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The Anti-Japanese Resistance War, Chinese Patriotism and Free Speech. How Can We Forgive Japan?

Yu Jie

Translated by Nanyan Guo

Introduction

The Resistance War of 1937-1945 is the centerpiece of contemporary Chinese nationalism and contention over war memory has long exacerbated China-Japan frictions. The present blogged article by the dissident Christian writer Yu Jie, building on an earlier statement by literary critic Ge Hongbing, is both a rare challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's nationalist orthodoxy on the war by a China-based author, and a plea for Chinese reconciliation with Japan. Who are the victims, and who the assailants in the Resistance War? Specifically, were Chinese alone victims? And what is the relationship between representations of the Resistance War and questions of Chinese nationalism and free speech? Yu Jie and Ge Hongbing offer controversial answers to these and other questions. Looking beyond the Japanese government's failure to repent for its war crimes, Yu insists that reconciliation need not require repentance and underlines instead both the shared nationalism of the two parties to the war and the importance of reconciliation for both nations. This is part of a continuing Japan Focus series on reconciliation and community in Northeast Asia of which the most recent contribution is Mel Gurtov's [Reconciling Japan and China](#) MS

Recently, the famous literature critic Ge Hongbing posted an article in his personal blog 'China: How Should World War II Be Commemorated'. When the article was re-posted elsewhere, the title was changed to 'China's Purpose in Commemorating the Anti-Japan War is Promoting Revenge'. The controversial element in this article is Ge's view that the Japanese people are also victims of the war, and that China's revenge-centered education is the main voice commemorating WWII in the form of anti-Japan propaganda.

Within days of its publication, Ge Hongbing received more than seven hundred internet messages cursing its author. Some netizens lashed out at Ge's grandfather, 'the infamous traitor Ge Riren' who 'was executed by the National Government in 1946 and his property confiscated.' 'Ge's father Ge Bennong named his son Hongbing because he wanted to apologize to the Chinese people so as to enable the Ge family to live a new life without further suppression.'

Some people even published Ge Hongbing's address and telephone number, and launched a campaign to 'write critical letters to his workplace, to phone and e-mail him', branding him a traitor to the Chinese race.' It was said that some enraged jingoists even planned to go en masse to Shanghai University to call for his expulsion from his university post.

Under enormous pressure from the 'will of the netizens' (wangluo minyi), Ge Hongbing was forced to withdraw his article and apologize for it. Thus, the so-called 'will of the netizens' mercilessly deprived such a scholar of his freedom of speech in the belief that they thereby 'kept the country's dignity intact'.

In terms of Sino-Japan relations and how China should commemorate the Anti-Japan War, some of my views overlap with those of Ge and some differ. However, in face of the violent waves of the 'will of the netizens', I am willing to stand by Ge Hongbing, and with him to endure insults and attacks. The French thinker Voltaire once said, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' Ge Hongbing's freedom of speech should never be taken away, neither by the government, nor by the so-called 'correct majority'. When patriotism (aiguo) is regarded as the highest value, becoming a mantra and an excuse to persecute others, I would not like to call myself a 'patriot', but rather would prefer to be categorized as a 'non-patriot'.

Under today's political circumstances, China-Japan relations have become highly sensitive. 'Anti-Japan' emotions have been incited constantly in recent years, and have been established as an unchallenged value of 'political correctness'. That is because of Japan's continuing provocations, according to some people. In fact, since the 1990s, Japan did no more than what they did in previous decades. Japanese prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni Shrine and the re-writing of history textbooks by the right wing did not start in the 1990s. Even during the 'honeymoon' between China and Japan in the 1980s, Japan's right wing was equally active. Former Prime Minister Nakasone, who the Chinese government praised as 'an old friend of the Chinese people', visited Yasukuni many times. Then, why did we hear no criticism from the Chinese government and the people? [1]

So, what is the reason behind the increasingly feverish anti-Japan emotions? My personal analysis is that, firstly, after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, the Chinese Communist government rapidly changed its education policy and strategy. It no longer defended to the death the rotten ideology of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism, but rather shifted to the use of nationalism in order to legitimize its reign. Promoting nationalism requires an 'enemy' to be identified, as in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), to help shift citizens' frustration with the domestic political situation and provide justification for the expansion of the power of rulers. Therefore, Japan, which fought terrible wars with China in modern history, and is seriously deficient in regretting its war history, became a useful target. We know that the Chinese government strongly wishes Japanese politicians to visit Yasukuni. If Japanese politicians were to stop their visits, the Chinese government would lose its pretext for fanning fanatical nationalism.



