

Culture at root of Yasukuni issue

By Huang Chih-huei

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

When Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine on Aug. 13, the Taiwan media reacted in chorus, playing up opposition to the visit and reporting that Koizumi went to the shrine in complete disregard of domestic and overseas opposition.

The way the Taiwan press covered the event gave the impression that Koizumi is no better than a lone-wolf, rightist politician.

However, such reporting deserves to be criticized as irresponsible and prejudiced and serves only to misrepresent how the public in Taiwan perceive the current state of affairs in Japan.

At the same time, it is true to say that nationalistic arguments have been gaining force in Japan over the past decade.

What must be asked is: Why has that kind of argument been steadily gaining popularity in Japan?

The commotion over Koizumi's Yasukuni visit and the government authorization of a nationalistic middle school history textbook are closely linked with the surge in the nationalistic tenor of argument in Japan.

What has been put forth as the official views of China and South Korea under the circumstances is that the militarism extolled once by Japanese Imperial forces is being revived. As long as Beijing and Seoul regard the current nationalistic trend in Japanese society as equal to a revival of militarism, their reactions will naturally be extremely bitter.

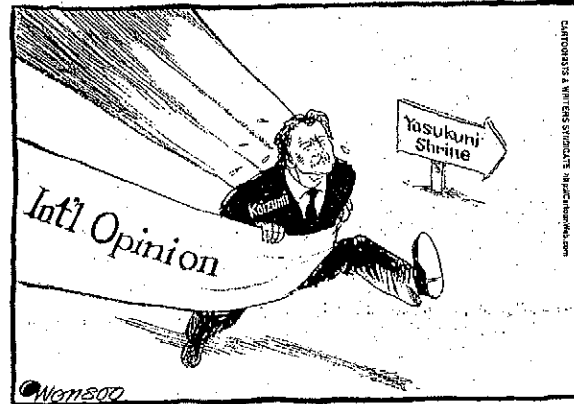
But if it were true that militarism is being resuscitated in Japan, not only China and South Korea, but all of Asia—and even the United States—would raise their voices in protest, since the international community as a whole would have to stem the resurgence of militarism in Japan.

Quite to the contrary, however, no responses similar to those of China and South Korea regarding the state of things in Japan have been heard from Europe or the United States.

Japanese opposed to Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine charge that the visit violated the Constitution's separation of state and religion. They also point out that Class-A war criminals convicted by the Tokyo War Tribunal are enshrined in Yasukuni. They maintain that the visit to the shrine by the nation's political leader offended our Asian neighbors, thereby jeopardizing diplomatic relations with them.

In the midst of the uproar involving the visit, Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka made remarks quite unusual for a Cabinet member, publicly opposing Koizumi's visit to the shrine. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan made a peremptory remark that Koizumi should give up the idea of making the visit.

The remarks by Tanaka and Tang provoked strong antipathy, so that many people who had been indifferent to the issue took an interest in the proposed visit, thus negating the ability



of those opposed to it to use foreign criticism to put pressure on the prime minister.

The theory that Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni offends Japan's neighbors is a double-edged sword because the theory itself cannot help but offend the Japanese people.

The crux of the problem is that the people of Japan have their own national sentiments and arguments on both sides of the Yasukuni issue have shared the same cultural frame of reference with regard to traditions.

Why did Koizumi stick to his decision to visit Yasukuni?

The prime minister noted his determination to visit the shrine to express "my wishes that Japan should never cause a war again, as well as my deep respect for those who had to go to war for the sake of their families and the country." Koizumi also said several times that a visit to Yasukuni Shrine "should be considered only natural for a Japanese."

Given that Koizumi's power base has been strengthened following the Liberal Democratic Party's victory in the House of Councillors election at the end of July, it must have been obvious to him that visiting Yasukuni would be of little significance in terms of public support in domestic politics, while it would cost a lot on the diplomatic front.

Koizumi dared to be faithful to his sentiments knowing the visit would not benefit him in domestic politics or diplomacy.

While stubborn, Koizumi was not so reckless as to completely ignore the will of the people. He did hesitate over his plan to visit Yasukuni in light of intensifying controversy at home and abroad over the issue, but eventually visited "after thinking over the matter as carefully as possible."

