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Apology Laid Bare: Colonialism, War and Japanese Historical Memory むき出しにされた謝罪ーー植民地主義、戦争、日本の歴史記憶

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Alexis Dudden

With anniversary commemorations for March 11, 2011's terrible tragedies overshadowing all else in Japan this spring — including momentous decisions about U.S.-Japan relations pivoting on a new base in Okinawa — it is notable that historical memory controversies have reemerged to sour Japanese relations with both China and Korea. Although Japan's immediate challenges would seem to make good neighborly ties more important than ever before, some Japanese politicians persist in milking time-honored retrograde strategies for all they are worth: denying the Nanjing massacre and denigrating the experience of the comfort women. The ghosts in the memory closet of Japanese colonialism and war will not be laid to rest.

On February 20, 2012 the mayor of Nagoya, Kawamura Takashi, welcomed Chinese Communist Party members visiting from sister city Nanjing by explaining his views of their city's most infamous historical experience, and a bedrock of Japan-China discourse ever since: the Nanjing Massacre. "It was a conventional fight," Kawamura averred of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese people that historians estimate Japanese soldiers trapped, raped, and slaughtered over the course of a several week period in December 1937. Not one to miss a chance to climb aboard the Nanjing-denial train, on February 24, Tokyo's powerful Governor Ishihara Shintaro gathered reporters to agree: "What mayor Kawamura says is correct. I would like to defend him."[1] Although some Japanese have voiced disagreement with Kawamura and Ishihara's remarks, Ishihara went out of his way to "name brand" the moment. While the remarks were doubtless discomforting to many Japanese, it appears unlikely, for example, that Tokyo voters will force Ishihara to withdraw his statement, still less that they will press him to resign over the issue.

2012 has been proclaimed a "Year of Friendship" between Japan and China, celebrating a half century of normalized ties through expensively planned and highly touted events aimed especially at smoothing feathers still ruffled by the September 2010 Japan Coast Guard capture of a Chinese fishing boat during a stand off over the contested Diaoyutai/Senkaku islands.[2] Mayor Kawamura and Governor Ishihara's comments ran roughshod over the efforts toward accommodation of all involved on both sides, sparking cancellations of sister city tours, cultural exchanges, and judo matches. It is too early to know where this round of "history problems" will lead; on March 6, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi called a press conference in Beijing, pointedly telling Tokyo to set the record straight. Minister Yang stressed progress on both sides and urged Japanese officials to "clarify confusion" surrounding a variety of matters — specifically the contested islands and especially Nanjing — for "the overall interests of the China-Japan relationship."[3]

Media in Japan reports mounting Chinese fury at Mayor Kawamura's statement, while reporting the Japanese government's adherence to the position that "the killing of noncombatants, looting and other acts occurred."[4] Nevertheless, instead of giving significant airtime to the numerous Japanese scholars and activists who have long worked to challenge the deniers' discourse, Japan's rising political star, Osaka mayor Hashimoto Toru, captured the spotlight. Ideologically poised to inherit Governor Ishihara's command, Hashimoto's growing *Ishin-no-kai* (Osaka Restoration Group), together with his strident efforts to define patriotism and loyalty among city employees, have made him the most closely watched political figure in contemporary Japan. At a February 27 press conference Hashimoto signaled displeasure at his colleagues: "A publicly elected head of a local government is not a historian," he said. "Any comment about historical facts will have to be based on knowledge of the past and should be made very carefully."[5] Hashimoto reads his constituency's pulse brilliantly: they want jobs and a strong Japan, not to be dragged into debates about the nation's bad behavior before they were born. Shrewdly addressing Nagoya Mayor Kawamura's actions, Hashimoto avoided conflict with Tokyo's Governor Ishihara, the conservative kingmaker; even more important, while distancing himself, he did not disagree with the content of their remarks.

