

Who is Responsible? The Yomiuri Project and the Enduring Legacy of the Asia-Pacific War

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When, in mid-2005, Japan's Yomiuri newspaper began to publish a series of articles on the question of "war responsibility", the event attracted nationwide and even international interest. Now the newspaper series has become a book, published in a two-volume version in Japanese and in a one-volume abridged English translation entitled *Who Was Responsible? From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbour*. There can be no doubt that these publications mark an important moment in the long and vexed history of East Asia's "history wars" – the ongoing conflicts between Japan and its neighbors (particularly China and both Koreas) about memory of and responsibility for Japan's 20th century military expansion in Asia.

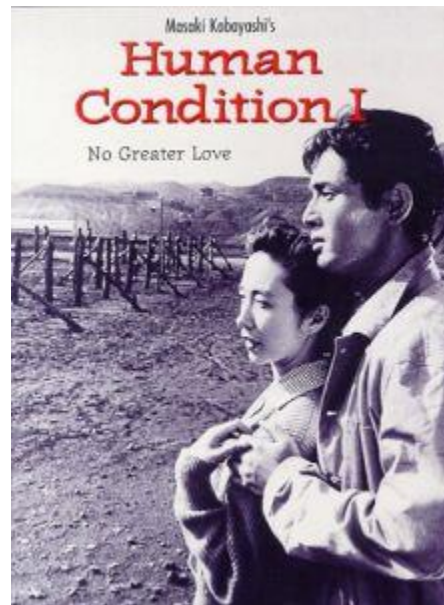
To assess the significance and impact of the Yomiuri project, though, it is important to see it in the context of history-writing in Japan and of contemporary Northeast Asian international relations. Before beginning to assess the content of the English-language volume, therefore, it is worth emphasizing what is not new about this work: There is nothing novel or unusual in Japanese historians or journalists publicly debating the problem of war responsibility. They have been doing so, with much passion and soul-searching, for more than sixty years.

During a recent visit to Tokyo, a Japanese colleague showed me the cover of a journal he had unearthed from the early 1950s, published by a group affiliated to the Japanese Communist Party. The cover featured a striking cartoon of Emperor Hirohito standing atop a mountain of skulls. Such graphic imagery is certainly highly risqué in the Japanese political context, where a miasma of taboo still surrounds critical comment on the person of the Emperor, and it is almost impossible to imagine any major journal agreeing to publish such an image. But its presence on the cover of this long-forgotten small-circulation magazine provides a stark reminder of the fact that questions of war responsibility, including those of the responsibility of Emperor Hirohito himself, have been ongoing topics of heated discussion in Japan. Indeed for historians of twentieth century Japan, a key task has been the search for an understanding of the processes that led to the "Manchurian Incident", the war in China, Pearl Harbour, Hiroshima and Japan's disastrous defeat in war.

One of the most influential early attempts to address this conundrum was the best-selling paperback *Showashi* ["A History of Showa" – Showa being the reign of the Emperor Hirohito], which was published in 1955, sold more than 100,000 copies in the six weeks following its publication, and generated a prolonged public controversy now remembered in Japan as the "Showashi Debate". Written by the eminent Marxian historians Toyama Shigeki, Imai Seiichi and Fujiwara Akira, *Showashi*'s approach was very different from that of the current Yomiuri volume. It sought, not so much to judge personal war guilt, as to define the underlying social and economic forces that led to war. [1]

The popular success of *Showashi* is a reminder of the powerful influence which Marxism exerted on postwar Japanese intellectual (though not political) life. However, searching criticisms of war responsibility were of course not confined to Marxists. Critical liberal intellectuals such as Maruyama Masao made profound contributions to the debate – Maruyama's work focusing particularly on the aspects of Japanese social structure and patterns of thought which had created fertile ground for the rise of militarism. [2] In the 1950s and 1960s, war responsibility was

debated not only in such academic works, but also in massively popular novels and films such as Gomikawa Jumpei's *Ningen no Joken* [The Human Condition], which appeared in novel, movie and manga form, and included graphic representations of acts of brutality committed by members of the Japanese armed forces in China. [3]



