

# The “Japan Is Great!” Boom, Historical Revisionism, and the Government

**Tomomi Yamaguchi**

This is the first of a two-part article. Part two, entitled “The National Story of ‘Japan Is Great!’” by Hayakawa Tadanori, is available [here](#).

**Abstract:** As the [Tokyo Shimbun reported in its recent article](#), the expression “Japan Is Great!” and a distinctive nationalistic sentiment associated with it flood the mass media in Japan today. Journalists and television personalities praise Japan ad nauseam. Hayakawa Tadanori is an editor and writer who has extensively covered this “Japan-Is-Great” phenomenon. Analyzing issues surrounding nationalism and propaganda both in pre-war and contemporary Japan, he examines topics ranging from patriotic mobilization in pre-war and war-time Japan to post-war propaganda promoting nuclear energy. His most recent book, *The Dystopia of “Japan Is Great”: The Genealogy of Singing One's Own Praises in Wartime* (“Nihon sugoi” no disutopia: senjika jiga jisan no keifu, Seikyūsha, 2016) analyzes “precursors to the current ‘Japan Is Great!’ discourse” in publications between 1925 and 1945.

ideology can enter the mundane, everyday spheres of life. In doing so, Hayakawa brilliantly demonstrates how the nationalistic movement “Japanism” (Nihonshugi) took off. He shows that these books “discover” the greatness of Japan everywhere, from rice and fish consumption to etiquette, hygiene, and physical training methods. And through his examination of nationalistic publications in the country’s past—those that like the “Japan Is Great” publications today also overstated the uniqueness of the country’s culture and technology—he clarifies how that older “Japan Is Great” discourse bolstered the mobilization for the Greater East Asia War, thereby awakening us to the danger of history repeating itself.

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The book does not deal with any acclaimed, classic texts; instead, it collects and analyzes “silly books that may be thrown into the trash bin of history, books useless for our understanding and meaningless for the fate of humankind.” (Hayakawa 2006: 14) Examining these seemingly unimportant texts, such as various “how-to” books on etiquette, management skills, and workers’ ethics, and a collection of essays by elementary school students, he highlights how a “Japan Is Great”

# 「日本スゴイ」の ディストピア

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**Hayakawa Tadanori, *The Dystopia of "Japan Is Great": The Genealogy of Singing One's Own Praises in Wartime* ("Nihon sugoi" no disutopia: senjika jiga jisan no keifu, Seikyūsha, 2016)**

In “The National Story of ‘Japan Is Great,’” translated by Joseph Essertier, Hayakawa focuses his attention on the contemporary phenomenon of “Japan Is Great” in popular publications. From a vast number of publications, Hayakawa selects the title *Teacher, Japan Is Great, Isn’t It?: Live Coverage of Classroom Excitement!* (Sensei, Nihon-tte Sugoine: Kyōshitsu no Kandō wo Jikkyō Chūkei!, Takagi Shobō, 2015), written by Hattori Takeshi, a public junior high school teacher, as the quintessential example of the genre. The book presents Hattori’s practice of teaching moral education in the classroom, using anachronistic materials featuring “great

predecessors and examples” from the period prior to Japan’s defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. Hattori is a member of a teachers’ organization, Jogyō Zukuri JAPAN (Lesson Planning JAPAN), a teachers’ organization that succeeded Jiyū Shugi Shikan Kenkyūkai founded in 1995 by Fujioka Nobukatsu, and dissolved in 2014. (The “Association for Advancement of an Unbiased View of History” is the official name in English for the Jiyū Shugi Shikan Kenkyūkai, but it is also often translated as the “Association for the Advancement of a Liberal View of History”). The new Jogyō Zukuri JAPAN is less intent on going to the barricades to boost Japanese pride in the public arena and emphasizes instead “designing classes that will produce a proud Japanese people.” (hokori aru nihonjin wo sodateru jogyō wo jissen.)

