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Back to the Future: Shinto, Ise and Japan's New Moral Education

A small organization, little known to the public, has helped restore much of Japan's controversial past – and it is only getting started.

David McNeill

Immaculate and ramrod straight in a crisp black suit, Japan's education minister, Shimomura Hakubun, speaks slowly and deliberately, like a schoolteacher. His brow creases with concern when he talks about Japan's diminished place in the world, its years of anemic economic growth and poorly competing universities. Mostly, though, he appears worried about the moral and spiritual decline of the nation's youth.

"The biggest problem with Japanese education is the tremendous self-deprecation of our high school students," he says in an interview at his Tokyo office. He cites an international survey in which children are asked: 'Are there times when you feel worthless?' Eighty-four percent of Japanese kids say yes - double the figure in the US, South Korea and China, he laments. "Without changing that, Japan has no future."

Shimomura's remedy for this corrosive moral decay is far-reaching: Children will be taught an expanded curriculum of moral and patriotic education and respect for Japan's national symbols, its 'unique' culture and history. Textbooks will remove "self-deprecating" views of history and references to 'disputed' war crimes. They will reflect the government point of view on key national issues, such as Japan's bitter territorial disputes with its three closest neighbors: China, Russia and South Korea.

Education reforms represent only one layer of Shimomura and his government's ambitions. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, a close political ally, wants to revise three of the country's basic modern charters: the 1946 constitution, the education law, which they both think undervalues patriotism, and the nation's security treaty with the US, which constrains Japan to a junior role. The Emperor would be returned to a more prominent place in Japanese society. The special status of Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines most of Japan's war dead including the men who led the nation to disaster in 1933-45, would be restored.

"They're trying to restore what was removed by the US occupation reforms", explains Mark R. Mullins, Director of the Japan Studies Centre at the University of Auckland. If it succeeds, the project amounts to overturning much of the existing order in Japan - a return to the past with one eye on the future.

Political Shinto

For an explanation of the core philosophy behind this project I visited an imposing black building nestling on the leafy borders of Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. The Association of Shinto Shrines, representing about 80,000 shrines, is classified as a religious administrative organization. It is also one of Japan's most powerful political lobbyists.

Many of the nation's top elected officials, including Abe and Shimomura are members of the organization's political wing, *Shinto Seiji Renmei* (officially, the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership – eschewing the word 'political' from the English title). A sister organization, the Shinto Political Alliance Diet Members' Association, boasts 240 lawmakers, including 16 out of the government's 19-member Cabinet. Abe is the Diet Association's secretary general.

Seiji Renmei sees its mission as renewing the national emphasis on "Japanese spiritual values." In principle, this means pushing for constitutional revision and patriotic and moral education, and staunchly defending conservative values in ways that seem to contradict Abe's internationalist capitalism. The Association opposes the free trade of rice and the sale of "strategic property" such as forests or lakes to non-Japanese, for instance.

Since its birth in 1969, Shinto Seiji Renmei has notched several victories in its quest to restore much of the nation's prewar political and social architecture. In 1979, it successfully lobbied the government to reinstate the practice of using imperial era names. In 2007, it won a national holiday, April 29th, honoring Japan's wartime monarch Hirohito – a day when Japanese might "look in awe at the sacred virtues of the Showa Emperor."



Over the last decade, Tokyo city has fought to impose a directive demanding that teachers lead schoolchildren in singing the *Kimigayo* national anthem – another Shinto concern. In April this year, 168 Diet members visited Yasukuni for its spring festival - the largest number since these counts began 24 years ago. "A lot more politicians now understand the importance of our views," concludes Yuzawa Yutaka, head of Shinto Seiji Renmei.

Though not a member of the Association, maverick Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro helped end the taboo on any overt show of sympathy with the militarism of the past with his six annual pilgrimages to Yasukuni, climaxing in his visit on Aug. 15, 2006 (Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's visit in 1995 had provoked such a storm of criticism abroad that most Japanese leaders stayed away till then.) Yuzawa's father, Tadashi, was Yasukuni head priest at the time. For both, it was a vindication of years of struggle. "Our stance is that it is natural for the prime minister to pay his respects at the shrine on behalf of the country." Lawmakers such as former Prime Minister Kan Naoto who refuse to go are "impertinent," he adds.