Ningen no Joken [The Human Condition]

Such criticism was only feebly echoed, however, at the political level, where Japan's postwar political leaders tended as far as possible to avoid the entire subject of war memory and responsibility, making apologetic comments only when pushed, and even then in guarded and ambiguous language which almost inevitably failed to satisfy those to whom the apologies were addressed. A symbolically significant and politically decisive moment in this history of evasiveness came in the late 1950s, when the Japanese government addressed the task of paying compensation to the Southeast Asian nations it had occupied during the Pacific War. With strong support from the United States, Japan reached a series of bilateral reparations agreements which involved government-to-government transfers of money for large-scale development and infrastructure projects. Many of these projects were carried out by Japanese companies which thus acquired the opportunity to re-establish an investment presence in the region. [4] No personal payments were made to the individual victims of the occupation.

Similarly, when relations were later established with South Korea and the People's Republic of China, development aid was used as a "substitute" for personal compensation. This process has had ongoing consequences. On the one hand, it has created a lingering sense of injustice on the part of many Asian victims of the war; on the other, it has left many people in Japan with the belief that their country has already paid its dues, and therefore that continuing demands from Asian critics that Japan "face its responsibilities" for wartime aggression are unreasonable.

An opportunity to resolve this unhappy legacy of history seemed to appear in the mid-1990s, as the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War approached. At that time, the Liberal Democratic Party, which had long held power in Japan (and is again in government today), was in a state of some disarray, and the political situation was unusually fluid. In 1993 indeed, Prime

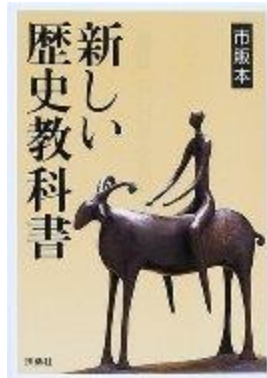
Minister Hosokawa made what many see as the most full and explicit apology by a Japanese leader, expressing his belief that:

it is important at this juncture that we state clearly before all the world our remorse at our past history and our renewed determination to do better. I would thus like to take this opportunity to express anew our profound remorse and apologies for the fact that past Japanese actions, including aggression and colonial rule, caused unbearable suffering and sorrow for so many people and to state that we will demonstrate our new determination by contributing more than ever to world peace. [5]

This, however, was not followed up by substantial practical measures by the Japanese government. The most significant step taken to mark the occasion by the coalition Murayama government (in power at the time of the anniversary of defeat) was the establishment of a relatively modest fund for international research on the war and related issues: an act which was seen by many as a characteristically timid and inadequate approach to the profound problem of war responsibility.

In fact, if the mid-1990s marked a turning point, it proved to be a turn in the opposite direction: away from efforts to acknowledge war responsibility and towards a nationalistic reassertion of pride in Japan's past (including significant aspects of its wartime past). The years immediately following the fiftieth anniversary witnessed an upsurge of revisionist writings by scholars and journalists seeking to justify Japan's prewar expansion and wartime policies. Most notable, perhaps, was the creation in 1996 of the Society for History Textbook Reform [Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho o Tsukuru Kai] which sought to promote a nationalistic approach to history teaching, and developed history texts that minimized criticism of Japan's colonialism and wartime activities. [6] Of course, the revisionists did not have things all their own way. A number of Japanese public figures, ranging from philosopher Takahashi Tetsuya to Miki Mutsuko (widow of former Liberal Democratic Party Prime Minister Miki Takeo) have continued to write and speak eloquently of the need for Japanese society and government to confront the unresolved problem of war responsibility. [7] Meanwhile, an expanding number of collaborative history projects by scholars in Japan, China and Korea have also been seeking paths to common understandings of the past. [8]

The growing visibility of the revisionists, and the rising tide of nationalist sentiment in Japan, however, brought a chorus of criticism from Japan's neighbours, particularly China and South Korea. Though the underlying causes of regional tensions are complex, and include economic rivalry and domestic political problems, the most visible trigger for friction has been the question of historical responsibility. Thus, when large groups of Chinese demonstrators attacked Japanese-owned businesses and offices in April 2005, the overt cause of the conflict was the Japanese Ministry of Education's decision to approve a new edition of the Society for History Textbook Reform's nationalistic textbook for use in schools. Throughout 2006 a major source of regional tension was Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's insistence on making public visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, the Shinto shrine to "those who fell in war" (that is, to members of the military killed in action), in which executed war criminals are among those whose spirits are revered.



