

COVER STORY

WORLD LEADERS

# DISTORTING HISTORY

Shinzo Abe's personal political ambitions endanger the region's stability

By Ding Ying



MA FING





**Y**in Shuzhang, 76, can never forget one winter night in 1943. It was the night when her family and a neighbor's family stayed in a small cave close to her village on the coast of east China's Shandong Province to hide from Japanese soldiers patrolling the area. She and her neighbor's 3-year-old son both caught a fever from the cold.

They were found by a soldier from the "Chinese Collaborationist Army," which was made up of Chinese soldiers forced into service by the Japanese. While the two families awaited their deaths in desperation, the soldier whispered to them, "I didn't want to be a traitor. The Japanese forced me with guns." He passed Yin a warm boiled egg, which was a luxury in those days, and left quietly. Yin survived, but the neighbor's son died three days later.

"In those days, things like this happened almost every day. Running away from the Japanese was routine," she recalled. "How can I forget those terrifying days?"

Yin's story is but one among thousands from the time of Japan's aggression in other Asian countries during World War II. People in China, Korea as well as countries in Southeast Asia were killed, raped, mugged and had their dignity trampled on during these years, which is why none of these countries can ever forget the aggression that they suffered at the hands of Japanese forces.

Unfortunately, Japan's official attitude toward its wartime history remains vague, with some even attempting to revise it or otherwise downplay the atrocities committed by their forefathers.

Japanese officials recently incited a major diplomatic incident when they paid tribute at the Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines all Japanese soldiers that died in conflicts from the Boshin War (1868-69) up to the end of World War II, including 14 convicted Class A war criminals. Even after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo ▶▶



Abe attracted condemnation from members of the international community—including many East Asian countries ravaged by the Empire of Japan's colonialism, as well as its own ally, the United States—Japanese Internal Affairs Minister Yoshitaka Shindo still paid a visit to the shrine on the first day of 2014. These visits not only heightened regional tensions, but aroused alert worldwide over Japan's increasingly right-leaning leadership.

"I cannot understand. Since when were murderers good people?" Yin asked.

Conservative estimates suggest that at least 35 million Chinese nationals were killed during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-45). People like Yin wonder: Will Japan make a return to the political views of its past? Will the country retrace the path it walked before?

The war-linked Yasukuni Shrine has long been seen as a symbol of Japan's past militarism. The 14 Class-A war criminals enshrined there include Hideki Tojo, who planned Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and Abe's own grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, who was charged with Class-A war crimes though not tried or convicted.

## Complicating matters

Yang Bojiang, a senior research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), considers Abe's Yasukuni Shrine visit as another step rightward following the release of a national security strategy, new defense program guidelines and a medium-term defense buildup plan in December last year. The three documents are seen as aiming to free Japan from its postwar political shackles.

On a personal level, Abe can fulfill his own political desires, said Yang. The researcher predicts that as Abe has pledged to restore Japan's status, it will be only a matter of time before he tries to lift the country's self-imposed ban on exercising the right of collective self-defense, or coming to the aid of an ally under armed attack.

Zhang Yong, another researcher of Japanese studies with the CASS, pointed out that being a representative of politicians born after World War II, Abe has no clear understanding of Japan's responsibilities toward the outcomes of the war, which is why he tries to beautify Japan's aggression and distort history.

"He prefers military realism instead of political realism. He chose an extremist method of visiting the shrine to fulfill his political mission



of right deviation," Zhang said. He noticed that Abe's visit had sent two messages: getting rid of the postwar international system to make Japan a political and military giant and seeking more support by catering to the domestic right.

"The only effect of Abe's visit is the deterioration of the East Asian situation, and increased tension in current conflicts between Japan and its neighbors," said Zhang, predicting that the relationship between China and Japan is going to become even more complicated.

Abe's visit to the shrine not only hurt the feelings of the nations that Japan invaded during World War II, but also violated the conscience of international society and challenged the postwar international order, said Qu Xing, President of the China Institute of International Studies.

"The 14 Class-A war criminals represented at the Yasukuni Shrine should be nailed to a pillar of shame in history. They were Japan's versions of Adolf Hitler, but they are still worshiped by Japan's right-wing politicians. It humiliates international society as a whole. The Chinese people and our government will definitely fight against this dangerous trend," said Qu.

## Making a choice

Chinese Ambassador to Japan, Cheng Yonghua, published an article in *Mainichi Shimbun*, one of Japan's major newspapers, on December 30,

2013. In the article he stated that China has always differentiated Japanese people from Japanese militarists, and war criminals from ordinary soldiers. Like Chinese people, Japanese people were also victims of war, to which Japanese militarists should be held responsible.

"We have no objection to ordinary Japanese paying tribute to their family members. But Japanese leaders' visits to the shrine concern the country's understanding of war. China can never accept such visits," said Cheng.

Abe and his acts have once again exposed the dangerous intention of the Japanese right wing to beautify war criminals and challenge the results of World War II as well as the postwar international order, said Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Urging Japanese politicians to reflect on their history and correct errors, Hua stressed that the Chinese and Asian people will never allow Japan to turn back the clock.

Abe's administration has often defined the Japanese-U.S. relationship as an alliance based on the same interests and values. However, Abe has recently reached the bottom line of the United States' conceptions of history and war, said Liu Jianguo, a professor with Tsinghua University. On the issue of Abe's visit to the shrine, Washington and Tokyo's interests and values are quite different, Liu pointed out.

"If some countries were to worship Osama





**ENVOY:** Japanese Ambassador to China, Masato Kitera (front), arrives for a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on December 26, 2013. At the meeting, Wang expressed strong condemnation over Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine

Bin Laden as a martyr 50 years later, would the United States accept it?" asked Liu. He added that regional instability is not in the interests of Washington's Asia-Pacific policy.

"This move amounts to a barefaced denial of the abhorrent atrocities the Empire of Japan committed during a dark chapter for humanity, and also a blatant refusal to face up to or learn from history," said *People's Daily*, the flagship newspaper of the Communist Party of China, in a commentary on January 2.

The commentary compared Japan's attitude with that of Germany. "Abe's conspicuous lack of historical honesty contrasts shamefully with the courage and vision of late West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, who dropped to his knees at the monument to victims of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in a spontaneous act of genuine repentance," the article read. "The sincere remorse and in-depth reflection of Brandt and other German leaders paved the way for their nation to be accepted by the international community. The moment Brandt knelt down, his nation stood up."

Now, Japan has to answer the question: Will it stand up from the shadow of war and become a responsible power in the region? Or will it resort to its old path and become a common enemy to its neighbors? ■



dingying@bjreview.com

<http://www.bjreview.com>