In the midst of the growing China-Japan fracas, on March 1, 2012 at ceremonies in Seoul to commemorate Korea's 1919 independence uprising against Japan, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak stressed that the Japanese government must understand that "the issue of military comfort women is a humanitarian matter that needs to be resolved swiftly."[6] President Lee has no political record of championing the less-than-powerful. Nor, prior to the past few months, had he taken up the cause of the comfort women. Lest one decry his remarks as simple opportunism, however, it is important to locate Lee's words in light of the momentum sparked last August when South Korea's constitutional court ruled that it was unconstitutional for Korea *not* to make every effort to resolve the comfort women issue with Japan.

For decades, South Korean activists have sought to hold their government accountable for collusion with the Japanese government in suppressing the lived histories of Koreans victimized by the horrors of Japan's brutal colonization (1905-1945) such as the former comfort women, forced laborers, and draftees sent off to die for Japan's rapacious expansionism and wars. Collectively, they target the 1965 Treaty of Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea as the root of the problems that persist. At its signing, the agreement sold away Korean individuals' right to seek redress from Japan in exchange for Japanese "economic aid," and not even an official apology. Under the Park Chung-hee dictatorship, victims were not even permitted to make their stories publicly known. Since the 1990s, however, in the wake of Korean democratization and with impetus provided more recently by the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, such histories have flowed forth and become common property of Korean national identity and history.[7] To cap it off, in January 2005, the South Korean government released over one thousand pages of diplomatic documents between Seoul and Tokyo that confirm what activists had long charged: in 1965, in exchange for $800 million dollars in grants and loans from the Japanese government to Park Chung-hee and his inner circle, the South Korean government agreed to forfeit South Koreans' ability to make individual claims against Japan. Faced with this significant shift in South Korean politics and society, the Japanese government continues to staunchly maintain that 1965 finalized all official apology and compensation matters with Korea.

Last August's constitutional court ruling in Seoul, however, validated activists' efforts by determining that the South Korean government was in violation of its constitutional duty by failing to seek individual compensation from the Japanese government on behalf of the former comfort women. In short, the court ruled that Seoul was *as* liable *as* Tokyo for the women's welfare and dignity and that it should endeavor to uphold the women's fundamental human rights.

It is fair to say that the authoritarian government of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak was nonplussed at best. That said, the vital gains of South Korea's democracy movements continue to hold sway; within weeks Korean bureaucrats did what their court demanded, albeit reluctantly. On September 15, 2011, Cho Sei-young, director general for Northeast Asian Affairs in South Korea's Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry, summoned Minister Kanehara Nobukatsu from the Japanese embassy in Seoul and submitted his government's formal proposal to the Japanese government to hold joint talks on compensation for the South Korean comfort women. Tokyo responded that same day, with senior Vice Foreign Minister Yamaguchi Tsuyoshi explaining to reporters that the matter had been settled long ago in the 1965 Treaty.[8] There was nothing to discuss.

The autumn months followed contours of this well-known pattern, but in early December the issues boiled over and onto the streets of Seoul. December 14, 2011 marked the 1000th consecutive weekly Wednesday sit-in that former comfort women and their supporters would hold in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul; in preparation for the event, the Seoul city government approved the placement on their gathering spot of a small, bronze statue of a young girl said to represent the hundreds of thousands of Korean victims of Japan's wartime system of sexual slavery. Japanese embassy officials in Seoul demanded the statue be taken down, to which the South Korean foreign ministry responded that it would be far better for Japan to acknowledge the abuses of Japan's rule in the nation's history than dictate municipal codes for the South Korean capital.

Three days later, on Saturday December 17, 2011 President Lee arrived in Japan for long-scheduled summit talks with Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko. Before departing Seoul, Lee repeatedly vowed that he would make the comfort women compensation matter central to the discussion, yet up until the day before the meetings Japanese Foreign Minister Gemba Koichiro declined to acknowledge whether the topic would even make the agenda: "How the matter is dealt with is ultimately the Prime Minister's decision."[9] President Lee raised the issue, which appears to have met with silence. Whether or not large anti-Japanese riots would flare in Seoul in the days to come, however, never even arose: on December 19, 2011 North Korean state television announced the death of leader Kim Jong-il.[10] The region went on high military alert, and the comfort women again disappeared from the headlines until President Lee's March 1st speech made them again politically useful.

