almost to have disappeared into a black hole of oblivion in the memory of the rest of the world.

When history dispute heatedly erupted in the 1990s between China, Japan, and the United States,²² the memory of World War II in Chinese American community entered a new phase in 1997, when the Chinese American writer Iris

Figure 2: Increase of Chinese American Population (1850-2000)

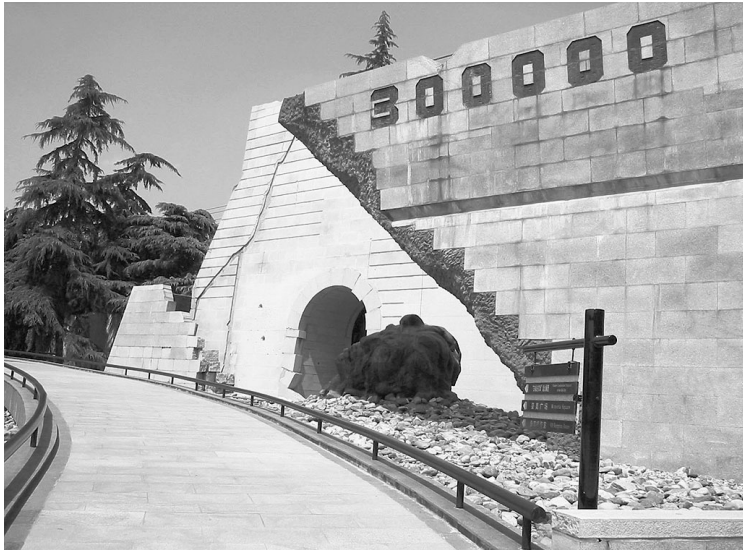


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Chang published *The Rape of Nanking*.²³ The book, despite its problematic use of sources and often somewhat emotional tone, made the *New York Times* bestseller list due to the overwhelming support of Asian American groups. The book's subtitle, *The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, reflects the belief among many that the Asian dimension of the war has been forgotten in the United States. How could Chinese Americans keep the memory alive in order to arouse public concern in the United States?

In the late 1990s, Chinese Americans began their campaign of public education for the "forgotten holocaust" in Asia. In the San Francisco Bay Area, a social group, the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia, opened a series of exhibits on Japanese wartime atrocities at the Old Navy Library on Treasure Island, California, in 1998. Chinese Americans, active in reviving a memory of the Chinese dimension of World War II, are a diverse group in terms of profession and background. They take an active interest in the campaign movement as part of a new ethnic pride and consciousness. Although the latter phenomenon had begun only in the late 1960s and owed its genesis to the civil rights movement, it also drew attention from Jewish American community because many Jewish Americans also suffered during World War II. While many Americans, including some Jewish Americans, question whether the Holocaust really belongs to America, it is not a coincidence that Chinese Americans, like Iris Chang, were appropriating the term to call attention to the Japanese devastation in China as an "Asian Holocaust." Now, the United States, not directly involved with the Holocaust, has built the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on Washington's most important public memorial strip, National Mall.²⁴ Chinese Americans are emulating what they considered to be the success of Jewish Americans when they call for a museum dedicated to the victims of Japan's

Picture 5: “The Rape of Nanking” in Chinese American Memory



A symbolic memorial in the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum, Nanjing, China, is to commemorate the Chinese ordeal in the Sino-Japanese War. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

aggression in Asia, the Chinese Holocaust Museum of the United States, which was opened to public in San Francisco Bay area in 2000.

Grassroots support for Chinese American demands found allies in other groups, such as American former POWs, Jewish and other Asian American organizations. In 1999, Mike Honda, a Japanese American assemblyman in California, spearheaded legislation that would allow former victims of wartime Japanese corporations to sue their American subsidiaries in Californian courts. Since then he has been elected as member of U.S. Congress and continues to champion the cause of former POWs and the rights for the victims of the war in Asia. In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives even passed a resolution demanding an official apology of Japanese government for its wartime crimes symbolized by the so-called “comfort women.”²⁵ This bill was introduced by Congressman Mike Honda and overwhelmingly supported by Korean Americans, Chinese Americans, and American veterans groups.

To Chinese Americans, Japan’s wartime atrocity--“the Chinese Holocaust,” is so unprecedented in history that it was as horrific and devastating as the Jewish Holocaust. Whereas the Jewish Holocaust has been integrated into World War II history and social science courses taught in high schools in the United States, “the Chinese Holocaust”, however, is relatively unknown to American young generation. Chinese Americans’ political campaign to integrate the war in China into the World War II history curriculum in U.S. high schools led the San Francisco Board of Education to adopt a resolution to enhance coverage of the Asian aspect of World War II in the school curriculum. Most importantly, the

participation of other Asian groups including Japanese Americans in these efforts can also be explained by the newly emerging Asian American identity in the United States and justified by a sense of the responsibility of democratic citizenship. In early 1999, the Japanese-American Citizens League in San Francisco adopted a resolution supporting the victims of Japan's wartime atrocities in China since they considered that Japanese Americans were also innocent victims of World War II.

