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War and Japan's Memory Wars: the media and the globalization of consciousness

by Gavan McCormack

The Fox-ification of the US media proceeds apace. In Italy, the country's media mogul doubles as Prime Minister. In Britain public broadcasting is under pressure from Blairite forces. Japan, the world's No 2 capitalist power, is left out of most discussion on global media trends, but is undergoing the same pressures. Allegations of political intervention to tailor the way the issue of "comfort women" in 1930s and 1940s Asia should be addressed in a 2001 documentary stirred a full scale media war in 2005.

On 30 January 2001, NHK, Japan's hugely influential public radio and television station, screened a 40-minute film, part two of a series entitled "How to Judge Wars." The documentary film dealt with the question of violence against women in war, and specifically with the system of sexual slavery of women on a wide scale across Asia as practiced by the imperial Japanese army in the 1930s and 1940s. It featured the proceedings of the "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal" convened in Tokyo the previous month by an international coalition of citizen and feminist groups. The Tribunal brought to testify sixty-four surviving elderly victims of the infamous "comfort woman" system before an international team of prosecutors and judges, several of them fresh from Bosnian and Rwandan war crimes trials.

It was not a "mock tribunal" as its detractors style it, but a "civil" tribunal, that is to say it did not have the punitive powers of a state-backed tribunal but possessed moral force, the credibility that resides in expressions of shared human conscience irrespective of endorsement by states. Its precedent was, therefore, not so much the large, state-run tribunals of Nuremberg and Tokyo in the late 1940s as civic tribunals such as that in Stockholm in 1967 (sometimes called the "Russell Tribunal" because of the close association with it of the philosopher Bertrand Russell) that investigated and publicized United States war crimes in Vietnam, including indiscriminate bombing and defoliation. The basic stance of the Tokyo Women's Tribunal was that acts of violence committed against women constituted the single major, unacknowledged category of "neglected" crimes of World War Two: neglected by the U.S. and its allies at the Tokyo trials, and neglected by the Japanese state and other states subsequently.

Hence, while most of those responsible were already dead, responsibility and guilt needed to be established, the shame and guilt experienced by the victims assuaged, and some meaningful restitution provided them. At a formal, inter-state level, the same slowly maturing social consciousness was reflected in the Treaty of Rome (1998) under which an International Criminal Court was established to try rape and sexual slavery henceforth as major crimes of war, alongside genocide. As Rome addressed present and future crimes, the Tribunal in Tokyo was an attempt to address, if even in a symbolic way, past crimes, and especially state responsibility for them.

The issue of Japan's responsibility for the so-called "comfort women" system has long been controversial. Nobody disputes that in the 1930s and 1940s military brothels existed throughout Japan's colonial and semi-colonial East and Southeast Asian occupied areas, but Japanese neonationalists insist that the system was "merely" the commonly practiced one of military prostitution, the women professional prostitutes, and the organization independent of the Japanese army or government. They could hold without difficulty to such position until the late 1980s, when, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the first "comfort women" in Korea, the Philippines, the Netherlands and elsewhere, came forward to tell their stories. Equally important, in the early 1990s, Japanese researchers unearthed incontrovertible archival evidence of official sponsorship and organization of the "comfort women" system by the military and the government. In due course prime ministers apologized and a semi-public fund (the "Asia Women's Fund") was established to compensate the victims.

Even then, however, responsibility remained bitterly contested. When from 1997 token references to the "comfort women" system were included in some school history texts, the Association for New History Textbooks (Tsukurukai) was formed and together with other neo-nationalist organizations began to attack what it described as a "masochistic" view of national history and to propagate in its stead a "proud" view of a pure, honorable Japanese history. To such groups, the "comfort women" were greedy prostitutes, the tribunal an outrage, and the inclusion at the centre of the indictment of the late "Showa" emperor (Hirohito, 1901-1989) absolutely intolerable.

