

Talk by Tennichi Takahiro, Editorial Writer of the Yomiuri Shimbun, on “The Yomiuri Project on War Responsibility in Japan” at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, The George Washington University, January 22, 2007

The Yomiuri project on war responsibility was launched in August 2005 at the initiative of Watanabe Tsuneo, and the team of 17 journalists published a book “From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor; Who was responsible?” in December 2006. Although Watanabe is the key figure who set the Yomiuri Shimbun’s political position in the center-right, he draws a clear line between rightists and himself in his interpretation of WWII, as well as on the issue of Yasukuni Shrine. The goals of the Yomiuri project were, first of all, to provide younger generations with information of a non-glorified, but rather disastrous and horrendous aspects of the war, and secondly, for Japanese to face and clarify war responsibilities by themselves, independently of the Tokyo Tribunal. The team’s hope is to give momentum for building a national consensus about the meaning of the war.

The project posed the following five questions:

1. Why did Japan extend the lines of battle following the 1931 Manchurian Incident, plunging the country into the quagmire of the Sino-Japanese War?
2. Why did Japan go to war with the United States in spite of extremely slim prospects for victory?
3. What foolishness caused the Japanese military to employ "banzai attacks," or die-but-never-surrender action, and "kamikaze" suicide aircraft attacks, after the rapid deterioration of Japan's position shortly after victories in the initial phase of the Pacific War?
4. Were sufficient efforts made to bring the war to an end and was it possible to prevent the civilian devastation caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
5. What problems were there with the Tokyo Tribunal in which Allied Forces charged Japanese political and military leaders with war crimes?

In answering the questions 1-4, the team specified both individuals (i.e. ambitious military leaders) and the political system (“Tosuiken no Dokuritsu”: independence of the supreme command and “Gunbu Daijin Gen’eki Bukansei”: the veto power of army and navy on appointments of Prime Minister) that allowed them to drag the state into a series of wars. In addition to the structural problem of the government’s decision making system, Mr. Tennichi also pointed out the significance of the role of media in fanning pro-war sentiment among Japanese people. For the question 5, the Yomiuri team pointed out several problems of the Tokyo Tribunal, including the issue of the Japanese POWs who were condemned to forced labor in Siberia. Soviet Union sent a judge and a prosecutor to the Tokyo Tribunal while its leaders were not accused for their violation of the international law. In South East Asia, France and the Netherlands continued their wars in Asia aimed at maintaining their colonies in the region. Both France and the Netherlands respectively sent a judge and a prosecutor to Tokyo Tribunal.

In their conclusion, the Yomiuri team specified 32 individuals who were mainly responsible for the war. Among these 32 individuals, 18 were put on trial at the Tokyo Tribunal, but 14 were not previously assigned responsibility for the war. They identified Tojo Hideki as most responsible for initiating the war against the US, and Konoe Fumimaro, who committed suicide before being arrested, as the second most responsible. Ishihara Kanji, a mastermind of the Manchurian Incident, was added to the list although he was not accused in the Tokyo Tribunal.

In the Tokyo Tribunal, 28 military and political leaders were put on trial but the Yomiuri committee concluded that 10 of them were not mainly responsible for the war. These people include Shigemitsu Mamoru, a former ambassador to London who opposed the Tripartite Alliance, and Kaya Okinori, Finance Minister of the Tojo cabinet.

In order to provide the social background of the Yomiuri project's goal, Mr. Tennichi briefly explained the absence of comprehensive study on war responsibility by the Japanese themselves in the post-war history. During the immediate post-war period under the US occupation, a few political leaders, including Higashikuni Naruhiko and Shidehara Kijuro, tried to initiate an examination of war criminals, but these attempts were not successful owing to pressure from outside powers. Since the end of the US occupation, the Japanese government did not make any attempt to clarify the war responsibility on its own. In academia, historians have been facing the issue of war responsibility more actively, but their works have tended to focus on some specific issues, topics or events within a very limited time frame. Thus, the Yomiuri project was the first attempt to comprehensively consider and assess war responsibility by Japanese themselves, Mr. Tennichi argues.

Yomiuri has been receiving responses from a wider variety of audiences; it has received 5000 messages, and especially the articles published between August 13 and 15 that showed their conclusion alone met with 300 responses. Mr. Tennichi mentioned that three fourths were positive and the rest negative. Some intellectuals and politicians also commented on the project, many of them praised it for providing a new model of history research and cooperation between journalism and academism. At the same time, Yomiuri has also received negative responses from some of its readers who were disappointed at the conclusion that the Yomiuri team reached.

Regarding the political implication of this project, Mr. Tennichi brought up the controversies over prime ministers' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. He argues that the Yasukuni issue – or in what manner a prime minister should deal with the war dead – is a domestic issue. However, “some Japanese leaders that caused the reckless war and betrayed Japan's national interests, thereby causing the Japanese people great suffering... It is symbolic that Emperor Showa stopped visiting Yasukuni Shrine after Class-A war criminals were enshrined.”

Mr. Tennichi continued by pointing out some differences between the Yomiuri's stance and other conservative views. In contrast to those opinions that emphasize the aspect of self-defense in response to the Western colonialism, he argues that what is important is

that Japanese leaders misread the trend of the international politics. Many Japanese leaders did not understand the rising nationalism of China. Japanese Army often treated POWs very badly in contravention of international laws.

In his concluding remarks, he quoted a passage from the Yomiuri book, “Who was responsible?”: “It should be noted that the Yomiuri Shimbun’s reexamination of where responsibility for the war sits was launched on its committee’s own initiative, and was not due to pressure from China and/or South Korea. The Yomiuri Shimbun’s efforts were based on its belief that there can be no genuinely honest and friendly dialogue with those countries which suffered considerable damage and casualties in the wars with Japan, without correctly understanding Japan’s past. To that end, we, the Japanese people, should follow our consciences in explaining on our own how barbaric the wars were and who should be held responsible.”

About the Speaker: Mr. Tennichi is one of the senior members of the Yomiuri Shimbun War Responsibility Reexamination Committee. He has been at the Yomiuri Shimbun since 1981 as staff writer, deputy editor and now editorial writer. He was also a part-time lecturer at Gakushuin University in Tokyo from 2004 to 2005. Before that, he contributed to the publication, *Challenges for China-Japan-U.S. Cooperation* (edited by Kokubun Ryosei, Japan Center for International Exchange, Tokyo, New York, 1998). He received his M.A. from The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University and his Bachelor of Laws from the Faculty of Law of The University of Tokyo.