

“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in Modern Japanese History

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Preface

I am a researcher, not an archivist, of modern Japanese history, specializing in particular in the diplomacy and military affairs of the 1930s. However, this being a period that led to the collapse of the traditional two-party system, the Sino-Japanese War, and then the Pacific War, inevitably much of my basic research depends on the use of government-generated national records.

Reading historical sources, the extent to which the politicians who determined policy were bound by their own belief in past history as something that taught and forewarned becomes clear. This phenomenon is most consummately analyzed by Ernest R. May, who lectured in politics at Harvard University, in his book *“Lessons” of the Past*. I would like to present an illustration of Professor May’s. In the Second World War, President Roosevelt’s insistence on unconditional surrender was in order not to repeat the mistake President Wilson made in the First World War with his Fourteen Point armistice for Germany that failed in the face of the Paris Peace Conference.

Looking back, there is more a recent example of Japan being bound by the lessons of history: an incident that could be best described as the “Gulf War Trauma.” At the time of the 1991 Gulf War, the fact that the donation amounting to 13 billion dollars that Japan made to the multi-national forces elicited thanks from neither Kuwait nor the United States became an incident that the press in Japan made a great deal of at the time. Then, in 2001, Japan failed to appear on a list of the countries that contributed financially to the Afghan War. So, at the time of the Iraq War in 2003, in an effort not to repeat the mistakes of the Gulf War and the Afghan War, and ardently seeking to dispel the sense of deep humiliation from those times, the Japanese government, in a well-known move, speedily dispatched the Self-Defense Forces.

At those times, for example, in 1991 and 2001, no cool-headed speculation was evident in Japan regarding how perhaps the list of donor nations prepared in the United States, having been drawn up by the military, may well have been finalized without being submitted to the scrutiny of the Department of Defense and the Department of State, and how this may well have been an internal problem of the United States’ decision-making system. In other words, there was absolutely no point of view expressed in Japan that the thankless United States may have been victim to its own structural defects whereby, because of the relationship between the government and the

military, a policy was decided on that reflected the military's dominance.

Evident here is how when politicians and peoples look to history for lessons, they are swayed by those cases they remember and arbitrarily select from that narrow band of examples those that they decide to use as their "history." Over and over again, politicians and peoples misuse history. My lecture today borrows its title largely from Professor May's book, but I will address here the issues I have just introduced.

The Problem of Self-Awareness in the Authors of State Documents

I have just outlined how politicians and peoples, when framing future policies, continually misuse history. However, I would like to address examples of an issue that precedes how history is used, that is, what happens at the stage when history is written, and about the people who wrote and preserved the national records. Surely it is there that the problem begins.

The 30-year rule observed in Western archives whereby archives are opened after 30 years is the general one. However, in Japan, if access is sought even to documents in the national archives relating to political decisions made in the 1970s, access is not possible. The problem of the national archives not having sufficiently archived even important post-war documents came to light with the 2001 Information Disclosure Act whereby the national archives were established as an independent administrative institution, each government ministry taking over its functions. Not only had archiving been insufficient, but with the transfer to the ministries of archiving authority, what had been a flow of documents to the national archives from the ministries of over 17,000 volumes per year dropped alarmingly to a mere 674 in the space of a year.

It is therefore impossible to verify in the future the meaning of those important decisions reached by policy makers of the past; neither can use be made of critically informed selections of history. While he can not be said to represent the whole government, Yasuo Fukuda, the Chief Cabinet Secretary in 2003, in an encouraging move in that year, accepted the seriousness of the problem and established a Commission on the Management, Archiving and Use of State Documents, peopled it with key figures, and expounded on the nature of the problem. Along with specialists on the Information Disclosure Act, lawyers, specialists in administrative law, and the head of the national archives, I, too, took part in the Commission. It was, I believe, for this reason that I was asked to give a keynote lecture at this conference.

Much was discussed by the Commission. In these discussions, a comparison of Japan's archives with those around the world quickly made it clear what the problems were. They can be summed up in five points.

1. Japan has no law corresponding to laws in foreign countries regarding the archiving of documents that are made into law; for example, the United States' Code Title 44 - Public Printing and Documents, and similar laws in the Republic of Korea, China, and Canada, amongst others.
2. The absence of any agency supervising and directing the archiving of national records presently in use by government organs.

3. The absence of any agency to screen and approve the disposal of documents.
4. The lack of any right on the part of the national archives to determine which documents should be transferred to it when documents are transferred to it from ministries.
5. The lack of a system of training for specialist staff to handle historical archives and national records in a specialized manner.

Each of these five points approaches, I believe, the core of the problem. However, I feel that at the time of creating national records, it is important that those creating them and those executing that policy have the kind of self-awareness I will discuss below that acknowledges the actor's own part in the policy decision, and realizes the overwhelming basic duty he or she has to the people and the state to leave a full and accurate record of the policy and the process it follows from its drafting, to its confirmation, through to its execution.

At the present day, the process of drafting and negotiating policy via electronic media has become very much the norm. As people experience in the course of daily life — to the point of not actually being conscious of it — constant negotiation with numerous people via electronic media, e-mail, and the like makes lasting documentation of processes such as the revision of documents very difficult. Compared to the Showa era (1926–1989) and of course the Meiji era (1868–1912), the present age is without a doubt going to be judged the most difficult by future generations when it comes to understanding the processes by which policy was formulated.