When the allied powers occupied Japan and tried Japanese war crimes in 1946-48 they paid little heed to crimes against women and occupation authorities at the highest level decided to exempt the Japanese emperor from indictment or investigation. Yet he had indubitably been commander-in-chief of Japanese forces and head of government when the "comfort women" system was set up and as such either knew or should have known of it. Five and a half decades after war's end, therefore, and eleven years after his own death, the victims of the system and their supporters were adamant that his responsibility should be addressed, something never attempted by any previous tribunal. If he were not a god but indeed a human being (as he himself declared in 1946) then issues of responsibility pertain equally to him as to members of the Japanese military and government. However, the association of the emperor, ultimate symbol of Japanese purity, with sex crimes on a massive scale, was an unbearable affront to Japanese nationalists. After three days of deliberation, with the organizers and participants facing neonationalist harassment, intimidation, and death threats, the tribunal ended with a preliminary verdict of guilty. A full, final judgment, drawing upon the precedents of Nuremberg, Tokyo, and the former Yugoslavia and Rwandan tribunals, was issued at a subsequent session at The Hague in December 2001.

The documentary film on the tribunal was shown on NHK's second, or educational, channel on 30 January 2001. NHK, like Britain's BBC, is a public corporation, unable to take advertising revenue and heavily dependent on payment of a compulsory viewer license fee (the basic Japanese annual fee is approximately \$220, as against the BBC's \$195). Its educational channel does not attract a large audience, almost certainly less than one per cent of viewers. This January 2001 program was no exception. However, directly associated with the tribunal were appalled at what they saw as an incoherent and distorted account of the historical issues the tribunal had addressed. They criticized it severely and in due course launched a suit in the Tokyo District Court alleging major NHK improprieties. In March 2004 the court ruled that NHK had acted within its legitimate discretion, but in 2005 the case was continuing, under appeal.

The issue suddenly exploded into the public arena on 12 January 2005, however, when Asahi Shimbun, a national daily with a circulation of around eight million, published a "scoop" alleging manipulation and political interference in NHK's production process.[1] The allegations were repeated the following day in a press conference by Nagai Satoru, a director within NHK, who had become an internal "whistle-blower" one month earlier by launching a complaint of interference and political pressure to NHK's newly set-up "compliance committee." [2] The nub of the matter was that the documentary, originally prepared by an independent production company under a sub-contracting agreement with NHK, had been subject to a series of changes due to political interventions. The "in-house" editing process was conducted while the company was in a state of semi-siege, as rightists mobilized and sound trucks circled the NHK building blaring hostile messages and employees were jostled and abused as they entered or left the premises.[3] Changes made at that phase of editing included the incorporation of the views of a hostile critic of the "comfort women" and the tribunal, (the historian Hata Ikuhiko, an associate of the Tsukurukai group). Then, just days before the film was shown, a meeting was held between senior executives of NHK and two prominent politicians, Abe Shinzo, then deputy chief cabinet secretary and as of early 2005 acting secretary-general of the LDP, and Nakagawa Shoichi, then an LDP diet member and as of 2005 minister for economy, trade, and industry. Further, major changes were then made, adding new material while cutting the 44 minute film to 40 minutes. All reference to the emperor's responsibility was deleted (even though that had been central to the tribunal process), the testimony of the former "comfort women" witnesses

was much reduced, the space for hostile comment on the tribunal increased. The process was completed hours before broadcast

Abe and Nakagawa are prominent conservative politicians, both neo-nationalists, advocates of revision of the constitution and the fundamental law on education and proponents of sanctions against North Korea. Both are, and were in 2000, prominent figures in the diet members "Association to Consider the Future Path for Japan and History Education." This organization, founded in 1997 with 107 diet members, is the parliamentary equivalent of the nation-wide neo-nationalist body devoted to textbook revision, Tsukurukai.[4] It continues today, minus only the word "young," and counts many influential lawmakers among its members (including the present Minister of Education, Nakayama Nariaki). To Abe, Nakagawa and other members of such an organization, the tribunal was anathema.

One of the sources Asahi relied on for its initial "scoop" was an interview it conducted on 9 January, i.e. before the story broke, with "a senior NHK executive." [5] Matsuo Takeshi, executive director-general of broadcasting at NHK at the time in question, quickly acknowledged that he was the executive in question, that there had been such a meeting, and that he had felt "pressured" by it. He recognized, however, that had he not gone as summoned to meet the politicians the pressure would be much greater, "perhaps three or four times greater," and the film might not have been shown at all. [6] The politicians gave him this "overall impression": "Be careful" and "I'll be watching." [7] Later, however, he revised his story: he was not summoned to meet the politicians but had gone there for a routine discussion of budget matters; the question of the documentary had come up, but not in such a way that he felt pressure.

