

<BOOK REVIEWS>The History Problem : The  
Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia By  
Hiro Saito

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**BOOK REVIEW**

***The History Problem:  
The Politics of War  
Commemoration in East Asia***

**By Hiro Saito**

University of Hawai'i Press, 2017  
279 pages.

**Reviewed by Jason BUTTERS**



Since the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945), questions surrounding the history and commemoration of its traumas have impeded Japan's diplomatic relations with its neighbors. Victimized populations seek respect and reparations while, in their engagement with that legacy of wartime violence, the Japanese government alternates between self-interested politicking and benevolent activism. In recent decades, disagreements have spurred popular demonstrations, boycotts, and even violence, characterising the latest chapter of what sociologist Hiro Saito and others have called “the history problem.” Saito's *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia* outlines how conflicting interpretations of history—as articulated in government statements, commemorative acts, as well as domestic and international policy—have divided the region's populations and mobilized nationalisms. As the author explains, memories of Japan's military aggression continue to dictate the nature of its relations with China and Korea. Fuelling these divisions are Japan's selective commemoration of victimized groups, its downplaying of past military aggression and sexual violence, and public affronts to the sensitivities of neighboring societies through official visits by Japanese premiers to pay their respects to the Class A war criminals enshrined at Yasukuni. Investigating these processes, Saito asks whether the three nations most invested in these debates can “resolve the history problem and, if so, how?” (p. 3)

Demonstrating the link between war memory and international relations, *The History Problem* traces the peaks and valleys of Japan's postwar relations with China and Korea. The central actors are those responsible for official Japanese commemoration—mainly prime ministers with their official statements, actions, and policies on compensation and education—and those within Japan who seek to influence that commemoration (p. 12). The study's source base includes Japanese National Diet proceedings since 1945, relevant press releases, and popular discourse as reflected in Japanese dailies. The voices of opposition party members—usually the Japanese Socialist Party and Japanese Communist Party—illustrate the key struggle which, according to Saito, typifies war commemoration in Japan: nationalism versus cosmopolitanism. The former represents self-serving forms of commemoration that prioritize national interests, while the latter Saito uses to designate efforts that commemorate victims regardless of nationality or social status.

The book's periodization is at once familiar and refreshing, allowing readers of all backgrounds to navigate with its author more than seventy years of international political history. Saito uses the immediate postwar period (until 1964) to explain how reactions to the Tokyo trials, together with early conservative reforms under Yoshida Shigeru, planted the seed from which the international history problem later grew. Despite the hegemonic presence of this conservative mainstream, the efforts of Japan's cosmopolitan vanguard combined with the absence of normal diplomatic relations with either China or South Korea to delay the widening of rifts over commemoration. Japan's later normalization of relations with each is shown to have bolstered in Japan not only cosmopolitanism, but also reactionary, conservative challenges to cosmopolitan commemoration. Therefore, despite early efforts to connect Japanese with Korean victims of the atomic bombs and victimized populations in China, Japan's conservative mainstream forcefully rejected broad definitions of wartime culpability. Saito demonstrates this nationalist pushback with the 1979 enshrinement of Class A war criminals at Yasukuni and the LDP's reluctant portrayal of Japanese aggression in public school textbooks in the 1980s. Thus, while the LDP adopted "limited" cosmopolitanism in its proclamations of "regret" and "reproach" for wartime violence during this second period of the history problem, these gestures did little to diffuse an issue that had by then become a veritable powder keg (pp. 70–72).

Saito extols the positive effects of research, activism, and exchange, which he links with the search for war memory reconciliation. The pressure applied on the LDP by transnational organizations since the 1990s has been successful in compelling conservatives to adopt certain cosmopolitan policies and practises. This leads the author to posit a "cautiously affirmative" yes to the question of whether the history problem, together with its international ramifications, can be resolved (p. 178). In this regard, Saito notes that three recent prime ministers, heeding pressure, refrained from visiting Yasukuni, including Abe who has not been back since 2013 (pp. 112, 125). Nevertheless, while cosmopolitan commemoration has certainly influenced the conservative position, it remains unlikely that the LDP will suddenly adopt inclusive practices after decades of resistance. Thus, it is not only transnational cooperation, but in fact a collaborative reconceptualization of the very root of the history problem itself that is needed. The author explains: "East Asia's history problem developed because the Tokyo Trial, a common reference point for relevant political actors in the field, was deeply problematic" (p. 153). Victims of the crimes which the trials ostensibly punished are repeatedly angered by Japanese nationalists' dismissal of its verdicts as victor's justice. To Saito, the key is getting over and going "beyond" cleavages stemming from the trials.

Some questions remain. Cosmopolitanism has yet to appease the two sides, while consolidation of Korean and Chinese nationalism has only increased the demands of victims and advocacy groups. In response, the LDP has more than once redeployed its popular nationalism, opposing comfort women commemoration and preparing for constitutional reforms to deregulate Japanese defense and military capabilities. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen if an increased cosmopolitanism will not invite similar pushback in the future. Finally, Saito's framing of the emergence of Korea and China implies a link between strong economic and diplomatic relations with Tokyo and their participation in high-stakes war memory discourse. This reviewer wonders when one might expect states such as Indonesia or the Philippines to leverage greater power against Japan via the framework of the history

problem. Could proactive cosmopolitanism elsewhere act to contain the history problem in East Asia?

In a recent article, Saito reminds us “history problems are not unique to East Asia.... The act of remembering the past,” he continues, “is indispensable to social life because it enables people to articulate their collective identity.”<sup>1</sup> History problems occur wherever exclusive nationalism drives commemoration; they operate, in the long term, to aggravate and perpetuate national divisions and the dominance of political society by established elites. Cosmopolitanism, according to Saito, offers a way out from these cyclical clashes by transcending the nation-state and connecting societies on a more interpersonal level. *The History Problem* asks readers to question the authority of historical knowledge, the ownership of trauma, and the responsibilities of an educated citizenry. Presenting an impressive overview of recent Japanese and English-language historiography, Saito makes an important contribution to a growing body of transnational literature—the very body of work he argues is essential to cosmopolitan commemoration. Whether or not one agrees that the responsibility of academe is to inform policy, readers with an interest in postwar transnational history will find Saito’s historical overview insightful and his models of analysis transposable. An intriguing and timely case study of contemporary nationalism, *The History Problem* should be widely read not only for its engagement with the study of war memory in the Pacific, but also for its closeness to the fields of international and political history.

## REFERENCE

Saito 2017

Hiro Saito. “The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 15, issue 14, no. 4 (August 2017). <http://apjif.org/2017/15/Saito.html>. Last accessed October 10, 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> Saito 2017, p. 2.