As exemplified by the connection between the prototypical “Japan Is Great” book by Hattori and his involvement in the revisionist history movement, Hayakawa traces the origin of the contemporary “Japan Is Great” phenomenon to the historical revisionism of the mid 1990s. The inclusion of references to “comfort women” in all junior high school history textbooks in the 1990s triggered a sense of urgency and anxiety among right-leaning citizens, leading to the growth of the revisionist history movement, most notably of Jiyū Shugi Shikan Kenkyūkai and Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho wo Tsukurukai (Society for History Textbook Reform). These groups countered that the version of Japanese history taught in schools was masochistic. Instead, they insisted that a positive vision of Japanese history was necessary to boost children’s confidence in their country. The current Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, has long been deeply involved in the revisionist movement as a founding member and executive secretary of the group of young LDP politicians promoting revisionist history, Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōiku wo Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai (Group of Young Diet Members for Consideration of Japan’s Future and History

Education), established in 1997.

The neo-nationalist revisionist history textbook movement met heavy criticism and resistance by teachers, teachers' unions such as Nikkyōso (Japan Teachers' Union), citizens groups such as [Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21](#), parents and community residents, as well as progressive scholars of history and education. The adoption of junior high school history textbooks every four years became a major site of struggle between neo-nationalists and progressives. Although promoters of revisionist textbooks have struggled to gain approval for their adoption in public schools, their numbers have increased steadily, particularly recently under the Abe administration; for example, one publisher of revisionist textbooks, Ikuhōsha, increased its share 1.6 times, to 6.3% of the history textbook market, and 1.4 times, to 5.7% of the civics textbook market, for textbooks to be used from 2016. According to journalist Ikezoe Noriaki, the content of Ikuhōsha textbooks mirrors the Abe administration's priorities, and the close relation between Abe and groups and individuals supporting the Ikuhōsha textbooks is well known. More significantly, the description of "comfort women" disappeared from all the junior high school history textbooks as an act of self-censorship by all the major publishers in 2011. Finally a new company, Manabisha, entered into the market in 2015, and its junior high school history textbook, developed by a group of school teachers, is currently the only one that includes the description of "comfort women" used from 2016, with 0.5% share of the market.

In addition to his revisionist view of history, Abe has been promoting Japan in idealized and nationalistic terms, both domestically and in addressing the international community, above all the United States. In 2006, Abe published a book in Japanese with the title *Toward a Beautiful Nation* (Utsukushii Kuni e), and during his first term as the Prime Minister from

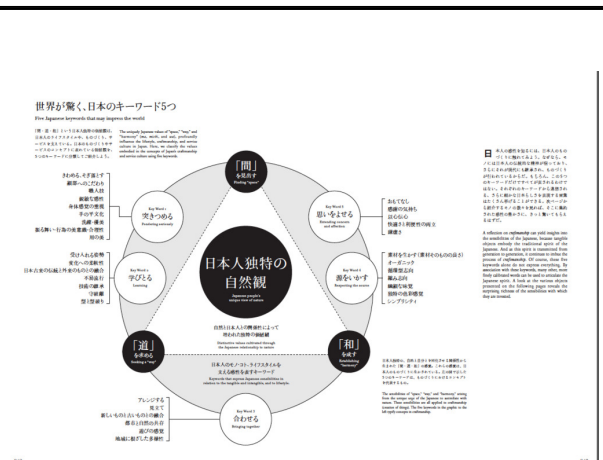
September, he used the phrase "beautiful nation" to express his basic philosophy. In 2012, Abe became Prime Minister for the second time and initiated various campaigns to promote Japan internationally. For example, he reinforced the "[Cool Japan Strategy](#)" with respect to technology, industry, and traditional and popular culture, and appointed a cabinet-level minister to lead the effort. In 2015, he initiated the "[Japan House](#)" project, an initiative directed at Los Angeles, London and San Paolo "to nurture a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japan in the international community, by creating a number of hubs from which to showcase and communicate Japan as a country of countless charms, able to enrich the rest of the world." [The Asahi Shimbun](#), however, reports that it was originally conceived of as a group of centers for launching an international PR campaign for disseminating Japan's position, in opposition to efforts by South Korea and China, on issues such as territorial disputes and historical consciousness. When the idea was derided for entailing nothing other than "propaganda houses," the government backed off from the idea of presenting exhibits on territorial disputes (such as Takeshima/Dokdo with Korea and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with China) and from historical controversies (such as "comfort women" and other wartime atrocities).

What is striking is the extent to which all these attempts by the Abe administration to promote Japan's greatness to the world are rooted in historical revisionism and nationalistic political interests concerning territorial issues. Of course, claiming a nation's greatness is not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon; it is typical of nationalism in general. We have the recent example of U.S. President Donald Trump campaigning under the slogan, "Make America Great Again," as [Nakano Koichi mentions](#). Yet, with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics approaching, it is highly likely that these policies to advertise Japan's greatness abroad will be promoted all the more by the Japanese government and

corporations, with the giant PR company Dentsu working alongside them.