Political intervention in the media is forbidden by both Article 21 of the constitution and Article 3 of the Broadcasting Law. Both Abe and Nakagawa moved quickly therefore to negate key parts of the Asahi story.

Nakagawa agreed (to Asahi on 10 January) that he had indeed met the NHK executives days before the documentary was shown, and he confirmed it to the media in general in an interview conducted while he was traveling, in Paris, on the 12th. But he insisted that he merely demanded that NHK maintain "fairness and impartiality." The following day, however, he changed his story to say that no such meeting had taken place till after the screening, on 2 February (and also on the 8th and 9th), and therefore he could not have brought any pressure to bear on the documentary editing. Denying the admission attributed to him by Asahi of trying to bluff NHK into dropping the program altogether [7] before settling for a drastic re-editing (cutting) process, he demanded retraction and an apology from Asahi. [8]

Abe confirmed that he had indeed met the NHK executives, but at their request, not at his summons. He rejected the suggestion of improper behavior and launched a bold counter-attack. He said that he had learned from "interested parties" that the tribunal was biased. He himself evidently did not see the film but still concluded that both tribunal and film were deeply flawed: despite the trial format, the court had made no provision for defense counsel; it required a pledge of support for the tribunal's cause as a condition for admission by observers, and it chose a particular venue in order to be, as Tribunal organizer Matsui Yayori put it, as close as possible to the imperial palace so as to maximize the sense of confrontation with the "root of evil." Further, Abe asserted, the Tribunal served North Korean agitation and propaganda purposes, being designed to soften Japanese anger over the issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens by casting it in the light of victim, with a North Korean agent or agents even participating on the bench. [9] He added that he thought North Korea was trying to use the tribunal to deflect attention from criticism of it over the abduction of Japanese citizens, but that he was used to being slandered for his principled efforts to address the North Korea issue and would not yield.

As his press release put it, "Because I was told that the mock trial was going to be reported in the way that the organizers wanted it to be, I looked into the matter. I found out that the contents were clearly biased and told [NHK] that it should be broadcast from a fair and neutral viewpoint, as it is expected to." [10] In other words, he had indeed instructed the national broadcaster about the content of its program, but far from it being a breach of any law, it had been his duty as a public official to do so.

Abe acted with the confidence of a politician who enjoys massive public support. His popularity has been honed in recent years as the epitome of the "hard-line" position on North Korea, advocate of forcing the North Korean government to its knees and eventually bringing about regime change as the only way to resolve pending issues, including those of abductions. He also happens to be the grandson of a former "Class A" war criminal, Kishi Nobusuke, wartime munitions minister and member of Tojo's cabinet at the time of Pearl Harbor. Avoiding trial thanks to the "reverse course" adopted by the occupation in response to the Cold War, Kishi emerged from Sugamo prison at the end of 1948 and went on to become Prime Minister between 1957 and 1960. Abe himself is widely tipped to follow his grandfather as a future prime minister. One of his television interviewers, the normally irrepressible and irreverent Furutachi Ichiro on Asahi TV, seemed dazzled to the point of dumbness in the presence of his distinguished visitor, while on Fuji TV's Sunday-morning talk show he is said to have been treated "like a martyr" by the pundits. [11]

However, what he had to say was not only of dubious constitutionality and legality, but much of it was simply absurd, though neither the national media nor the parliamentary opposition pursued him. [12] The tribunal was in fact organized by an international committee, not by Matsui Yayori alone, although Matsui was indeed a prominent figure in the organizing group. (Matsui, a former Asahi foreign correspondent, long active in war-related and feminist issues, died in December 2002.) The remarks attributed to her about the imperial palace being the "root of evil" were a complete (and possibly libelous) fabrication, and the hall in which the meeting took place was the only one capable of accommodating and offering relative security from attack to the thousand-plus participants (and accommodation for hundreds of the visitors including the former "comfort women"). As to the North Koreans, abductions were not an issue in the Tokyo of late 2000 and did not become so till North Korea's admission and apology of September 2002, and, while it is true that four North Koreans participated in the tribunal they did so as members of a nine-person joint South-North Korean prosecution team (under a South Korean chief prosecutor), having the same role as prosecutors in other national teams – to lead the presentation of evidence of former "comfort women" who lived then and now on both sides of the state borders of North and South Korea. Although he dropped the more absurd of his allegations in subsequent statements, Abe may have judged, perhaps correctly, that in 2005 the best way to blacken the image of the tribunal would be to create in the public mind the suspicion of a North Korean link. Deleting his earlier, wild accusations, including the charge that the Tribunal had been manipulated by North Korean agents, Abe came to focus on the demand that Asahi back its accusations of improper influence by substantive evidence or else apologize.