At present, a large-scale museum to commemorate the "Asian Holocaust" is under preparation. The grassroots founded World War II in Asia Memorial Foundation, aiming to build a museum to commemorate all the victims who suffered and died under the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II in Asia. According to the committee's working plan, the museum includes four halls, the Permanent Exhibition Hall, Special Exhibition Hall, Temporary Exhibition Hall, and the Hall of Remembrance. The Permanent Hall will be divided into five parts: (1) China Hall, commemorating Chinese wartime experiences; (2) East Asia Hall, focusing on the wartime experiences of Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, (3) Southeast Asia Hall, covering the wartime experiences of Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with sections devoted to Singapore, Vietnam, and Indochina; (4) Prisoner of War and Internee Hall, detailing the experiences of American, Australian, British, Chinese, Dutch, French, Filipino, and New Zealand prisoners and internees; and (5) Hall of Bacteriological Warfare by Unit 731 and Unit 100, in addition to a Special Exhibition Hall devoted to the Nanjing Massacre, designed for "the most terrible massacre in human history at one time in one city" and a Hall of Remembrance devoted to the nation's memorial for "the victims of the holocaust in the Pacific."²⁶ Their recent campaign, though the result is still uncertain, has shown that to create a shared memory symbolized by the "forgotten holocaust" in Asia encourages Asian Americans to enhance their ethnic identity to "preserve the history of World War II in Asia" in the memory community of multicultural America. Congressman Mike Honda viewed redress for the war victims as "a basic human rights issue" and stressed, "We are supporting these people (Chinese Americans) to fight for justice."²⁷ To Asian Americans, preserving World War II history in Asia and sharing their experiences is intended to contribute to American political democracy. Undeniably, Asian or Chinese American campaign challenges the memory hegemony of American society and causes societal reverberations as well as international repercussions.

Overall, the Chinese American campaign in American society echoes significant themes we have encountered earlier: the rise of Chinese American consciousness, participatory democracy, history education and sharing memory. Why were these concepts so important to Chinese Americans? What did they mean? And what do they still have relevance for Asia American community and American society in general today?

Picture 6: Chinese American Memory and Identity



The exhibit in the San Francisco Office of Chinese American grassroots organization, Alliance for Preserving the Truth of Sino-Japanese War illustrates that the memory of the Nanjing Massacre plays a significant role in the construction of Chinese American identity. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

3. Building a Common Ground: Challenge of History in a Global Era

The latter half of the twentieth century saw a dramatic growth in immigration to the United States, which has transformed the Asian American community. Globalization has a power of combined effect on immigration flows and it also accelerates the migration of memory. As this paper has shown, the increasing awareness of ethnic identity and a combination of international environments have contributed to a greater recognition of the Chinese or Asian dimension of World War II in Asia in American public memory. It is therefore not surprising that changes of international conditions and shifts of geopolitics have helped set up new frameworks of remembrance of World War II in America. The emergence of the trans-Pacific memory is unproblematic on the issue of the war. However, it causes profound societal repercussions in American society and casts a dark shadow in the U.S. relations with its East Asian countries.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Asian American groups demanding reparations for war victims demonstrated in San Francisco. Their activities aroused deep concern in both the Japanese and American governments. Thomas S. Foley, then U.S. ambassador to Japan, explained that former POWs and others had no basis to seek reparations because the United States and Japan had waived all claims against each other under the peace treaty. An editorial in the *New York Times* pointed out that the U.S.-Japan alliance helped Japan's economic rebirth, but the U.S. strategy played a significant role in fostering Japan's historical amnesia.²⁸ Meanwhile, an editorial in the *Japan Times* stated that the treaty enabled Japan to rejoin the international community, helped strengthen its economic ties with other Asian countries, and gave it a foothold for postwar economic reconstruction. Japan should use its alliance with the United States as an anchor to increase bilateral cooperation in the fields of politics and economy, while seeking long-term stability in its relations with its neighboring countries China and South Korea to push active diplomacy in East Asia.²⁹ Thus how to remove historical obstacles and overcome the shadows of the past to reach a common ground for political and economic stability and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region is indispensable for the United States, Japan, and China as well.

According to a survey carried out in 2001, slightly more than half of Californians insisted that Japan owed the United States an apology for World War II crimes, although 59 percent of the respondents also said the United States should not apologize for the atomic bombs on Japan.³⁰ Meanwhile, while in answer to a question from a fifty-one-year-old man from Hiroshima who asked how many times Japan should apologize to China, then Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji responded in conversations with Japanese citizens on a TBS television program, "Japan has never apologized to the Chinese people for its wartime aggression in any of the official documents." He added, "China will not keep demanding apologies from Japan, but we want you to consider that."³¹

Picture 7: Peace for the World



The Peace Monument in the Nagasaki Peace Memorial Park, given by Chinese Chairman Hu Yaoban during his visit to Nagasaki city in 1989, demonstrates Chinese and Japanese commitment to find a road toward historical reconciliation. (Photograph by Xiaohua Ma)

Over sixty years have elapsed after the end of World War II. Rather than decreasing the conflicts, however, as the apology debate shows, the gap between China, Japan, and the United States has been further intensified, and to some extent it has reinforced the enmity and mistrust associated with their different positions during the war. The disputes surrounding the remembrance of World War II in Asia lead one to ask if it is possible for the people in the Asia Pacific region to build a common ground for sharing memories of the war.

With regard to the debate on the issue of “sharing memory,” Harvard historian Iriye Akira points out that history is not the exclusive product of one country, but “a shared product of human beings.”³² How can history, a “shared product of human beings,” be shared in the 21st century? And what kind of role should historians play in the process of educating the younger generations to interpret this “shared product?” To be sure, how to educate people to comprehend this “shared product of human beings” in a global era is not only an important issue for the people in the Asia Pacific region, but also is a new challenge for historians in the world to confront.

Note:

The author would like to thank Professor Ricardo T. Jose’s valuable comments for this paper.

Notes

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8. Chester Tanaka, *Go for Broke: A Pictorial History of the Japanese American 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team* (Richmond, CA.: JACP, 1982), 171.
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12. See the website of China News, June 21, 2010, <<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/hr/hr-mzhrxw/news/2010/06-21/2352912.shtml>>
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