

Asia bends history to fit national myths

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Rewriting the past

HONG KONG History is a two-edged sword. Almost 60 years after the 35-year Japanese occupation of Korea, the issue of collaboration with the Japanese is roiling South Korean politics and bringing some embarrassing reminders. But it is not just Koreans who could benefit from looking back at what actually happened in Asia before and during the Pacific war, rather than pretending that all were part of heroic struggles against the Japanese.

In South Korea, nationalism is especially directed at Japan, whose crimes as occupier are forever being recalled. A leader of the governing Uri party has had to quit for allegedly trying to cover up the fact that his father had served in the Japanese military police.

This fracas has served as a reminder, however, that the relationship was always ambiguous. Japan was a harsh colonizer but also brought education, railways and industry. So it was not surprising that an ambitious Park Chung Hee assumed a Japanese name and graduated from a Japanese military academy in Manchuria in 1944. As President Park, his subsequent pivotal contribution to South Korean modernization is revered. So could the great Korean patriot have also been a collaborator? History says he was both.

China surpasses Korea when it comes to reminders of the war and Japanese brutality. Beijing never loses an opportunity to remind Chinese people of the Nanjing massacre and complain about lack of Japanese contrition. Meanwhile China not only prefers to forget that the Communist Party subsequently inflicted even greater misery on the Chinese people but also likes to forget the extent of Chinese collaboration with Japan.

The West is also fond of accusing Japan of not being contrite. But Asians could well ask why Europe and the United States have never apologized for their imperialism in the region. European and American rule was much less harsh than Japan's, but it lasted longer.

In Asia, little about the Pacific war is black and white. Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were generally fiercely anti-Japanese and suffered accordingly during the occupation. But much of Asia did see the Japanese, initially at least, either as liberators or no worse than the previous rulers.

A significant part of the ever-opportunistic Philippine elite did not oppose the new occupier, and President Ferdinand Marcos later invented a role as an anti-Japan guerrilla fighter. President Cory Aquino's father-in-law was wartime ambassador to Tokyo under Japan's collaborator president, J.P. Laurel, whose son Salvador later became Aquino's vice president.

In Indonesia, a young Suharto served in the Dutch and Japanese forces before joining the independence struggle. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Thailand not only officially sided with Japan for a while but used this alliance to grab back parts of Malaya, Burma and Cambodia, which it had lost to the European empires. It had to return these in 1945. In Malaya, the Japanese occupation increased tensions between Chinese and Malays, who had a more neutral view of the Japanese. After the Japanese surrendered, many Malays accused of collaboration were killed. Even in mainly Chinese Singapore, working for the Japanese was unavoidable. Lee Kuan Yew, later the founder of modern Singapore, learned the language and worked for Japan's propaganda agency.

Taiwan, meanwhile, was little touched by the Pacific war and in many ways benefited from its 50 years of Japanese rule, which brought education and infrastructure. That experience laid the groundwork for Taiwan's subsequent success, and helps explain why its view of Japan is profoundly different from China's and has fueled Taiwan separatism.

Given the histories of Taiwan and Singapore, it was remarkable last weekend to hear Singapore's new prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong - Lee Kuan Yew's son - lecturing Taiwan on the dangers of aspiring to independence. Singapore would not recognize any such claim, he said. Taiwan's people might like to remind the younger Lee how fortunate it was in 1965 that Malaysia, acknowledging the wishes of the majority led by Lee Kuan Yew, allowed Singapore to secede without a fight. Singapore was part of the Johore sultanate for longer than Taiwan was part of China, so for many Malaysians, the 1965 separation remains a matter for regret - and possible reversal.

History may not teach us much about the future or how to act in the present. But its perspective can be a useful antidote to propaganda based on ideological myths - especially at a time when Asian alliances and rivalries, driven by national and personal interests that have changed since the end of the cold war, are again in flux.