As the slanging match between the country's two media giants escalated into something like war, NHK exploited to the full its power to form public opinion by including long statements by Abe, Nakagawa and Matsuo denouncing Asahi on its national news broadcasts. Denunciation of Asahi was featured repeatedly on national news programs. The 7 pm national news on 20 January, for example, roughly equivalent to the main evening national news on BBC in Britain, carried a special caption "the problem of Asahi shimbun's false reporting," which was only removed under protest from later news broadcasts. [13] Despite NHK's obligation under Article 3 (2) of the Broadcasting Law, to introduce "as wide a range of viewpoints as possible" on matters on which opinion is divided, Asahi's counter claims were ignored, leading it to complain, somewhat plaintively, of "one-sided slander through the use of the public airwaves." [14]

Much was disputed, but one crucial, and damning, detail was agreed: it was routine for NHK to engage in consultation on matters of programming with politicians, and this practice was carried to new lengths under the regime of Ebisawa as president from 1997. [15] "Given that NHK's budget has to be approved by the Diet under the Broadcast law, it is necessary to have them understand correctly both about management planning and about individual programs" (italics added), said Sekine Akiyoshi, head of broadcasting at NHK. [16] On 17 January 2005, both the secretary-general and the president of the Diet Members "Association to Think about the Future of Japan and History Education" confirmed that the NHK bosses had come to consult with Abe about the forthcoming program because of concerns about "problems that might arise if the program were presented in its present state." [17] Not only was the public broadcaster committed to the principle of clearing individual programs in advance with politicians, but it paid special attention to consult with those who were members of an avowedly neo-nationalistic group.

By late January 2005, two weeks after the original Asahi article, ultimatums, demands for explanation, and writs were being prepared, issued, or threatened on all sides. Abe and Nakagawa continue to insist that their pleas for "fairness and impartiality" were completely open and above-board, and not to be seen as thinly veiled threat designed to manipulate the mass media by imposing their own extremely partial views. Some one has been lying. Whether it is these senior figures in the government and ruling party, the national broadcaster or the national daily paper, or perhaps all of these, remains to be seen.

NHK also faces a separate, but severe institutional crisis. A series of embezzlement scams within the corporation and their inept handling under President Ebisawa – who outraged nearly everybody by cutting the television broadcasts of the Diet session at which he had been called to explain the scandals - led in 2004 to a mass “rebellion.” With the number of citizens participating in this protest by refusing payment of their compulsory license fees approaching the half million mark, on 25 January 2005 Ebisawa resigned. Pleading with viewers to “trust those who come after me,” he was, in effect, admitting that he had lost that trust. However, he made no apology for his actions and no allusion to the dispute with Asahi.[18] Two days later, his successor as president had to hastily reverse a decision to retain Ebisawa as “adviser” to the corporation when that threatened to spark a new wave of boycott protest.

Other heads were bound to roll as the war continued, and other whistle-blowers may well be waiting in the wings, at NHK and perhaps at Asahi too. VAWW-Net demands that its civil action against NHK be extended because of the new evidence and its seeking court leave to call as witnesses the two politicians, three NHK figures, and the original whistle-blower, Nagai, who played the central roles in the drama now developing. Civil groups have begun to call for NHK to restore and show its original, uncut, version of the film. Hokkaido University political scientist, Yamaguchi Jiro, comments that true “conservatives” are disappearing from the ruling conservative party and that hard-liners such as Abe, who are most intent on overthrowing the North Korean regime, actually themselves resemble it in their actions to assure media control.[19]

The Asahi scoop and the Nagai whistle blast exposed large problems at the interface of Japan’s media and political worlds. The trust that NHK had built over the postwar decades because of its stance being seen as independent of government was badly eroded. Yet never has the need been greater for a “fair and impartial” media. The question of Japan’s responsibility for facing the past, the openness of its present democracy, and its vision for the future, are all at issue. The ascendancy of political and media forces determined to deny the justice of the “comfort women” cause, or even its historicity, and to insist absolutely on the immunity from criticism or even discussion of the role of Japan’s war-time leader, can only impede hopes for understanding and acceptance by its neighbors of Japan’s ambitions to play a leading role in the birth of a twenty-first century East Asian community. Korean and Chinese comment is yet to come, but it seems likely that suspicions of Japanese attempts to “cover-up” and “re-write” its history to suit neo-nationalist pressure groups is bound to stir strong negative reactions in both unless quickly resolved.