It is worth recalling that in January 2008, even before assuming office, President Lee summoned foreign correspondents to declare that he would not use his office "to tell Japan to apologize or engage in self-reflection."[11] At the time, even his closest allies informed him that such an approach would prove impossible given the workings of democracy and nationalism in South Korea. If their words fell on deaf ears, subsequent frenzies surrounding the Dokdo/Takeshima island dispute made clear to Lee the rhetorical value that "Japan" and "the past" could have with regard to his political standing.[12] Significantly, during Lee's tenure a "Japan strategy" focusing on the island dispute at the expense of even acknowledging any other legacies of the colonial era — let alone histories that some would define as crimes against humanity — re-emerged.

Age has taken a heavy toll on the comfort women and forced labor survivors whose protests fueled demands in the 1990s that the Japanese government apologize and compensate individuals for the nation's past wrongs. During the last several years, public outcry over the region's history has shifted focus from the victims' stories to demands for control over the islands, re-centering the history wars onto the territorial disputes (Dokdo/Takeshima and Diaoyutai/Senkaku).[13] Thus, President Lee's rhetorical attention on March 1, 2012 to the still-living former South Korean sex slaves of the Japanese imperial Army — there are 63 by official count — marked a departure for him in terms of publicly acknowledging Korea's actual victims and naming Japan the aggressor; it did nothing more, however, than lay bare the absolute instrumentality of politicians' use or lack of use of apology today. It is an election year, and while South Korea's constitution prevents Lee from another term, his party is in trouble. On top of this, on February 29, the United States and North Korea reached a deal to stabilize the standoff over the nuclear weapons crisis; throughout his presidency, Lee and his followers have fostered the sanctions/regime-change approach that would now appear shelved.[14] What's left other than the Japan card?

Where this will lead is too early to know. The thought that President Lee might be able to claim credit during his tenure for Japanese government compensation to individual Korean former comfort women might infuriate some. More than speculation, however, it is critical here to emphasize the strength of South Korean democratic possibility. On March 6, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan announced that any future compensation money paid to individual Korean comfort women would be channeled into a fund — "The Butterfly Fund" — that would help female war victims and their children throughout the world.[15] Korean Council chairwoman Yun Mi-hyang emphasized to reporters that the fund "makes it clear that what the comfort women for the Japanese military want is not money, but a formal apology from the Japanese government." Together with three surviving former comfort women, on March 8 International Women's Day, the group's lawyers formalized the plan, describing it as the women's "final wishes." Once again the ball is in Japan's court.

Alexis Dudden is Associate Professor of History and Director, Foundations of Humanitarism Program, University of Connecticut and an Asia-Pacific Journal Associate. She is the author of Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States *and* Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power.

[1] See this link.

[2] See Gavan McCormack, "Small Islands - Big Problem: Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Weight of History and Geography in China-Japan Relations"

[3] See here.

[4] On March 5, Mayor Kawamura told reporters that his statement was "essentially the same as the government's party line." See this link.

[5] See this link.

[6] See this link.

[7] C. Sarah Soh's analysis of the comfort women's ordeal throughout the post-1945 era is unparalleled: *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008); for discussion of the Japanese semi-official effort at compensation — the now disbanded Asian Women's Fund — see Wada Haruki, "The Comfort Women, The Asian Women's Fund, and the Digital Museum"

[8] See this link.

[9] See this link

[10] See Ruediger Frank, "North Korea After Kim Jong Il: The Kim Jong Un Era and its Challenges"

[11] Alexis Dudden, "South Korea's Leader Tries to Turn His Back on History," January 2008

[12] For historical discussion of recent excitement over the islands in disputes, see Mark Selden, "Small Islets, Enduring Conflict: Dokdo, Korea-Japan Colonial Legacy and the United States"

[13] A 2011 public opinion poll conducted by Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies discovered that Koreans overwhelmingly regard the island clash with Japan as the "biggest obstacle to the development of Korean-Japanese relations" averaging just above 60% across the spectrum regardless of age and political preferences, with the textbooks coming in second at roughly 30% and the comfort women just under 10%." The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Annual Opinion Survey, 2011.

[14] See Christine Ahn here.

[15] See this and this.