Tsukurukai's New History Textbook

II

The Yomiuri project, then, is in a sense just part of a long history of contests within Japan surrounding the memory of war. What is unusual about the project, however, is that it is a re-examination of the problem of war responsibility initiated by a newspaper generally considered to be “right-of-centre”, and therefore expected to support a more nationalistic approach to the past. The project can indeed be seen as one symptom of an interesting re-alignment in Japanese political and intellectual life, in which some aspects of the traditional distinction between “right” and “left” are being destabilized.

Conventionally, it has been the “right” which was expected to push the cause of nationalism, and “left” which was expected to espouse an internationalist attitude of remorse for past aggression against Japan’s Asian neighbours. But the regional tensions intensified by Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and by nationalistic statements from some ruling-party politicians alarmed some people (including significant sections of Japan’s business community and more liberal members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party itself) whose general political stance is very far from being “left-wing”.

Among those people was Watanabe Tsuneo, the 80-year-old Editor-in-Chief of the Yomiuri Newspaper. As Watanabe makes clear in his Foreword to *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor*, his perspective on contemporary Japanese nationalism is influenced by his painful personal memories of having been a wartime conscript soldier. He expresses deep discomfort at the prospect of a Japan where memories of war are rapidly fading, while events like Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine offer an implicit indulgence to the convicted war criminals who are enshrined there alongside other fallen soldiers. “If things are left as they are,” writes Watanabe, “a skewed perception of history – without knowledge of the horrors of the war – will be handed down to future generations.” (p. 8) A key problem emphasized in Watanabe’s Foreword is the fact that the Tokyo War Crimes Trials were conducted by the postwar Allied occupation authorities, and that the Japanese judicial system never attempted its own prosecutions of war criminals. As a result, it has been all too easy for Japanese people to dismiss the Tokyo Trial verdicts as a hollow form of “victors’ justice”, without attempting to offer their own alternative assessment of war guilt. Although Watanabe is quick to emphasize that the Yomiuri project is an autonomous initiative and “not due to pressure from China and/or South Korea”, he also emphasizes that a sincere effort by Japanese people to reconsider the problem of war

responsibility is indispensable if Japan is to “forge friendship and peace with its neighbors in the future”. (p. 9)

It was against the background of such concerns that the newspaper established the Yomiuri Shimbun War Responsibility Reexamination Committee, which was entrusted with the task of revisiting the events of the war and making their own re-assessment of the judgments of the Tokyo Trials. Though the members of the Committee were all Yomiuri journalists, they consulted with a number of historians, whose opinions they drew on in reaching their own conclusions on war responsibility. The project was launched at the time of the sixtieth anniversary of Japan’s defeat in war, and was one of a number of retrospective studies produced by Japanese media to mark the occasion. (Other large-scale projects timed to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary included the eight volume series *Ajia Taiheiyo Senso* [The Asia-Pacific War], produced by the publishing house Iwanami Shoten. [9])

The results of the Yomiuri team’s labors were two series of articles: the first serialized in the Yomiuri newspaper from August 2005 to March 2006, and republished in Volume 1 of the project’s Japanese language book, which is entitled *Kensho – Senso Sekinin* [Examining War Responsibility]; the second serialized from March to August 2006, and republished in Volume 2. [10] It is the second of the two volumes which (with some editing) provides the basis of the English translation. The English version also includes a collection of contemporary documents, not included in the Japanese original.

The decision to translate only Volume 2 seems to me to have been a regrettable one, since it leaves English-language readers with a slightly misleading impression of the nature of the project. In the Japanese version, the first volume is thematic, presenting a series of discussions of issues such as the economic background to the war, the issue of political terrorism, the role of the media, and the nature of war responsibility itself. The volume also contains interviews with two foreign scholars – American China scholar Mark Selden and the Chinese historian Liu Jie (currently based at Tokyo’s Waseda University) – and a panel table discussion between a group of Japanese public figures including writers and politicians.