Seven decades after the Japanese government and military took the decisions to organize trafficking in women in China, and six decades and more since the system was universalized across Asia, the problem of how to wind it up and atone to its victims remains only half resolved, and the war responsibility of emperor Hirohito continues to vex. With Germans attending as respected guests in the European and UN commemorative gatherings to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps, including Auschwitz, in January 2005, the contrast with East Asia is sharp. How many more years must pass, one wonders, before a Japanese Prime Minister can be a respected guest at a war commemorative ceremony in Harbin or Nanjing or Manila, or at one in honor of Asia’s comfort women?

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1. Honda Masakazu and Takada Makoto, “LDP pressure led to cuts in NHK show,” Asahi shimbun, 12 January 2005.
2. This committee, (Horei junshu sokushin iinkai), set up in September 2005, was problematic for several reasons: it was headed by company president Ebisawa, and the “external broadcast” section, to which Nagai sent his complaint, comprised the three lawyers who were defending NHK against charges of improper handling of the film in question. It was thus in no position to independently assess Nagai’s complaint. (“Seijika kainyu no nichijoka ukabu,” Akahata, 21 January 2005).
3. “NHK bangumi kaihen mondai - honsha no shusai hodo no shosai,” Asahi shimbun, 18 January 2005.
4. “Nihon no zento to rekishi kyoiku o kangaeru wakate giin no kai,” (literally: “Association of Young Dietmembers to Think about the Future of Japan and History Education”) See Tawara Yoshibumi homepage, <http://www.linkclub.or.jp/~teppei-y/tawara%20HP/index.html>)
5. “Whistle-blower: NHK president let LDP interfere,” Asahi shimbun, 14 January 2005.
6. Ibid.
7. “Asahi refutes NHK official’s claim,” Asahi shimbun, 21 January 2005.
8. Asahi shimbun, 14 January 2005, and on Nakagawa’s subsequent press conference, on 20th January, Asahi shimbun, 21 January 2005.
9. Abe speaking on Asahi TV’s program, “Hodo Station,” 13 January 2005. I here rely on my own observation of this program, excerpts of which have been reproduced at Shukan kinyobi, 21 January 2005, p. 13, and by VAWW-Net (Violence against Women in War) itself on its web site – “Abe Shinzo shi no jujitsu waikyoku hatsugen ni tsuite,” 17 January 2005, (<http://vaww-net-japan/nhk/appeal050177.html> , .
10. “NHK censored TV show due to political pressure,” Japan Times, 14 January 2005.
11. Philip Brasor, “LDP big guns fight NHK censorship claims,” Japan Times, 23 January 2005.
12. See VAWW-Net’s web response “Abe Shinzo shi no jujitsu waikyoku hatsugen ni tsuite,” and the article by the research group of Shukan Kinyobi, “Bangumi e no atsuryoku mondai o surikaeta Abe Shinzo shi,” 21 January 2005, p. 13.
13. Asahi shimbun, 21 January 2005.
14. “Legal action eyed,” Asahi shimbun, 22 January 2005.
15. “NHK no ‘seiji hodo’ shisei to wa,” and “Ebisawa NHK kaicho jinin,” Tokyo shimbun, 20 and 26 January 2005.
16. “Jizen setsumei wa tozen,” Asahi shimbun, 20 January 2005.
17. Shimomura Hirofumi and Furuya Keishi respectively, “NHK gawa kara hoso mae ni setsumei,” Asahi shimbun, 18 January 2005.
18. “NHK boss exits as viewers stop paying,” Japan Times, 26 January 2005.
19. Yamaguchi Jiro, “Hodo ni atsuryoku o kakeru nante jibun-tachi ga hinan shite iru dokusaisha to onaji hasso de wa,” Shukan kinyobi, 21 January 2005, pp. 14.