

# Nippon Kaigi and the Radical Conservative Project to Take Back Japan

David McNeill

In September 2015, several hundred mainly foreign academics and journalists received unsolicited copies of two poorly written books from Japan, accompanied by a signed letter from politician Inoguchi Kuniko. "In East Asia, the regional history of the 20th century has been incorrectly distorted (sic) by some individuals due to their current domestic political ambitions," said the letter. "I believe it is important for you, as a highly esteemed member of the academic and policy circles (sic), to look into the books which I am enclosing with this letter."

The first of the books, "History Wars," published by the *Sankei Shimbun*, a conservative newspaper, said records of Japanese misconduct during World War II were exaggerated or false. China and South Korea have used these claims to wage a long battle in America to distort views of the war, with the goal of "weakening the US-Japan alliance," it said. "Japan's postwar governments have not only failed to wage an effective rebuttal against the propaganda maneuvers of Japan's adversaries, but have also fallen witlessly into their...traps."

In "Getting Over it! Why Korea Needs to Stop Bashing Japan," Sonfa Oh, a naturalized Japanese academic originally from South Korea, argues that successive generations of Korean leaders have resorted to historical fabrication, and "capricious, opportunistic egoism" to damage Japan and its reputation around the world. Japanese rule of Korea from 1910-1945 was essentially benign, writes Oh. The Japan in both publications is cast as well meaning, stoic and endlessly forbearing in its

dealings with its mendacious, two-faced neighbors.

The mass mail-shot is part of an occasionally clumsy but well-funded attempt to transform international perceptions of Japan. A campaign of "strategic communications," with a budget of over half-a-billion dollars, has been launched to counter negative PR and cultivate a generation of pro-Japanese foreign commentators. Japanese embassies and consulates have been instructed to be more proactive in challenging perceived slights, such as foreign textbooks that stir the history pot. Brookings, Carnegie, CSIS and other think tanks have been given millions of dollars to promote Japan; millions more has gone to support chairs at Columbia, Georgetown and MIT universities.

At the same time, an informal list of friends and foes appears to have emerged. Outside Japan, those considered allies include a small group of mainly US-based academics, journalists and rightwing bloggers. The foreign enemies list is topped by *The New York Times*, which neoconservatives have long seen as leftwing and anti-Japanese. The hundreds of foreign scholars who signed the 2015 Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan ([https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/japan-scholars-statement-2015.5.4-eng\\_0.pdf](https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/japan-scholars-statement-2015.5.4-eng_0.pdf)), an attempt to counter the revisionist drift under the Abe administration, are also under suspicion. It is the letter that appears to have prompted the mailing.

The risk of overreach in this project is never far away. In one case, Japanese foreign ministry officials accused Germany's largest business

newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, of carrying pro-Chinese propaganda. Its Tokyo-based correspondent Carsten Germis wrote a widely circulated article (<http://www.fccj.or.jp/number-1-shimbun/item/576-on-my-watch/576-on-my-watch.html>) lamenting what he called a crude government attempt to censor views it disliked. Dispatches of diplomats to the offices of history professors and publishers, and attempts to nudge foreign journalists away from academics critical of the government, have also triggered PR blowback (<http://www.japantoday.com/category/kuchikom-i/view/diplomatic-pressure-on-foreign-reporters-raises-media-hackles>).

The book campaign struck some, therefore, as naïve, at best. Did Inoguchi think that a few hundred pages of thin, selectively argued academic gruel might tilt a complex debate that has waged for years in favor of Abe style conservatism? The point, she insists, is to circulate ideas that “have not been represented” in the mainstream. “I felt I was in a position to work with others in enhancing views about what we have done since the war, as a new nation state,” she said. “It is not to justify anything,” she added, citing her own credentials as a fighter for women’s rights, in Korea and elsewhere.

Inoguchi’s decision to lend her imprimatur to the books was considered surprising. A political scientist and internationalist known for work on disarmament and gender issues, she had not been previously linked with Japanese neo-conservatism. One clue to her apparent shift is found in her association with Nippon Kaigi, or the Japan Conference. Interviewed by telephone, Inoguchi said that she is a member of the Chiba Prefectural branch of the lobby group, but insists they part company on one issue: “If they try to justify the past, that is the point on which I disagree. I don’t try to rewrite history; it cannot be undone.”

Justifying the uncomfortable past — and

recasting it for 21st Century Japan is, however, precisely the mission of Nippon Kaigi. The group’s charter lists six key goals: “respect the Imperial Family as the center of Japanese life;” nurture patriotism; promote a new Constitution “based on our nation’s true characteristics;” protect the sovereignty and honor of the nation’s independence; nurture young people to grow up with pride and love for their nation; and establish a strong army and promote the nation’s status abroad.

**Box: Nippon Kaigi acts based on the following principles:**

- 1) Respect the Imperial Family, the center of a unified Japan, and nurture compatriotism.
- 2) Promote a new Constitution based on our nation’s true characteristics.
- 3) Protect the sovereignty and honor of our independent state and realize responsible politics that serve peace and order.
- 4) Revive tradition in education and nurture young people to grow up with pride and love for their nation.
- 5) Cultivate a spirit to protect the nation and to provide it with enough defensive power to secure its safety and contribute to world peace.
- 6) Widen the understanding of the world, aim to co-exist (with others) and contribute to promoting the nation’s status in the global community and (to building) friendship (with other nations).