Yuzawa accepts that these visits will worsen already dangerously frayed ties with Beijing and Seoul but insists it is "not something Japan can bend on." "It relates to our culture, history and tradition," he says. "To us, Yasukuni Shrine is a god." Criticism that prime-ministerial visits confer legitimacy on the Class-A war criminals enshrined there cannot be taken seriously, he says.

"Perhaps, according to today's judgment, they might have made mistakes but back then they were doing their best for the country. In Japan, our way of thinking about the dead souls is that we don't criticize them. They were protecting the emperor, and by extension the Japanese people." That vital point, he says, is now understood by a growing number of Japanese politicians.

The Sun Goddess

The American occupation of 1945-51 ended Shinto's status as a state religion and attempted to banish its influence from Japan's public sphere, notably its emphasis on a pure racial identity linked to the emperor. The core element of this belief, ruthlessly enforced through the education system, was the emperor's divine status as a direct descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Though weakened, however, Shinto conservatives in Japan "were simply biding their time" until they could restore its rightful place in Japanese society, says Mullins.

He sees 1995 – the year of the Kobe earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo deadly gas attacks on Japan's subway - as a turning point. The two events, combined with the agonizing decline of the miracle economy, had a profound impact on the nation's confidence. "The sense after that was: 'We have so many troubles in Japan, we need to go back and get what we had,'" recalls Mullins. "There are certain people very sympathetic to that, to Shinto's restoration vision."

One of those people is Abe. In October, he became the first prime minister in 84 years to attend the most important ceremony in Shinto, the *Sengyo no Gi* at Ise shrine – a centuries old ritual in which the main shrine buildings are demolished and rebuilt. Ise is considered home to the emperor's ancestors – Amaterasu being enshrined in the inner sanctum. The highlight of the ceremony is the removal of a mythological "sacred mirror" used to lure the sun goddess out of her cave, a symbol of the legitimacy of the emperor. Abe took eight members of his cabinet along to watch.



Prime Minister Abe at Ise Shrine

Some scholars were agnostic on the visit, given that prime ministers routinely go to the shrine to show respect for Japanese traditions and culture. But others were alarmed. "In the past, Ise Jingu was the fountainhead for unifying politics and religion and national polity fundamentalism," author Yamanaka Hisashi told the *Asahi* newspaper. "Abe's act is clearly a return to the ways before World War II."

It is far from clear how much of the past, exactly, Abe and his Cabinet want to revive, or how much sway Shinto holds over them. Shimomura swats away concerns about the government's agenda. "Sections of the media have an allergy to moral education," he says. "They're sending out the wrong image that we are trying to reinstate the prewar education system." But parts of Shinto clearly sit uneasily with the modern, globalized economy the government says it is trying to build.

Yuzawa says Japan should prohibit sales of land and property to China, Japan's largest trading partner. Another possible point of conflict is free trade of agricultural products, a key demand of US negotiators in the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade talks. Traditional ties between rice cultivation and Shinto rituals make this a taboo for Shinto fundamentalists, points out historian Matthew Penney in a recent article in the *Asia-Pacific Journal*.

Mullins says this magnetic tug of the past is not unique to Japan. "I see Shinto fundamentalists as very similar to US Christian fundamentalists and Hindu neo-nationalists," he says. "It's people trying to cope with the modern world; to make it all black and white and nail it down." But he says an "ecumenical group" of like-minded conservatives is in the ascendancy in Japan, led by Shinto and Nippon Kaigi, a nationalist think-tank that advocates a return to "traditional values" and rejects Japan's "apology diplomacy" for its wartime misdeeds. "Abe's comeback has given them this sense of confidence."

Whatever happens to his government's larger agenda – much depends on Abe's economic performance – Shinto conservatives will likely continue their quiet mission to transform Japan. John Breen, a religion specialist at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, emphasizes the importance of the restoration of imperial markers on the annual calendar: State Foundation day; Culture day, marking the birthday of the Meiji emperor; the current emperor's birthday in December, and Labor thanksgiving, "marking the emperor's annual performance of the Niiname rite, a celebration of Amaterasu's gift of rice to Japan."

"The deep imperial meanings of these holidays are concealed behind innocuous names like Culture day and Labor thanksgiving," he says. But the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership is determined to restore their original titles, "and so make apparent to all their true meaning."

Retooling Shinto

Many of Shinto's earthy, animist rituals were tied to a love of nature and tradition, anchored around festivals and ceremonies honoring 'kami' (gods) found in all aspects of life.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Shinto was retooled for the modern, bureaucratic state. The first reformists purged Buddhism, made Shinto a state religion and elevated the emperor to head of state, making him the divine link in an unbroken chain going all the way back to the sun goddess.