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Secondly, the economic positions of China and Japan have been gradually changing since China's economy took off in the 1990s. In the mid-1970s, because China had to obtain loans and technology from Japan, China actively displayed friendship to Japan, and agreed to treat historical issues 'roughly' without paying attention to details, and maintain a 'forward-looking' attitude. However, in the mid-1990s, when China became richer and more confident as a place for foreign investors to compete, the importance of Japanese investments and loans declined. Then, it eventually became possible to say 'No' to Japan. Whether to say 'Yes' or 'No' is not based on principles of justice and respect for historical truth, but rather is based on the government's utilitarianism.

There is no real public opinion in China. So-called 'public opinion' is all under state control, guidance and manipulation. If public opinion is not welcomed by the government, it will be immediately erased. If an opinion conforms to government views, then it will be encouraged. For instance, the government does not allow any street protest regardless of the reason, yet anti-Japanese protests alone were 'freely' conducted right in front of the military police.



2005 Beijing demonstration calls for boycott of Japanese goods

Anti-Japan, anti-America, and anti-Taiwan are 'puppet plays' directed by the Chinese Communist government and performed by some citizens. This view may hurt some patriots' self-respect. But, I would like to ask one question: if Chinese citizens have no right to protest against forcible confiscation of their property and land for new developments, but are given rights to 'freely' abuse Japan, the US and Taiwan, is not this 'freedom' perverted? If anyone who criticizes irrational 'patriotism' is violently threatened, then there is no foundation of justice behind patriotism.

Nationalism is a double-edged sword. By inciting anti-Japanese sentiments, the Chinese Communist government forces a great number of innocent young people to hate Japan (I myself was a victim of the education and propaganda, and was full of hatred of Japan. This can be seen in my early writings.). But, this cannot really weaken a rival or make us stronger. In the past, the Boxer Rebellion's blind xenophobia brought disaster to China. But, we Chinese have not learned any lesson from the lost blood. The same mentality and behavior is still deeply embedded in many people's hearts. Even self-proclaimed 'pursuers of democracy and liberty' also take anti-Japan thought as useful resources. Self-professed human rights activists Fan Yafeng, Guo Feixiong and Chen Yongpu all participated in and planned anti-Japan activities. They tried to establish a democratic and constitutional government through nationalistic movements. This kind of thinking will not lead anywhere, but will push China into further misery.

I strongly believe that one day the ice between China and Japan will be broken and the two countries will eventually reconcile. The confrontation, the gap and the

hatred between China and Japan benefit neither in the long run. Currently, the East Asia region is a powder keg, which may explode at any time. Conflicts between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, collisions between China and Japan, disputes between South Korea and Japan, nuclear arms of North Korea, etc. all constitute serious dangers in this region. If China and Japan can wholeheartedly establish peace and friendship, which takes root in people's hearts, then the two countries can create long-lasting stability and prosperity in Asia.

When can this paradigm shift take place? The relations between France and Germany, and between Britain and Germany, are models for improving China-Japan relations. Many people think that the reason France and Britain forgave Germany is because the prime minister of West Germany Willy Brandt fell to his knees to show his remorse.

But Ge Hongbing does not think so. He writes,

"All the crimes committed by Germany can never be compensated by simply 'falling to the knees'. Behind forgiving Germany is the victims' tolerance and understanding. In the end, it is China that should be responsible for resolving the problems between China and Japan. Only China's forgiveness of Japan can bring real reconciliation between them. My basic opinion is that Japan's attitudes, no matter what, should not become a condition for reconciliation. I do not mean that we should forget Japanese crimes. I mean that Japan is also deeply trapped by its grave crimes, and the Japanese need our forgiveness."