By contrast, the second volume is essentially a chronological account of the war from the “Manchurian Incident” of 1931 to Japan’s defeat and occupation, in which the main emphasis is on a re-evaluation of the judgments of personal war responsibility made at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. The penultimate chapter offers a “re-trial”, in which the Yomiuri team presents its own list of those most responsible for the disasters and sufferings of the War. Unsurprisingly, they concur with the original Allied decision not to prosecute Emperor Hirohito, emphasizing the image of Hirohito as an essentially peace-loving man who “stayed within the framework for a constitutional head of state”. (p. 260) They also agree with the Tokyo Trial judgment of wartime Prime Minister Tojo Hideki as holding major responsibility for launching aggression and maintaining even when defeat was inevitable. (pp. 245-249)

On the other hand, they differ from the Tokyo Trials in emphasizing the war responsibility of Konoe Fumimaro, Prime Minister from 1937-1939 and from 1940-1941, who committed suicide before he could be brought to trial, and in highlighting the roles of several others (including Kwantung Army officer Ishihara Kanji) who were never brought to trial. At the same time, the Yomiuri project also highlights the fact that blame for the wrongs of the war does not lie with Japan alone. The US is criticized for its firebombing of Japanese cities and its decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while the Soviet Union is criticized for unilaterally

revoking its neutrality pact and declaring war on Japan in early August 1945. (pp. 263-264). Interestingly enough, James Auer, the American editor of the *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor*, distances himself from the Yomiuri journalists' condemnation of the atomic bombings: one of the few instances I have encountered of an editor firmly contradicting a key conclusion of the book to which his name is attached. (p. 11-12)



Konoe Fumimaro

Because the English version excludes the thematic Volume 1, it gives the impression that the Yomiuri Project is a dry and traditionally empirical account of the events of the War, providing little discussion of social, economic or intellectual background. Such a criticism would be unfair, since (as we have seen) the background issues are addressed in some detail in the un-translated first half of the project. But, even though Volume 1 offers a more reflective approach to the problems of understanding the meaning of war responsibility, it remains true that the project as a whole takes a relatively orthodox approach to the determination of historical truth: it appears to tell its readers the answer to the question “who was responsible?”, rather than encouraging them to generate their own answers to that question.

I will not attempt here to discuss the merits of each individual assessment of personal responsibility made by the Yomiuri team, but would instead like to offer some more general comments about the strengths and weaknesses of the project as a whole.

III

The most valuable contribution of the project has been its role in stimulating renewed public debate in Japan about the question of war responsibility. As Japan's largest-selling newspaper, with a circulation of 10 million, the Yomiuri is particularly well-placed to bring the issue to wide public attention. The project team's findings make use of the opinions of relatively conservative historians such as Hata Ikuhiko (who is known for his low estimate of the number of victims of the Nanjing Massacre and of institutionalized sexual abuse by the Japanese military [11]). Precisely by placing the discussion of war responsibility within this conservative framework, however, the Yomiuri project has helped to make critical discussion of war responsibility "respectable", and encouraged participation in the debate by those who might otherwise have feared to approach such a sensitive topic. Meanwhile, their project has also encouraged emulation by others: the Asahi newspaper – conventionally regarded as occupying the "liberal-left" end of the spectrum of Japanese broadsheet newspapers – was quick to respond by starting its own re-examination of war responsibility.

The careful blow-by-blow account of the events of the war presented in *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* also sheds light on a number of aspects of the path to war which are probably not as well known as they should be, either in Japan or elsewhere: among them the ideological background to the Manchurian Incident, the complex political divisions which beset the Japanese cabinets of the late 1930s, the story of the desperate last-minute efforts to avert war on the eve of Pearl Harbor, and details of strategic blunders of Guadalcanal and the Battle of Okinawa. Incidentally, it should be said that the temporal scope of the book is a good deal wider than its English title suggests: rather than spanning the period from the Marco Polo Bridge incident of 1937 to the Pearl Harbour attack of 1941, it actually covers the entire period from 1931 to the immediate aftermath of Japan's defeat in 1945.