This being the case, I believe it more important than ever that those drafting policy are able to be aware when creating documents that these records will in the future be transferred to the national archives and stored there. Such documents should be created based on this awareness. However, trying to induce self-awareness in people seems less a task for the historian than for those concerned with morality.

As historians, all we can do is approach the historical sources, consider the various movements of forces that went into making them, and ask how accurately they record what happened. To address this point, I would like to discuss the case of the Ganghwa Island Incident. Looking at it over the long term, the fabrication of historical sources left quite a large imprint on the historical consciousness of succeeding generations. This influence was by no means necessarily a good one, and in many ways was to Japan's detriment.

The Ganghwa Island Incident — An Amendment Conscious of the Great Powers' Scrutiny

The concealment of inconvenient facts potentially detrimental to one's grip on power is a practice that wielders of political power have indulged in all ages and countries. Japan is no exception. However, after the Russo-Japanese War, such behavior in Japan took on a particular characteristic. On the one hand, Japan's victory made possible its abrogation of the Unequal Treaties while on the other it assumed the role of ruler of Asia. Yet, at no time could Japan fail to remain aware of being under the scrutiny of

the Great Powers. Japan was rewriting the facts of history from the point of view of having to explain them to the Great Powers. The Ganghwa Island Incident is one such example.

This incident was recorded in Japanese high school textbooks and the like as being one that took place in September 1875 when the captain of the Japanese naval vessel, the Unyo, seeking drinking water, tried to land a ship's boat without notice on Ganghwa Island. The Koreans shelled the boat, so once the captain had returned to the vessel, the Japanese shelled the Korean battery. The Japanese government used this as a pretext to pressure the Koreans the next year into opening their country, and in which it succeeded.

The main points of this account are

1. that the landing was in search of water, and
2. that the number three battery on Ganghwa Island began firing on the naval vessel Unyo that was flying the Japanese flag.

This is from the account of the incident recorded in the historical document known as the "Kobun Roku" held in the national archives, and was based on the report written by the captain of the Unyo dated October 8, 1875. In other words, this is what was recorded in the actual report composed at that time.

However, thanks to a discovery of a certain historical resource by Jun Suzuki, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo's Department of Literature, it became clear that the actual report of the Unyo's captain, dated October 8, had been amended to change the facts recorded on it. A detailed account of this is available by reading Professor Suzuki's article, "Captain of the Unyo, Yoshika Inoue's September 29, 1875, Report of the Ganghwa Island Incident," in No.12, Series 111, of the *Shigaku Zasshi*. In actual fact, the captain of the Unyo, Inoue, made a first report dated September 28 — and thus dated considerably earlier than October 8. In this first report, there was no mention of having sent out a boat from the ship for the purpose of finding drinkable water. The report clearly states that the aim of the landing was "to conduct a survey and meet with the local administrator to inquire after various matters." The aim of surveying Ganghwa Island and conducting an investigation of the surrounding area is not concealed. In Inoue's mind there would have been no need to conceal such actions as landing to conduct surveys and talk with the local administrator.

Also, one more thing about the first report is that it did not conceal the fact that the Koreans' firing on the Unyo as it flew the Japanese flag happened only after the Unyo fired on them. It was Inoue's superior, Sukemaro Ito, who made the amendments to the first report. On presenting the report to the Minister of the Navy, Sumiyoshi Kawamura, Ito rewrote it in two places.

The reason Ito amended the first report to read that Japan had ended up being fired upon after setting out to survey Korea's important batteries was to awaken the vigilance of the Great Powers, and because he considered the Japanese act illegal from the point of view of the international law of the day. The report with Ito's amendments is the one that was included in the "Kobun Roku", from there to be included and

published in the “Japanese Diplomatic Documents.” This was in 1940, and shows how long Japan has clung to the belief that Korea was wrong in shelling a Japanese ship that was seeking water and flying the Japanese flag.

Somehow, with the gift of papers left behind by Ito to the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies of the Defense Agency in 1964, the truth has managed to survive. However, until the publication of Professor Suzuki’s thesis, that truth lay dormant. So when reading modern Japanese historical sources, it is necessary take care and remain aware of these examples of history rewritten by those of that time for the purpose of eliminating contradictions between what really happened and the way it was believed the Great Powers should be made to think things happened, as well as between what really happened and what it was believed was admissible by international law.

Conclusion

The Japanese, on the one hand, sought independence from the Great Powers, and on the other hand, sought to break away from Asia. Therefore, on the one hand, they remained ever conscious of being scrutinized by the Great Powers, while, on the other, they themselves looked down on Asia. It should never be forgotten that these twin orientations in modern Japanese history exercised a great influence over, and restricted, the policy makers who left historical sources behind them. Also, it is important that today’s Japanese consider what the modern equivalents might be of the scrutiny of the Great Powers and the contempt for Asia that characterized pre-war Japan.

The Commission mentioned above presented two reports to the Cabinet. The content of them can be seen on the Cabinet website; but I would like to use the question and answer session to elucidate on what I believe to be the most important points, and which of them has stayed with me.