I agree with Ge. It is not difficult to love those who are lovable. But it elevates one to love those who are not lovable. We certainly cannot feel Japan 'lovable', but it is God's requirement to love our unlovable neighbors. It is also a sign of elevation of our humanity.

It is truly difficult to ask the Chinese to love or forgive the Japanese. But, is it easy to ask Chinese to love our own people? Chinese culture emphasizes revenge as a common sense for a true man. Historically, forgiveness has always been regarded as a negative value. The Chinese Communist government seized power and controlled its people by using 'hatred' as a psychological weapon, just as Ge Hongbing points out, 'Since 1949 all forms of education in China are "hatred"-centered. Hatred of imperialism, aiming at the United States and Japan, for the sake of justifying the governing party; hatred between the exploiting class and the exploited class, and then hatred between those who managed and governed and those who were managed and governed. These kinds of hatred education make the Chinese unable to forgive. If the Chinese cannot forgive, then there will never be real reconciliation with Japan.' If we are only capable of hating, we will be enslaved by hatred. Those who encourage us to hate are the manipulators of puppet plays.

A sign of the maturity of a people is its ability to have sufficient confidence to forgive. We should love and forgive the Japanese without asking them to love and forgive first. Although we were victims, we should free ourselves from the chain of hatred earlier than our assailants. We shall be able to choose to look at Japan and other 'enemies' compassionately and sympathetically from their perspectives. As victims, we shall be able to gain a state higher than that of the perpetrators through our respect for God. Love and forgiveness do not equal hatred; they are more noble than that. Here, Ge Hongbing presents an unprecedented idea: 'I would like to propose an extreme opinion: that we forgive Japan even though the Japanese do not regret their crime and do not provide compensation. We should also forgive perpetrators. Only when the Chinese forgive the Japanese will we be able to help the Japanese realize their mistakes. A race full of hatred will never be accepted by the international community. China has provided the world an image of a threatening and warlike nation. For instance, the Chinese government does not want to give up the possibility of using arms to resolve problems with Taiwan. This is also a reflection of our hatred nature.' If we realize that we are all sinners, then Ge's proposal is not that new. To love others as one loves oneself should also include one's enemy. This kind of love does not require any return.

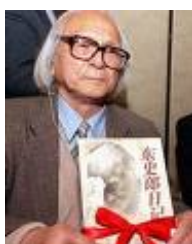
Here, my emphasis on love and forgiveness does not mean that the history of the Anti-Japan War should be concealed, or those who died during the War should be forgotten, or that the evils of aggressors should not be criticized. Forgiveness is closely related to the revelation of truth. If there is no truth, then there is no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, there is no future.

In terms of facing cruel historical truth, I do not agree with Ge's opinion that children should not be exposed to bloody historical documents. He thinks the numerous photos displayed to commemorate World War II are not beneficial to establishing the young generation's understanding of humanity and war. Their psychology and intelligence might be adversely affected. This opinion seems to derive from Ge's concern about protecting children's innocence. But this concern will actually deprive children of their right to understand human nature. If we want children to grow up healthy, we should not only provide them with sunshine but should also ask them to face the darkness of this world. In the American capital, Washington DC, the Holocaust Museum displays a replica of a Nazi concentration camp cell and torture tools. Its darkness and evil tear at peoples' hearts, and they cannot continue to watch. Many parents and teachers bring children to visit the Museum, and explain the brutal history. Because this shows what really happened in human history, children need to learn about the whole world and humankind. If we do not let them learn, they will be put into a bright 'beautiful new world' without darkness. This will not help them become wholesome.

Ge Hongbing correctly criticizes the Chinese government's commemorating of the Anti-Japan War as opposed to the 'anti-war' objective. We must protect Ge's freedom of speech, because it is the first step toward understanding ourselves. If we cannot correctly understand ourselves, then we will be unable to understand our rivals. When Athens could not accept Socrates, the final days of the city were at hand. When jingoists try to use unlawful means to suppress Ge's free speech, their patriotism is degraded to an excuse for persecuting dissidents, and those patriots are degraded to 'country-loving bandits'. The mentality of those who tried to deprive Ge of his free speech is identical to that of Japan's right wing gangs and the Nazis. One of Hitler's and Tojo Hideki's major reasons for waging World War II was to terminate different opinions.