The Japanese government unveiled a new public relations campaign on March 8, 2017, when the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) announced the release of a "concept book" entitled *Wonder NIPPON!* METI writes, "As the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games approach, worldwide interest in Japan appears to be growing." In the context of this growing interest the Ministry has produced this book, aiming "to convey Japan's unique sensibilities and values to the rest of the world as the foundation of commodities and services provided under the Cool Japan Initiative." *Wonder NIPPON!* is filled with expressions emblematic of the "Japan Is Great" genre, such as "The whole world is impressed by Japan!," "Japanese people's unique view of nature," and so forth. Their list of references (p.35) includes classic Nihonjinron works such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), Doi Takeo's *Anatomy of Dependence* (1971), and even *The Japanese and the Jews* (1970) by conservative critic Yamamoto Shichihei (1921-1991), who published the work under the authorship of a pseudonymous "Isaiah Ben-Dasan." METI's *Wonder NIPPON!* is nothing but a typical "Japan-Is-Great" book, officially produced, promoted, and disseminated by the government.

**Pages 2-3 of METI's *Wonder NIPPON!* : "The whole world is impressed by Japan!" This page is filled with comments praising Japan in English, French, Chinese, Malay, Indonesian and Vietnamese, with Japanese translations. Interestingly, comments by Europeans and Americans are introduced with their names, while comments by Asians are by nameless "international students."**



**Pages 42-43 of *Wonder NIPPON!* "Five Japanese keywords that may impress the world," and at the center of the diagram "Japanese people's unique view of nature." (The Japanese version is more confident than the English, not including the qualifier "may.")**

The "Japan-Is-Great" phenomenon trended not just through promotion by the media but significantly through active government promotion. Moreover, the government's desire to promote this image is part of the so-called "history war" campaign that it wages against Beijing and Seoul, on issues related to historical consciousness (in particular, the "comfort women" and the Nanking Massacre) and territorial disputes. Hayakawa also points out that the "Japan-Is-Great" boom coincides with the boom of hate-Korea and hate-China publications that portray Korea and China in an



extremely derogatory and racist manner (Hayakawa 2016: 13). In this article and in other publications, Hayakawa finds precedents for the contemporary “Japan-Is-Great” boom in the “Japanese spirit” and “Japanism” discourse of the 1930s.

### Related articles

Jeff Kingston, [Nationalism in the Abe Era](#).

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Tawara Yoshifumi, [The Abe Government and 2014 Screening of Japanese Junior High School History Textbooks](#).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Moral education will become an official school subject from 2018 in elementary schools, and 2019 in junior high schools. This is a major change from the subject’s present informal status. This has long been a neo-nationalist goal, one harshly criticized by progressives as a key step toward resurrection of the subject of Shūshin (moral training) in pre-war Japan. In the face of strong opposition, the government made the subject an official part of the curriculum in March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Fujioka Nobukatsu, a leader of the revisionist history movement, is quoted in the July 21, 1996 issue of Sankei Shimbun saying, “If this problem continues, children will be taught an incorrect history, one that characterizes the Japanese as an unprecedentedly cruel, lewd, and dumb people.” His use of the terms, “children” and “lewd” (kōshoku), is indicative here; unlike previous controversies on history textbooks that focused on high school textbooks, this case was about textbooks for students at the compulsory junior-high school level, in which all students are required to learn Japanese history. (Japanese history has not been a required subject for high school students, although the policy is likely to change from the next course

of study by the Ministry of Education). This fact, combined with the age of targeted children and the nature of the topic related to sexual violence, may all be contributing factors to why this issue was considered so important by many neo-nationalists. Based on my field research with Japanese neo-nationalists, the sexual nature of the “comfort woman” issue seems to be a key factor in their resistance against official recognition that these crimes took place.

<sup>3</sup> “28-endo Chūgaku Kyōkasho, Ikuhōsha Shea Nobasu Kōmin 1.4 bai, Rekishi 1.6 bai” Sankei Shimbun, October 16, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ikezoe Noriaki, “Ikuhōsha kyōkasho no kageni shushō grūpu,” Shūkan Kinyōbi, June 5 issue, 2015.