As such, the religion became inextricably bound up with the rise of Japanese nationalism and its central tenets. The emperor had a divine right to rule Japan, which was superior to other nations. Millions of Japanese children were taught these supremacist beliefs, fuelling the clash with foreign imperialisms and Asian neighbors.

In January 1946, Emperor Hirohito famously renounced his divine status in an imperial transcript known as his "declaration of humanity". The statement, made under the US occupation, was a prelude to the rewriting of Japan's constitution the same year.

This was just a part of a profound reengineering of the Japanese state. Shinto was stripped of its public status in a bid to separate church and state along US constitutional lines. The Imperial Rescript on Education was scrapped, ending the emperor's role as the source of individual and social morality. Japan's ability to wage war was permanently renounced in Article 9 of the new constitution.

Mark Mullins, citing sociologist N.J. Demerath, calls this reengineering an example of "imperialist secularization" – the coercive, top-down removal of religion from public institutions by a foreign power. "This is very different from...the gradual decline of religion with the advance of modernization," Mullins says. Many conservatives resented the changes. When the Americans left, they fought back.

The two faces of Shinto today are present in the organization's headquarters. The affable spokesman for the religion's International Section, Iwashita Katsujii, stresses its essentially peaceful roots, its overwhelmingly benign role in the lives of millions of Japanese; its modern, internationalist outlook.

Organized beliefs can be used in any nation, he explains, for good and bad. "Religion is a very good tool to unify people toward a single goal," he says in fluent English. Iwashita is critical of political Shinto. "They misinterpret Japanese culture as nationalism."

Like many Catholics, Muslims and Jews, he is also ambiguous about the central myths of his religion. Is the story of the mirror at Ise used to lure the sun goddess Amaterasu out of her cave literal truth? Iwahashi struggles over the answer but accepts it is "scientifically impossible."

Though now constitutionally a 'symbol' of Japan, the emperor is still the central figure in the Shinto drama and conservatives still spend a great deal of energy trying to interpret his often oblique statements and actions.

One of the great debates in Shinto is about why Emperor Hirohito stopped visiting Yasukuni in 1978. Accepted wisdom is because he was upset at the decision by its head priest, Matsudaira Nagayoshi, to secretly install memorial sticks for Japan's 14 Class-A war criminals. Matsudaira fought in the war as a lieutenant commander in the navy and was a bitter critic of the US-led Tokyo war trials.

Not so, says Yuzawa.

"If (his majesty) was really against that enshrinement, he would not have sent a representative to the shrine," he points out. "He always sent an envoy."

In 2004, Hirohito's son, Emperor Akihito triggered another debate when he told Yonenaga Kunio, a member of the Tokyo board of education, that it was "desirable not to force" teachers to sing Japan's flag and national anthem in schools. Yonenaga had been enthusiastically reporting to the monarch that it was "his job" to have schoolchildren sing the anthem.

Some interpreted this incident as evidence of the current emperor's liberal leanings, but Yuzawa disagrees. "In any subject, the emperor has always tried to take a neutral stance," he says.

"In this case, Yoneyama was taking an extreme position, so his majesty was trying to show other opinions and give space for the public to discuss it. It doesn't mean he was against Mr. Yoneyama's stance, he was just giving an alternative way of thinking about it."

Where does the emperor stand on female succession? We don't know, but Shinto conservatives oppose it because allowing an empress would dilute the "purity of the imperial line," says Yuzawa. "What if a woman succeeds and marries a foreigner? Non-Japanese blood will be mixed."

Reforming Education

The cutting edge of conservative Shinto's reforms will impact on education. Half of Abe's 19-member Cabinet belongs to a parliamentary association for "reflecting" on history education, or revisionists who deny Japan's worst crimes from World War II. Education minister Shimomura Hakubun has said he wants to revoke not just the landmark 1995 Murayama Statement, expressing remorse to Asia for Japan's wartime atrocities, but even the verdicts of the US-led 1946-8 Tokyo war crimes trials.

In January, Abe revived a panel on education reform that many historians predict will put his revisionist theories into practice. One of the panel's declared aims is to demand rewrites of high school history textbooks, removing "disputed" facts. It also wants to eliminate the so-called neighboring-country clause, which gives "consideration" to Chinese and Korean sentiments about the war. "From an academic point of view, the panel's proposals are simply political interference," says Kawashima Shin, who is part of a joint, government-led history research project with Chinese historians.