The Anti-Japanese War is behind us. But it is not so far away. Then, how shall we commemorate it? We should depart from airing disputes for the sake of factional gains. We should show the historical truth and allow different opinions to be expressed. Moreover, we need to further investigate the evils in human nature and make people think how we can heighten our humanity. Commemorating the War should not aim at deepening hatred of Japan, but rather at seeing the terror of war committed by both Chinese and Japanese, and considering the origins of war, in order to preserve peace. Only love and forgiveness can end war. If we simply depend on ourselves, we cannot love and forgive others, let alone love and forgive the Japanese. But, if we see our sins, limits and ugliness in front of God, then it is possible to love and forgive.

Japan's 'lack of repentance' is not unique to the Japanese. This is a common illness of humankind. In terms of 'lack of repentance' China is not at all better than Japan. From the Anti-Rightist Movement (of 1957) to the Great Starvation (of 1960), from the Cultural Revolution (of 1966-1976) to June Fourth (1989), so many people's hands were stained by blood. But how many of them ever stood up to show remorse?



Azuma Shiro

Among the Japanese, there is Azuma Shiro (a Japanese soldier who acknowledged his participation in the Nanjing Massacre) who stood up. Although the Japanese are forgetful, are not we too using our forgetfulness to survive? In his article 'How Shall We Commemorate the Anti-Japan War Now?', scholar Liu Ning

writes, 'Fairly speaking, the Japanese have not fully recognized their responsibility for their war crimes and have not sufficiently repented. They take the problems in recognition of history as political and diplomatic problems, and tend to touch on them with uncertainty. But at the same time, we must see that we only ask others to be honest about history, but seldom do so ourselves.' This reflection is cool-headed and sharp.

Our history, including the history of the Anti-Japanese War, is already incoherent and disjointed, with no true face. In China, the War has been distorted as one led by the Communist Party. The National Government, which played the major role in the War, was belittled and painted ugly. In fact, throughout the war, Mao Zedong was hiding in Yan'an directing the Communist Party to plant and sell opium and was expanding his army, meddling in the war. Later, Mao openly thanked visiting Japanese politicians for Japanese army's invasion, without which the Party would not have revived and taken power. But in the history textbook written by the Communist Party, Mao was praised as an anti-Japan hero, and the small 'Pingxingguan Battle' (of 1937 pitting Communist versus Japanese forces) is hailed as a major turning point in the War. However, the truth is that Jiang Jieshi was the real hero in the War, leading the National Government to fight extremely difficult battles for fourteen years. Yet the Chinese Communist Party painted him as the culprit claiming that he failed to resist the Japanese and enjoyed the harvest of others. Are not such lies identical to the Japanese right's denial of the Nanjing Massacre and the comfort women issues?

Of course we must love and forgive the majority of the Japanese and tell them the historical truth. At the same time, we ourselves also must search for historical truth. Under the hindrance of Chinese official ideology, there has been no first-class independently-researched book on the Anti-Japanese War in mainland China. Nor has any independent non-governmental organization studied and commemorated the War. Liu Ning points out, 'We do not have any public service to commemorate the war dead like Japan's "Memorial Services for the War Dead" (Senbotsusha kitokai) or South Korea's "Liberation Day", only abstract numbers such as 35 million died and were injured during the War, and 300,000 were killed during the Nanjing Massacre. We are unable to provide precise numbers of how many were killed and injured, let alone remember the victims' names. Moreover, it has been 62 years since the War ended and we still have not had any book that can rival Professor Wu Xiangxiang's authoritative History of the Second China-Japan War published in Taiwan, which looks at the War from both the perspective of both the enemy's logistical position and the battlefield. This shames our academic community. In this sense, the best way to commemorate the War is to ask ourselves how much we know about the War.' Can we face this sharp question?

