An American Speaks: The Japanese History That Some Want Hidden

Max von Schuler

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Reviewed by Tadashi Hama

There are two main themes in Max von Schuler's bilingual book. One theme, as suggested by the title, is the over-looked—perhaps "hidden"—history of pre-war Japan. While history is a collection of views, Von Schuler points out that the pre-war Japanese point of view has been studiously shunned in modern histories as they do not serve to bolster the American narrative—that Japan waged a "war of aggression" and America destroyed "aggressive" Japan for the sake of justice. The lack of access to historical truth, von Schuler points out, has led the Japanese to not only believe that they alone shoulder the burden of responsibility for a disastrous war but also to distrust their own country. At the same time, the lack of access to historical truth leads to the fabrication of mythical notions in America of the war against Japan. The second main theme von Shuler explores is the relationship between Japan and South Korea, one that could be characterized as Japanese reaction to constant Korean anti-Japan badgering based on—again—a mythical history. Von Schuler points out that neither Korea nor the US can claim the moral high ground when one objectively looks into their pasts. It is the right of people to coalesce around a common history which gives them a common sense of purpose and identity. However, the current book suggests that dogmatic faith in a mythical history is leading both Korea and the US down a self-destructive path. While von Schuler focuses on the relationship between Japan, South Korea and the US, upon reflection, his themes could be applicable elsewhere, such as to China.

The author, though an American citizen, pulls no punches as he exposes America's past and the true nature of his former countrymen. Von Schuler, who has lived in Japan for over 40 years, reiterates pre-war Japan's role on the international stage as seen from both Japanese and non-Japanese perspectives. The particulars may be a little thin in the current book, but von Schuler lists several references at the end for the curious. Two other references that may be helpful to the uninitiated in understanding the dynamics of Japan-US relations in the early 20th century is *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, by Harry Elmer Barnes (Caxton Printers: Caldwell, ID, 1953) and humanitarian, non-interventionist Herbert Hoover's view of Franklin Roosevelt's march to war against Japan in *Freedom Betrayed* (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, CA, 2011).

What is particularly striking is that von Schuler shows readers that America's soldiers during the Japan-US War were not the "complete angles" that US media during the war and ever since would have us believe. Indeed, the current book points out that American troops in the Pacific committed rape and mutilated Japanese corpses for body parts as souvenirs—even sending them to friends and family back home. American forces also habitually did not take surrendering Japanese as prisoners; surrendering Japanese

were shot on sight.[1] A Japanese cultural element that regarded surrender with scorn certainly existed, but the American policy of giving no quarter likely dissolved any hope of compromise with America. The current book also points out that during the Japan-US War, Americans had their own "comfort women" system and this is illustrated by describing infamous "Hotel Street" in downtown Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii. The Territorial Government, civilian police and US military cooperated in running brothels on Hotel Street, which were staffed by prostitutes imported from San Francisco. The current book further points out that when brothels in post-war Japan, set up by the American occupational authorities to contain the sexual urges of American military personnel, were shut down, rapes became rampant. A similar situation arose in Korea—the American military set up "comfort stations" for its men during and after the Korean War.

One could simply dismiss the GIs' utilization of government-approved prostitutes as "boys-being-boys" and American atrocities as merely "pay-back" for Japanese "atrocities". As American troops executed Japanese prisoners and extracted their teeth, von Schuler points out that America fought in the name of "freedom" and "democracy". The irony should not be missed by readers—that the US cloaked itself with the mantle of self-righteousness while excusing, even denying, its own abominable behavior—and von Schuler unflinchingly refers to this point again and again in his book.

A second intriguing point raised in the current book is that Korean thinking is the source of the current strain in relations between Japan and South Korea. One would think, in an era with a nuclear-armed North Korea and Japan's past experience as a target of nuclear weapons, that South Korea would work with Japan to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. However, South Korea does not appear at all to be inclined to cooperate with Japan to attain this goal. Rather, the priority is rebuking Japan for alleged crimes committed during the Japanese colonial administration of Korea, which ended over 70 years ago. Most commentators, both inside and outside of Japan, avoid criticizing South Korea and blithely assert that Japan is in the wrong. A few perceptive commentators, including von Schuler, single out the bizarre behavior of the South Korean government. Given Korean thinking and actions as described by the book, once could make the case that visceral feeling has overtaken rationality.

The book raises the "comfort women agreement" made between Japan and South Korea, an intergovernmental agreement reached in December 2015 which "resolved finally and irreversibly" the comfort women issue. Sworn in long after the agreement was signed and despite the fact that Japan already paid South Korea, as agreed upon, the equivalent of USD 8.7 million, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea is seeking to repeal the agreement. Von Schuler suggests that the US had a hand in forcing this agreement on Japan and this line needs further elaboration, but, this episode speaks volumes not only

[1]Examples of American atrocities, racism and orders by American military officers not to take Japanese prisoners can be found in Charles Lindbergh's *The War Time Journals of Charles A. Lindberg* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: NY, NY, 1970) and Eugene Sledge's, *With the Old Breed,* (Presidio Press: Novato, CA, 1981). The US military and government response to the desecration of Japanese corpses for souvenirs was tepid at best (Weigngartner, JJ "Trophies of war," (1992) *The Pacific Historical Review*, 61: 53-67.)

about Korean credibility but also the extent to which Koreans will humiliate those that they consider inferior.

Underlying Korean behavior, von Schuler notes, is the view that they are at the center of the world—that "Seoul is the center of the universe" and "everything in the world began in Korea." For example, there are Koreans who claim that the *buchimgae* (or *chijimi* in Japanese), a fried pancake-like vegetable dish, was "stolen" by Marco Polo and taken back to Italy, where it supposedly became "pizza". There are Koreans who state that Christmas trees originated in Korea. Thus, there are Koreans demanding "copyright fees" worldwide for the use of Christmas trees. Von Schuler gives other examples of the extent of Korean ethnocentrism and their strident public demonstration of it. Von Shuler attributes this kind of thinking to a "superiority complex". Sinologists are all to familiar with such thinking as exemplified by Chinese emperors—with Heaven's Mandate, a righteous Chinese rules the world from the Middle Kingdom. As Korea was a Chinese colony for hundreds of years, Chinese imperial thinking likely diffused to the Korean ruling elite.

At the same time, the "weird religion" of victimization permeates Korean thinking when it comes to Japan, perceived as "obviously" inferior and barbaric compared to Korea. This can be seen in Korean "comfort women" stories. Koreans say that the Japanese forced the "comfort women" to lie on beds of nails, were boiled and forced to engage in cannibalism. The stories also claim that the women serviced soldiers at all hours of the day—leading readers to believe that front-line Japanese troops had nothing to do other than visit prostitutes. While there is nothing that will change Korean thinking, von Schuler hopes that the international community will see through and dismiss their outlandish way of thinking.

There will be those who might be offended by the current book and von Shuler addresses this: telling the truth is not "hate speech". By contrast, what does one make of the fact that Korean primary school children are encouraged by their teachers—and their parents apparently gave their consent—to draw pictures that denigrate Japan? Is this the path to a "great country," to blame others for ones' own faults? "Look in the mirror," warns von Schuler.