**Source: Nippon Kaigi**

In practice, says Tawara Yoshifumi, who heads the nonprofit group Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21, which monitors neo-conservative movements, this is a shopping list of revisionist causes: applaud Japan’s wartime campaign to “liberate” Asia from Western colonialism; rebuild the armed forces, instill

patriotism among students brainwashed by “leftwing” teachers and revere the Emperor as he was worshipped before the calamity of World War II.

“They have trouble accepting the reality that Japan lost the war,” explains Kobayashi Setsu, a leading constitutional scholar and former Nippon Kaigi member. Kobayashi says the group is run by people who want to revive Japan’s prewar Meiji Constitution, which served as the basic law before it was replaced during the US-led Allied Occupation between 1945 and 1952. Indeed, some, he says, are descendants of the people who started the war and are nostalgic for Japan’s great power status.

Nippon Kaigi’s platform is rooted in profound resentment about the postwar settlement. Its supporters say the liberal Constitution, with its “masochistic” education system, has emasculated Japan. They despise the so-called victory justice meted out at the Tokyo war crimes trials and the pacifist clause that neutered the country’s armed forces. Hyakuta Naoki, Nippon Kaigi sympathizer, bestselling author and former governor of NHK, Japan’s public service broadcaster, expressed some of these core sentiments during a now infamous speech

([http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/politics/AJ201402040048](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201402040048)) in 2014.

Campaigning for Tamogami Toshio, the ex-Air Self-Defense Force chief of staff who was running for Tokyo governor, Hyakuta called the March 1945 firebombing of Tokyo and the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which collectively killed perhaps 300,000 people, “cruel massacres.” The Tokyo war crimes trial, he said, was “conducted to cover up those atrocities.” It wasn’t only the Japanese who committed war crimes, and there was no reason to teach such things to children, he said. “I want to first teach children what a wonderful nation Japan is.”

The drive to rewrite not just the history of World War II, but exhume the foundations laid down by the Occupation during the years after, naturally invites serious tensions with Japan’s US sponsor. In April 2015, for example, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo delivered a speech to both the US Senate and House of Representatives — the first by a Japanese leader — lauding deepening trade ties and the military alliance with America. The talk, fine-tuned for his American audience by speechwriter Taniguchi Tomohiko, cast Abe as a defender of strong democratic principles, a leader with “deep repentance” for the “lost dreams of young Americans” who died fighting Japan in World War II.

Conspicuously missing, noted veteran Japan watcher Gavan McCormack, were the core Abe values that Congress could hardly be expected to share: “take back Japan,” “cast off the postwar regime” and revise the U.S.-imposed Constitution; teach “correct” history to make the country’s youth proud and “revere the spirits of Japan’s war dead,” including those convicted as war criminals. Washington seems unaware of these contradictions, or is inclined to overlook them in return for Abe’s promise of greater military cooperation and support for TPP.

Much of the far-right agenda in Japan slips past American politicians, says Tessa Morris-Suzuki, a professor of modern Japanese history at Australian National University. “They don’t really see how this will play out in East Asia because they need the U.S. bases (in Japan),” she says. “The Abe administration doesn’t think Japan did anything wrong in the war — they just think it was unfortunate that they lost.”

Neoconservative values increasingly seep into the core of Japanese political life. The latest salvo comes in the form of a panel, reporting directly to Abe that will probe the verdicts of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946–1948). The verdicts, which

condemned Japan's six wartime leaders to death, were "based on a poorly constructed" perception of history, said Inada Tomomi, chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party's Policy Research Council ([http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/politics/AJ201511120065](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201511120065)).

Abe has already partially satisfied a key demand of his supporters — that Japan end the shameful apology diplomacy of the postwar years. The nation's gold standard mea culpa, issued by socialist prime minister Murayama Tomiichi in 1995, has been overlaid by a carefully worded but ambiguous statement in which Abe stopped short of offering his own words of remorse but said Japan "must not let...generations to come...be predestined to apologize." ([http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html))

The prospect that radical conservatives might dismantle Japan's entire postwar political architecture no longer looks far-fetched. The LDP has proposed changes to virtually all 103 articles of the 1947 constitution that would tip the balance away from individual rights and toward duties to the state. They have "reinterpreted" the Constitution to expand the nation's military role abroad. Nationalists in the Cabinet have repeatedly suggested that much of the accepted narrative of World War II, complete with its grim catalogue of war atrocities, be wished away. The education ministry has mandated this year that school textbooks must reflect the government position on history and territorial issues.

The blueprint for the next stage in the revolution was laid out to an estimated 11,000 supporters in Tokyo's Nippon Budokan hall on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The organizers of *Utsukushii Nihon no Kenpo wo Tsukuru Kokumin no Kai* (People's association for creating a Constitution for beautiful Japan), claim to have collected signatures from nearly

4.5 million people, including 422 Diet members, calling for a national referendum in the summer of 2016. The declared aim is to restore traditional family values, and strengthen Japan's defenses. Speaker after speaker warned about the rise of China and the decline of the United States. "Japan faces its worst crisis" since the war but the constitution has "hobbled" the country, said Hyakuta.