(A spokesman for the Education Rebuilding Council, Wakabayashi Toru, declined to discuss the specifics of its plans)

Professors have often been drawn into such arguments. Academic conferences across Europe have wrestled for years over interpretations of World War II, and how to shape the historical memory of children. But the Asian conflicts seem rawer and more dangerous than most because they are driven by competing nationalisms centered on territorial conflicts in the world's most dynamic economic region, led by fast-rising China and South Korea, and aging Japan.

In a bid to head off diplomatic flare-ups that have threatened to spiral out of control, the three countries have agreed, often reluctantly, to build academic bridges. In 2002, Japan and South Korea created a panel of historians to exchange sources and information. The project is ongoing, despite a suspension from 2005-7 after Japan refused to use any of the research in its high school textbooks. In 2006, a wave of violent anti-Japanese protests in China pushed Tokyo to set up a joint academic commission on history issues. In the course of a decade, there have been numerous efforts, both state and private, to reassess historical issue including the most contentious issues of colonialism and war. These have resulted, for example, in the publication of a joint China-Japan-Korean history, but the controversies remain unresolved, and the joint history did not significantly affect the content of official texts in the three countries.

Ironically, says Bu Ping, who led the Chinese side of the commission, Mr. Abe was prime minister at the time. "He seems to have done a complete reversal on the need for reconciliation," says Bu, Director of the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Faced with a meltdown of Sino-Japanese relations, Abe had little choice, say many analysts. "Organizing the commission was the easy part," points out Daniel Sneider, associate director for research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. "They just agreed to meet together and talk. Now it is a little tougher."

The impact of these joint efforts appears limited. A report published by China and Japan in 2011 admits the professors abandoned attempts to "come up with a unified interpretation for every incident," let alone a joint textbook. Although the tone of Japanese history textbooks is resoundingly antiwar, they contain little detailed discussion of the most bitterly disputed events such as the rounding up of Korean and Chinese sex slaves for use in army brothels, or the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, when Japanese soldiers slaughtered civilians in the Chinese capital.

Chinese textbooks, in contrast, depict these events in graphic detail and are still, in Kawashima's words less factual accounts of what occurred in the war than deeply patriotic "narratives." Little effort is made to explain the most profound postwar changes in Japan, notably the creation of its antiwar constitution and its deep-seated pacifism. South Korean textbooks focus entirely on the nation's suffering at the hands of the Japanese colonizers, making no mention at all of the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed over 200,000 people – including tens of thousands of Japan-based Koreans.

Conservative historians in Japan have long opposed these joint projects for contributing to what the government now calls "self-torturing views of history." Even mainstream scholars accept the difficulties. "It's relatively easy for Korea, China and Japan to have similar interpretations of the middle ages," points out Kotani Tetsuo, a research fellow at the government-linked Japan Institute of International Affairs. "When it comes to the 20th century, however, we just can't have a consensus."

But Sneider, who has written extensively on the textbook controversy, says the projects have been valuable. "They created relationships among historians on all three sides. That network is important." Bu agrees: "Chinese scholars used to have limited knowledge about Japan and these textbooks, and there were a lot of misconceptions. Many thought the Japanese hadn't changed since the war. I think more now understand that Japan is a complicated place and that not everyone is right-wing."

Years of academic exchanges and debate have also had one other important impact, says Kawashima: Historians concur on most of the fundamental facts. One outcome of the Abe proposals could be to destroy this hard-won middle ground by allowing outliers, known in Japan as "maboroshi-ha" (illusion school), a bigger say in the debate, he fears. "There are thousands of historians in Japan and most agree that there was a Nanjing Massacre, but a handful don't. If they're allowed to say, "these facts have not been established," the process will completely stall.

These tensions are likely to sharpen this year now that Abe's government has control over both houses of parliament and more power to push his reforms. Seoul and Beijing have already voiced their worries. South Korea's new ambassador to Japan, Lee Byung Ki, said he wants to expand academic ties and extend the joint history project as a way to fight Abe's influence.

Whatever happens in the political world, Bu urges, serious historians must persevere. "Germany and France have been struggling with these issues for decades," he points out. "We've had a few years."

David McNeill writes for [The Independent](#) and other publications, including [The Irish Times](#), [The Economist](#) and [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#). He is an Asia-Pacific Journal coordinator and coauthor of [Strong in the Rain: Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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