Who is responsible for this situation? Is not the Chinese Communist Party, which on one hand has destroyed various war remains and persecuted the heroes of the War, and on the other has promoted hatred while developing a distorted nationalism? Scholar Wang Kang produces many examples of the Chinese Communist government's destruction of war remains and contempt for those who sacrificed their lives during the War in his article 'The First Year of Our Spirit: Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Anti-Japan War'. For instance, the National Government spent enormous sums to build a 'Shrine for the War Dead' (*zhonglie ci*) at Mount Hengshan in Hunan in 1943 in order to mourn the war dead and encourage fighting spirit. But in 1950, the new government ordered the shrine destroyed by fire and ax along with all 'counter-revolutionary remains' in Hunan Province. In the Nanshan area of the wartime capital, Chongqing, there were 'Air Force graves', a site where more than 200 bodies of Chinese and American pilots were buried. When the Korea War started, the graves were vandalized, the monuments and coffins were destroyed, and the land was later used to build a dining hall for the People's Commune. The bodies were burned and used as fertilizer. General Zhang Zhizhong was the highest ranked officer to die in battle, but in the book War Records of Zhongyuan's History compiled by the Wuhan Army District published in October 1972, it is simply written that commander in chief General Zhang Zhizhong of the 33rd corps of Jiang Jieshi's army was killed by a Japanese soldier.' Such writing could hurt the heart of General Zhang if he knew it now.

Another strange phenomenon appeared. How is it that so many 'patriots' did not react to such destruction and contempt, but were easily incited by a few sentences written by Ge Hongbing? Those jingoists hate him so much that they could eat him and burn him. The answer is pretty simple. They are all manipulated by the government. The state does not tolerate any criticism; if someone criticizes the government, they are severely punished. But Ge Hongbing is just an ordinary person. Attacking him incurs no risk, but rather allows one to display 'sublime patriotic spirit'. How cheap, easy and wise such patriotism is!

Today, in mainland China, not only is research on the Nanjing Massacre taboo, but studies of the Anti-Rightist Movement (of 1957), the Cultural Revolution and June Fourth Movement (of 19889) are all prohibited. The Chinese who were killed by foreign forces could be remembered at the government's pleasure, but those who were killed by their own government could not be remembered. Therefore, under the circumstances in which there is no freedom to speak, to publish or to have religious belief, and when there is no democratic and constitutional political system, we lack the freedom to express the truth in history and reality. Therefore we cannot really commemorate the Anti-Japanese War. Of course, we are unable to bring up a transcendent value that will lead us to love and forgive the Japanese.

July 16, 2007.

Note

[1] In fact Nakasone made a public visit to Yasukuni Shrine as Prime Minister only once. Following Chinese government protests, he made no further public visit while serving as Prime Minister. (MS)

This is a slightly abbreviated translation of Yu Jie's Article posted at New Century on July 18, 2007.

Ge Hongbing is a Shanghai-based novelist and critic.

Yu Jie, a well-known Beijing-based writer and outspoken social and political critic, is the author of numerous books. His first collection of essays Huo yu bing ("Fire And Ice") became a bestseller in China in 1998. Other well-known books include Tiewu zhong de nahan ("Screams from the Iron House") and Shuo Haishi Bu Shuo ("To Speak Or Not To Speak"). In his book, Jujue huangyan ("Rejecting Lies"), Yu reflected on the role of China's intellectuals in the post-Tiananmen era. Yu has frequently called for protection of freedom of speech and safeguarding of human rights. In a controversial 1994 article, Yu called for the removal of Mao Zedong's corpse from the Mao Mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. In 2005, Yu said of the memorial to Japan's war dead: "We criticize the Yasukuni Shrine, but we have Mao Zedong's shrine in the middle of Beijing, which is our own Yasukuni. This is a shame to me, because Mao Zedong killed more Chinese than the Japanese did. Until we are able to recognize our own problems, the Japanese won't take us seriously." Yu, a founder of the Chinese branch of the writers' union PEN, supported the American war in Iraq. He was arrested and detained in 2005. On May 11, 2006, Yu met with President Bush and Vice President Cheney to call for support for China's underground Christians. "We are essentially different from the democratic fighters in the past because we have guidance from God. We want to bring changes to China through the love and justice of God and through nonviolent means," he told the President.

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