

Mistakes, distrust led to Sino-Japanese war

The Yomiuri Shimbun

It is 80 years since the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (see 📖) on July 7, 1937, which became the flash point of the Sino-Japanese war. Unable to get out of the quagmire of the war situation, Japan refused to withdraw troops from China, deepened its confrontation with the United States and then went to war against the United States and Britain four years later. In the end, Japan was defeated. I asked historian Ikuhiko Hata what the Sino-Japanese war actually was. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

The Yomiuri Shimbun: How do you view the Marco Polo Bridge Incident?

Ikuhiko Hata: Setting aside the Japanese side, I want to focus on the fact that the image on the Chinese side has changed. Fifty years later, in 1986, the testimony of Jin Zhenzhong, a Chinese army battalion commander who fought at the site of the Marco Polo Bridge, was released. Until that time, the Chinese side maintained the historical view of the Kuomintang regime and claimed it had been a planned conspiracy by the [Imperial] Japanese Army. However, this was refuted, and it became clear that it was an accidental shooting by Chinese soldiers. In other words, even though it could have been settled as a local dispute, it expanded into a full-scale war due to mutual misunderstanding and distrust.

Q: Having many people know the actual circumstances of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident can lead to a theory of equal accountability. Therefore, it became necessary for China, from a political point of view, to review its official historical view.

A: I think so. I was watching if they might come up with a new official view of the history on the 80th anniversary. Then, following a proposal by President Xi Jinping at a Politburo meeting two years ago, a description on the war in national curriculum textbooks issued this January changed the name of the war from the “8-year war of resistance against Japanese aggression” to the “14-year war of

resistance against Japanese aggression.”

In other words, the starting point of the war against Japan was changed from 1937 to the Manchurian Incident (or Sept. 18 Incident) in 1931, which had largely been ignored in textbooks. It can be read as the Chinese Communist Party shedding the historical view of the Nationalist Party in Taiwan and trying to establish its own national view of history.

Q: In Japan, there are quite a few people who describe the period from the Manchurian Incident until the end of the war as a 15-year war.

A: It was more than a decade ago, but one of the 15-year war theorists was happy to tell me that when he expounded at a Chinese academic meeting that China should also follow suit, many people were in agreement. But since it was actually 13 years and 11 months, the Chinese researchers have rephrased it to a 14-year war rather than 15 years.

In any case, it is well known the Manchurian Incident began with the staged railway bombing by [Japan's] Kwantung Army, and as it is indefensible, China may be using it as a new card to play against Japan.

Q: At the beginning of 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, the Emperor said, “It is important to fully learn the history of the war that began with the Manchurian Incident.”

A: As interest in the Manchurian Incident was waning, I was also touched by his Majesty's allusion to it. In this context, I recalled the insight of Emperor Showa. Ten days before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, anxious that Sino-Japanese relations were reaching a breaking point and in order to make a drastic concession to the Nationalist government of China, he tried to take the unprecedented step of holding an Imperial Council meeting.

The focus at this time was to acknowledge the unification of China with Chiang Kai-shek at the center, and to stop the North China Separation Operation (see 📖). Emperor Showa probably judged if the resources of Fumimaro Konoe, who had just won public confidence and become prime minister; Foreign Minister Koki Hirota, who had been calling for the

strategy to be canceled; and Kanji Ishihara, strategy director of the General Staff Office, could be combined, war could potentially be avoided.

However, just at the stage when it reached Kurahel Yuasa, the lord keeper of the privy seal, and elder statesman Kinmochi Saionji, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident occurred, and it came to nothing. Sadly, the last opportunity to avoid the Sino-Japanese war was missed, but I am impressed by Emperor Showa's good intuition.

Q: The problem lay in the maneuvers of the hard-liners against China who, having experienced success with the Manchurian Incident, intended to make Northern China into a second Manchukuo.

A: Although the Japanese China Garrison Army in the field had a non-expansion policy, the Kwantung Army and central hard-liners tended toward “ichigeki-ron” — the theory of getting the Nationalist government to succumb by way of a powerful blow from the Japanese Army. Hearing the first reports of the incident, Akira Muto, strategic planning department chief at the General Staff Office, responded, “Things are getting interesting,” and pressured his boss Ishihara, a supporter of the non-expansion policy, to agree to the dispatch of three divisions. Prime Minister Konoe and Foreign Minister Hirota were indecisive. Even when Ishihara said, “Please fly to Nanjing and talk with Chiang Kai-shek,” they did not move.

Chiang Kai-shek also grew more distrustful of the Japanese government and military, refused Germany's peace mediation, and decided on do-or-die resistance.

While neither Japan nor China wanted a full-scale war, they slipped into the quagmire of a long battle. The Sino-Japanese war, which broke out without a declaration of war, was absorbed into the Greater East Asia War against the United States and Britain in 1941, and by the end of the war, 1 million Japanese troops had been stationed, though it was not a main battlefield of the world.

Q: Unexpectedly, the Nationalist government was included among the victorious countries of World War II, but immediately



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afterward civil war broke out again between the Nationalist government and the Communist Party. The People's Republic of China was established in 1949. It was as if the Communist Party were fishing in troubled waters.

A: When visiting Japanese politicians and former soldiers referred to an apology, Mao Zedong said he was grateful to the Japanese Army that had fought against and destroyed the Nationalist government and showed his appreciation. Since the overthrow of the Nationalist government was the top priority for the Communist Party, Mao's comments likely reflected how he honestly felt.

Q: What are the prospects of future relations between Japan and China?

A: China after the Cultural Revolution made me think that confusion and stagnation would continue semipermanently, but that prediction proved to be wrong. China has flourished since the 1990s on a high growth path and is now on par with the United States as a superpower of the world. This miraculous achievement should be recognized without prejudice. Though the system of the country is different from Japan, we can expect them to mature through self-reform and hopefully maintain cool but friendly relations with Japan, neither too close, nor too distant. (This interview was conducted by Yomiuri Shimbun

📖 Marco Polo Bridge Incident

On July 7, 1937, an armed clash was triggered by the Chinese 29th Army firing on the Imperial Japanese Army during a night exercise at the Marco Polo Bridge in the suburbs of Beijing. A ceasefire was settled on July 11 of the year, but the Cabinet led by Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe decided that same day to send three divisions to Northern China. The Japanese Army occupied Beijing at the end of July. In August, fighting erupted in Shanghai, and it expanded to a full-scale war between China and Japan.

📖 North China Separation Operation

After experiencing the success of the Manchurian Incident, the Japanese Army decided to separate five provinces in Northern China and Inner Mongolia, such as Hebei Province, from Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, and to establish a local pro-Japanese government. The East Hebei Autonomous Council was established in 1935.

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