On the other hand, the decision to focus on a re-examination of the Tokyo verdicts in itself imposes some important limitations on the project. The Yomiuri Shimbun War Responsibility Reexamination Committee, in other words, have chosen to place themselves within the distinctly mid-twentieth century ethical and intellectual framework of the postwar war crimes trials, despite the fact that (as later commentators have pointed out) this framework leaves important questions of historical responsibility unexamined. The problem of war responsibility is, after all, not only a matter of determining "Who was responsible?" It is also necessary to ask, "For what crimes for which culprits to be judged?" In this project, two lacunae are particularly significant.

First, the Tokyo Trial prosecutors, who included representatives from the UK, Australia and the Netherlands, unsurprisingly chose not to address the problem of the oppression of colonized peoples. Their brief was to consider acts of aggression against independent nations, but colonial expansion itself was not held up to critical scrutiny, nor was the treatment of colonial subjects. The Yomiuri project, examining historical responsibility within the Tokyo Trials framework, similarly has virtually nothing to say about Japan's two major colonies, Korea and Taiwan. It does not (for example) look at contentious issues of historical responsibility such as the killing of Taiwanese Aboriginal people in the wake of the 1930 Musha uprising, or the use of forced labor from Korea during the Pacific War. [12] From this perspective, it is possible to question how far the Yomiuri project will address Taiwanese and particularly Korea concerns about Japanese historical amnesia.

Second, the Tokyo Trials paid relatively scant attention to the problem of war crimes against women, and had nothing at all to say about the institutionalized sexual abuse of Asian women in so-called “Comfort Stations” [ianjo], military and other officially sanctioned brothels. This problem, however, began to be a topic of heated debate in Japan and other Asian countries in the 1990s. In the year 2000, a group of Asian women including the late Matsui Yayori organized the Tokyo Women’s War Crimes Tribunal, which aimed to address this omission. The event was largely ignored by the mainstream media: the one extensive TV report on the Tribunal, produced by the Japanese national broadcaster NHK was altered (according to plausible accounts) as a result of pressure from conservative politicians including Japan’s present Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo. In reviewing the Tokyo Trials’ original judgments on individual war responsibility, the Yomiuri team once again draws a veil of silence over the problem of war crimes against women, and thus their study leaves another of the most contentious issues of historical responsibility un-addressed.

These criticisms, however, should not prevent a recognition of the achievements of this ambitious project, and particularly of its role in influencing historical debate at a crucial moment in Northeast Asian international relations. Perhaps the most interesting and significant sections of *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbour*, indeed, are the final chapter, entitled “What We Should Learn from the Showa War”, and the Afterword, written by senior Yomiuri journalist Asaumi Nobuo. These deal with the present and future as much as with the past. Asaumi’s Afterword reveals a real sense of concern on the part of sections of the Japanese social elite that the country is repeating mistakes of the past. Implicit parallels are drawn between the irresponsible adventurism of prewar politicians and the nationalistic posturing of some of Japan’s contemporary leaders. (pp. 282-290) The closing sections of the book also note the responsibility of the prewar media which, in Asaumi’s words “lost the spirit of upholding the principle of freedom of speech” (p. 290), and emphasize the problems the lack of widespread respect for human rights in prewar Japan. The lessons for the present are unmistakable.

The Yomiuri project’s answers to the question “Who Was Responsible?” are open to debate. But its concluding message is clear, powerful and timely. Those who were directly responsible for causing the disasters of the Asia-Pacific War have almost all passed on. But a different kind of historical responsibility survives into the present. This is the responsibility (incumbent on the people of all countries) to know about their past and to heed its lessons. In that sense, all sections of Japanese society, from government and the mass media to the ordinary person in the street, are responsible in the present for ensuring that their country does not once again slide towards tension and conflict with its closest Asian neighbors. And in that sense, this project can be seen as a valuable experiment in “responsible journalism”.

