

BOOK REVIEW

Southeast Asian Memories of the Japanese War

Hayase, S. (2010). *A walk through war memories in Southeast Asia*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers. ISBN 971-10-1211-3. 200 pp.

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Prof. Terami-Wada translated the original edition in Japanese to English of this book by Dr. Shinzo Hayase, a professor of Southeast Asian history at Osaka City University. It was originally a textbook for Japanese university students aimed at countering the influence of China in Southeast Asia by informing the Japanese youth of the importance of “historical awareness” in bringing about peaceful and progressive co-existence with East and Southeast Asian countries. The English edition was issued “for the Southeast Asian youth to know the Japanese view of the war” (p. vi).

By making a careful observation that the end of the war is viewed differently in different countries as opposed to what is observed in Japan, Hayase shows that national histories including Japanese are limited and biased that might lead to an appreciation of why they were so. He asserts that Southeast Asia is part of the “war space” that Japan had created. He faults Japanese intellectuals for failing to provide adequate information and knowledge on the war and postwar responsibilities that kept on surfacing on the controversy surrounding the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese prime ministers. The solution he sees is to view the war from the perspectives of the people of Southeast Asia, which he intends to do in this book.

It has eight chapters with the six devoted to six Southeast Asian nations: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and the Philippines in this order but the arrangement is not explained. There is uneven treatment on each of these countries with Thailand getting more attention than Malaysia and Indonesia contingent on the number of exhibits on museums, markers, memorials, monuments, parks and cemeteries related to Japanese wartime activities. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were left out allegedly because of the lack of similar structures commemorating the occupation as it was overshadowed by prolonged wars in each of these countries. To extract the Southeast Asian point of view, Hayase quotes verbatim the text printed on bill boards explaining the historical site, the artifact or the event itself aside from providing description to the places. Hayase seems to act as a knowledgeable guide to the reader supplying historical and cultural background on each of the countries but this device was not consistent all throughout.

A hint of military pride in the author is evident on the chapter on Singapore as regards to the use of bicycle by the Japanese in crossing the Johore channel “to outwit the British Commonwealth” (p. 19) as well as a trace of condescension on whether the artillery guns at Fort Siloso were

used or not against Japanese ships, which the author believed to be in the negative. The chapter on Malaysia raises questions on the sufficiency of materials used to conclude that in Sarawak the people were indifferent to the Japanese occupation. In general, were the ones consulted in each country representative of the sentiment of the people regarding the war? It is surprising that on the chapter on Indonesia the role of Japan in the independence movement is silenced; it keeps on giving the wrong reasons why the Indonesians did not abandon Japanese influence. It also misleadingly said that in the Philippines the legacies of the occupation were destroyed unlike in Indonesia where they were adapted. Thailand exploited so well the ruins of the war that key sites became profitable tourist spots. Although Hayase might be correct in pointing out inaccuracies and elisions in Thai historical texts, this is inherent in every national master narrative subject to the prejudice and inadequacy of the writer and the temperament of the government agency involved. The latter equally applies to Myanmar in which Hayase is open in discussing the Japanese role in the Burmese nationalist movement although the present dispensation seemed to be uninterested in the war since, as Hayase points out, it depicts in favorable light the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, the wartime and independence hero. The outline of Philippine history makes it appear that history commenced after the arrival of the West. It was during martial law under President Marcos that the first war memorial was constructed outside Japan, which was a precedent for later war memorials.

Throughout the text, Hayase is emphatic that the war should be seen on its two sides: the Japanese who thinks that war was justifiable in order to protect the country and the Southeast Asian people whose peaceful lives were devastated and sacrificed at the altar of imperialism. Again, in the conclusion he criticizes Japanese intellectuals, their collusion in promoting the selfish vision of postwar reconstruction but neglecting the effect of the war on the economies and cultures of the countries the Japanese military has wrecked. Thus, he calls for a broader “historical awareness” among the Japanese public, one that goes beyond the myopic view to understand and comprehend the role of Japan in maintaining peace as well as partner towards development not only of their country but of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries.

More than a travelogue, the book by Hayase is a didactic attempt to shape the consciousness of post post-war generation of Japanese students, one that is critical of both the Japanese and Southeast Asian perspectives of the war. Typos are observed but they do not detract the importance of having it disseminated widely. Although sources were cited in-text there should have been a list of references apart from the index.