

Response to PacNet #5 “The Yasukuni Puzzle”

by Pier Luigi Zanatta

Pier Luigi Zanatta (pierluigi.zanatta@gmail.com) was a former East Asia correspondent at ANSA Italian News Agency.

Your interesting article makes a very important point, often underestimated outside Japan. It's high time for a large debate on the Tokyo trials and the United States should have the courage to fully support it: in the long run, it would be beneficial to strengthen the US-Japan alliance and to dispel misgivings throughout the Pacific area.

But, if there is a clear need for such an historical revision, I wonder why a private and ultra-rightist organization like Yasukuni (and its chief priest) should be allowed to take the lead in promoting it.

In 1978 and then again in 2006 it was very clear that the Emperor himself had doubts about the policy followed by the Yasukuni Shrine Council and its semi-official endorsement by some government leaders. A plan for an historical revision, in my opinion, should be openly and boldly implemented through a vast debate among scholars and the public, not through a shadowy and questionable organization.

At the same time, the US should be ready to contribute to such a plan, even admitting some misjudgments and mistakes at the Tokyo trials, or even during the war. I understand that it could be a complex and somehow painful revision, but I'm confident that in the long run everybody would benefit from it.

The Yasukuni Puzzle – Complexity Still Misunderstood

by Yoichiro Sato

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My essay, “The Yasukuni Puzzle” (PacNet #5), produced many interpretations of what I was saying, some correct, many wrong. The misunderstanding is partly a result of the subtle way of Japanese communication, for which I am at fault, as well as a result of readers with strong ideological predispositions or who are careless readers.

First, nowhere in my writing did I endorse Prime Minister Abe's December 2013 visit to Yasukuni Shrine. I was only explaining the quiet response of the Japanese public to the event and imploring readers not to equate the entire Japanese public with the discourse of a “rightward drift” of Japan. I am not defending the ultra-nationalists; rather I am defending the general Japanese public from being labeled as ultra-nationalists by misinformed media.

Second, I did not uniformly criticize all international commentators of Japan's war history for having a negative view of Japan, and I did not offer a blanket denial of the entire war crime tribunals. Some knowledgeable Western observers do have a nuanced and detailed understanding of the war crime tribunals, an understanding that I was trying to illuminate. But, the *published* major media discourse remains extremely simplistic, indicating a general tendency to be superficially liberal and the tendency among editors to screen out views that do not conform to their established “liberal” discourse.

In my essay, I referred to Japanese skepticism about the tribunals, both on the right and the left, pointing out that both conservatives and socialists supported release of all war crimes prisoners in 1952. Some readers overlooked the argument on the left, as their eyes were predisposed to find problems on the right.

The poor state of history education in Japan is a problem, but Japan as an open pluralistic society holds a better chance at offering its people free and balanced history education and media diversity. The level of diversity among the conservative *Yomiuri* and the liberal *Asahi* newspapers is unmatched by the monotonously nationalistic Korean or Chinese media when it comes to reporting about Japan's wartime history. The standard practice of teaching history from the Stone Age forward in Japan may have to change, for teachers often run out of time before reaching the contemporary period as they try to cover some 2,000 years of Japanese history. University entry exams may emphasize math and English at the expense of social studies. This emphasis is similarly reflected in the high school curriculum.

Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students at my university got together and compared their high school history textbooks. The fact that this can happen in Japan attests to my confidence in Japan's open pluralistic society.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.