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Notes

1. Toyama Shigeki, Imai Seiichi and Fujiwara Akira, *Showashi* [A History of Showa] (Tokyo, Iwanami Shinsho, 1955); for a discussion see also Vanessa Buffy Ward, *Intellectuals and Publishing: Communicating Ideas in Post-War Japan* (Ph.D diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 2004), pp. 221-231.
2. For example, Masao Maruyama, "The Ideology and Movement of Japanese Fascism". *Japan Annual of Law and Politics*, 1952, vol. 1, pp. 95-128; Masao Maruyama, (Trans. I. Morris), *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963)
3. Gomikawa Junpei, *Ningen no Joken* [The Human Condition] (Tokyo, San-Ichi Shobo, 1967); for further discussion of the tradition of critical popular writings in Japan see also Matthew Penney, ["The Most Crucial Education": Saotome Katsumoto and Japanese Anti-War Thought"](#), *Japan Focus*, 3 December 2005.
4. See for example Kunio Yoshihara, *Japanese Investment in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1978) pp. 53 and 72.
5. [Policy Speech](#) by Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro to the 127th session of the national Diet.
6. Nishio Kanji et al., *Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho* [New History Textbook] (Tokyo, Fusosha, 2001), for a discussion, see Gavan McCormack, "The Japanese Movement to 'Correct' History", in Laura Hein and Mark Selden eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), pp 53-73.
7. See for example Takahashi Tetsuya, *Rekishi/Shuseishugi* [History / Revisionism] (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 2001); Takahashi Tetsuya, *Yasukuni Mondai* [The Yasukuni Problem] (Tokyo, Chikuma Shinsho, 2005). On Miki Mutsuko, see for example ["Japan's Burden"](#), *Asiaweek*, 7 June 1996, (accessed 26 January 2007)
8. These projects include the Historical Reconciliation Workshop [Rekishi Wakai Wakushoppu] headed by Asahi journalist Funabashi Yoichi and the Committee for Japan-China-South Korea Three Country Common Historical Materials [Nicchukan 3-koku Kyotsu Rekishi Kyozaï Iinkai]. See Funabashi Yoichi ed., *Nihon no Senso Sekinin o dou Kangaeru ka* [How to Think About Japan's War Responsibility] (Tokyo, Asahi Shimbunsha, 2001); Nicchukan 3-goku Kyotsu Rekishi Kyozaï Iinkai ed., *Mirai o Hiraku Rekishi: Higashi Ajia 3-goku no Kingendai-Shi* [History opens the Future: The Modern and Contemporary History of Three East Asian Countries] (Tokyo, Kobunken, 2005).
9. Kurasawa Aiko, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Narita Ryuichi, Sugita Toru, Yoshida Yutaka and Yui Daizaburo eds. *Koza – Ajia Taiheiyo Senso*. [The Asia-Pacific War] Vols 1-8. (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 2005-2006)
10. Yomiuri Shimbun Senso Sekinen Kensho Iinkai ed., *Kensho – Senso Sekinin* Vols. 1-2 (Tokyo, Chuo Koronsha, 2006)
11. See Hata, Ikuhiko, *Showashi no Nazo o Ou*, Vols. 1-2, [Pursuing the Mysteries of Showa History], (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjusha, 1993); Hata Ikuhiko, *Ianjo to Senjo no Sei*, [The Comfort Stations and Sex on the Battle Front] (Tokyo, Shinchosha, 1999); for a discussion, see Soh Chung-Hee Sarah, "Teikoku Nihon no 'Gun Ian Seido' Ron" [Debates on the 'Military Comfort

System' in Imperial Japan"] in Kurasawa Aiko, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Narita Ryuichi, Sugita Toru, Yoshida Yutaka and Yui Daizaburo eds. *Koza – Ajia Taiheiyo Senso*. [The Asia-Pacific War] Vol. 2. (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 2005), pp. 347-380.

12. On the Musha uprising, see Leo Ching, *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001), pp. 133-173; On the problem of forced labor, see for example William Underwood, "Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages: Seeking redress for Korean Forced Laborer", [Parts 1](#) and [2](#), Japan Focus, 10 September 2006, and , accessed 15 November 2006.

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