What was his "thinking over the matter" based upon, then?

The answer is probably that Koizumi "thought it over" with the national sentiments of the Japanese people to prop up his judgment.

As a reflection of this, a tabulation of views sent to Yahoo! Japan, a popular computer network, which is widely considered politically neutral, showed that about 65 percent of those writing in favored Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni, while views against the visit were only 30 per-

cent. In light of this and other surveys, it can be seen that the prime minister's decision to visit the shrine did not disregard the sentiments of the Japanese people.

Of special interest is the fact that even Soichiro Tahara, a well-known liberal-oriented Japanese opinion leader, even though opposing the visit, acknowledged in an article in a weekly magazine his sympathy for Koizumi's decision to visit the shrine, saying, "Honestly speaking, there is little difference in sentiments between Koizumi and me regarding the issue of his visit to Yasukuni."

Furthermore, Tahara once said in a conversation with a Chinese person that even those who were convicted as Class-A war criminals, once they were executed, "should be considered, when seen from the Japanese point of view, to have been purified of their responsibilities for the war crimes they committed, and therefore their remains should be free from blame."

He went on to say, "In Japan, a great majority of the people consider that every one, once they die, should be thought of as having an existence analogous somehow to Buddha or a deity." He then called for the Chinese to understand the Japanese way of thinking.

Judging from what Tahara said, the notion prevalent among the Japanese populace that the dead should be regarded—without exception—as "Buddha-like," has long been shared among Japanese—irrespective of differences in their political stances.

This attitude toward the souls of the dead constitutes the crux of religious feelings of the Japanese and is therefore the key to understanding Japanese culture.

The anniversary of the end of the war, Aug. 15, falls during the Bon festival, in which many families commemorate the dead, offering a prayer for the repose of their souls.

There exists a wide gap between Japanese and Chinese attitudes toward the dead.

In China, the notion has been handed down since ancient times that the consequences of crimes committed by an individual should be expiated, sometimes even with death, by the perpetrator's entire extended family. This mode of thinking even applied to the Cultural Revolution, with demands being made that the parents,

close friends and even the ancestors of those labeled "antirevolutionary" be harshly condemned.

Such thinking is astounding in the eyes of Japanese.

The Chinese way of thinking is evidently different from what is widely accepted in Japanese culture, and it also differs from the basic principle of today's international law that responsibilities for offenses committed by an individual should not be borne by anybody other than the offender.

The prime minister's visit to Yasukuni drew a lot of public attention in Taiwan. In particular, those calling for Taiwan's unification with mainland China reacted vehemently, demanding that the Taiwan government lodge a strong protest with Japan over the issue.

The Taiwan government, however, fell short of accepting the demand—with good reason.

During the war, the people of Taiwan were under Japanese colonial rule and a large number of Taiwanese were conscripted to fight for Japan in China and the rest of Asia. The more than 200,000 who fought had no alternative but to go to war just like Japanese soldiers who did so for the sake of their families and the country. Despite the fact that more than 30,000 of them lost their lives in the war, no official condolence has been extended by the Taiwan government to the souls of the war dead.

In truth, it appears that no soul-searching about the war has been done in Taiwan yet.

The ruling Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party), when it moved to Taiwan from the mainland, had the status of a victor in the war against Japan. The Kuomintang administration failed to understand the sentiments of the people of Taiwan, many of whom had no option other than to fight a war on behalf of an enemy country. The Kuomintang even tried to find fault with the families of such Taiwanese. This is what was really meant when former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui referred to "a sorrow resulting from being a Taiwanese by birth."

In light of the circumstances in which Taiwan found itself during World War II, any politician in Taiwan may well feel opposed to parroting Beijing's outcry against the visit by Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine.

What Taiwan politicians should say is this: "We can understand well the national sentiments of the Japanese people. As a matter of national sentiments, Taiwan has something common to the Japanese people. We propose that Taiwan and Japan make efforts for mutual understanding concerning our shared wartime history. We both are better advised to draw lessons from the evils of the war and go hand in hand for making further contribution to ensure peace in Asia by disposing of problems involving war responsibility in a rational manner."

What is of the highest significance for Taiwan is to boost amicable ties with as many friendly countries as possible.

[Huang is assistant research fellow, Academia Sinica, Taipei.]