Among those listening was Eto Seiichi, a special adviser to Abe, ex-education minister Shimomura Hakubun, Takeo Hiranuma, the head of the parliamentary league of Nippon Kaigi, and lawmakers Arimura Haruko and Mihara Junko. The chair was conservative journalist Sakurai Yoshiko, a key figure in the drive to get 10 million signatures. Her status is recognition, says Tomomi Yamaguchi, an anthropologist at Montana State University, that changing the attitudes of women, many of whom admire Japan's long-standing pacifism, will be crucial. Abe himself sent a prerecorded message in which he said the "time had come" to seek a Constitution suitable for the 21st century."

About a third of the Diet and well over half of Abe's 19-member Cabinet support Nippon Kaigi. All are members of its parliamentary league. Abe is its "special adviser." The group has more than 230 local chapters, around 38,000 fee-paying members and a network that reaches deep into the government. Its members or affiliates include former heads of large corporations; university presidents, Self-Defense Force chiefs of staff, several party chiefs and at least one former chief justice (<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21653676-powerful-if-little-reported-group-claims-it-can-restore-pre-war-order-right-side-up>), who chaired the group for several years.

Despite this impressive firepower, determining the group's exact influence is difficult. The country's media mostly shies away from covering them, says Sugano Tamotsu, a

journalist and researcher. Sugano believes its most important achievement has been to unite right wing movements under a like-minded program. "Throughout 40 years of history," Sugano says, "it has been sending almost the same message and focusing on the same priority: educating the young generation."

Nippon Kaigi's signature drives have helped pass laws and implement legal changes in local councils and in the Diet, Yamaguchi says. They have helped banish much "left wing" teaching from schools and have brought back the tradition of singing the national anthem and standing for the Hinomaru flag, both associated with Japan's wartime empire. A key supporter is former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro, who mandated punishment for teachers who refuse to stand, face the flag and sing the anthem during school ceremonies.

The group was formed in 1997, in reaction to what was arguably a high point in postwar liberal education, by politicians, intellectuals and religious figures. Its small Meguro office in Tokyo still shares a building with Seicho no Ie (House of Growth), a right-wing religious cult and a key tributary of one of the two organizations that merged to form Nippon Kaigi, the Society to Protect Japan (*Nihon wo Mamorukai*) (the other was the People's Conference to Protect Japan, or *Nihon wo Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi*). The publisher of Sonfa Oh's book is Tachibana Shuppan, which has links to the cult and the religious and political right.

A decade ago, the group collected 3.6 million signatures demanding revisions to the education law that would make it compulsory to teach children patriotism. The group wants Abe to continue to visit Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, though such pilgrimages are seen in much of Asia as an endorsement of the leaders enshrined there and their war aims. Abe triggered a major diplomatic row with South Korea and China when he last went in 2013.

The group's growing political heft is partly credited with increasingly unabashed displays of allegiance to the shrine — a record 168 Diet members visited during the spring festival of 2013.

Supporters have campaigned against anything that shows Japan's wartime behavior in a bad light, bombarding exhibitions on war crimes, for example, with petitions and phone calls. A closely allied group is the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership. In the late 19th century, the country's oldest religion, Shinto, was reinvented as a tool of state, serving as an ideology that helped mobilize Japanese to fight wars in the emperor's name. In 2007, lobbying by the association and Nippon Kaigi helped to persuade the government to make April 29 a national holiday in honor of wartime monarch Hirohito.

Even opponents are impressed at how radical conservatives have quietly transformed the landscape of Japanese politics. Nippon Kaigi accepts that "international and domestic events" - notably the rise of China and shifting public opinion - "have changed the national consciousness" and had a major impact on the political beliefs of national and local politicians. "Such a change is one important factor in the light of implementing our basic principles," it says. Another aim is to "co-exist and build friendship with other nations." One of the contradictions of their success is that they might achieve exactly the opposite.

**David McNeill** writes for The Independent (<http://www.independent.co.uk/>) and other publications, including The Irish Times (<http://www.irishtimes.com/>) and The Economist (<http://www.economist.com/>). An Asia-Pacific Journal editor, he is a coauthor of *Strong in the Rain* (<http://amzn.com/0230341861/?tag=theasipacj-o0b-20>): Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster (Palgrave Macmillan).



Recommended citation: *David McNeill, "Nippon Kaigi and the Radical Conservative Project to Take Back Japan", The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue 50, No. 4, December 14, 2015.*

### Related articles

- Mine Masahiro and Okamoto Teruaki, Japan's Largest Rightwing Organization: An Introduction to "Nihon Kaigi Translated by J.

Victor Koschmann

- Tawara Yoshifumi Translation by Sven Saaler, The Abe Government and the 2014 Screening of Japanese Junior High School History Textbooks

(<https://apjjf.org/-Tawara-Yoshifumi/4312/article.html>), The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue. 16, No. 2, April 27, 2015