

The End of Apology

Alexis Dudden

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by Alexis Dudden

In recent months, the survivors of Japan's so-called comfort women system have been dealt a series of newly cruel blows.

In late January, the beleaguered Asian Women's Fund announced that it would disband in 2007. During its ten year history, the Fund has been attacked from all sides, yet, as an editorial in the Asahi Shinbun emphasized, for all its shortcomings the Fund "managed to move the history issue ahead, if only just a little." The Asahi quoted Fund staff members who recalled how some of the women found a measure of closure to their horrific personal histories through contact with the Fund. The decision to dissolve the Asian Women's Fund fell as quietly as snow, however, landing on top of the media-blitzing scandal that pitted the LDP leadership and NHK against the Asahi concerning the NHK's well-known censorship of a 2001 documentary on the military sex slaves. The head of NHK resigned, but Japan's Public Television authorities refuse to admit wrongdoing, let alone that it was bullied into removing segments of the original show by powerful LDP Diet members.

In all of the excitement, of course, the women themselves -- and above all their history -- were the first casualties, largely ignored in the uproar. By now, the basic facts are available to reading audiences in Japan and around the

world. In the wake of the 1937 atrocities committed by Japanese troops in Nanjing, the Japanese government established a system to make available sex for its troops and civilian workers throughout Japan's battlegrounds in Asia and the Pacific, eventually enslaving some 100-200,000 women as forced sexual labor for the system, of which Koreans and Chinese comprised the greatest numbers. These details, once elusive due to government efforts to destroy all records, can now be substantiated readily with the kind of official archival documentation that government historians and courts so dearly prize. So why give up on the few surviving women now?

The big tragedy for the dwindling number of living victims of this crime came well before the New Year, and received much less attention, yet brought the continuing dimensions of the problem into sharp relief. In late November, the Supreme Court turned down a 13-year lawsuit brought by a group of former sex slaves from South Korea against the Japanese government. For years, the courts have shown indifference to the women's humanity by dismissing such cases on the grounds that the San Francisco Treaty and subsequent normalization agreements settled apology and compensation issues once and for all. Last November's judgment went farther than this customary apologist reasoning. The court claimed that the women's case had no basis in the Japanese legal system because the events they described -- their enslavement -- happened before the 1947 constitution came into being. Japan was a different country then, they explained, meaning that the women and their history could not be the responsibility of "new" Japan. Several days after the decision,

Education Minister Nakayama Nariaki greeted the court's judgment as well as the decreasing references to the issue of sexual slavery in school textbooks with characteristic empathy: "It is good. We shouldn't focus so much on the negative." Taking all of these moments together, it's safe to say that we're watching the end of the apology decade.

In 1989, in what seems like generations ago, Hirohito's death coincided with the end of the Cold War and, particularly, the growth of widespread democratization movements throughout the Asian-Pacific nations of Japan's former empire, encouraging thousands of long-ignored and denied voices to come forward to relate their experiences. In addition to the victims of sexual slavery, Korean victims of the atomic bombs, enslaved mine and factory laborers, and forcibly conscripted soldiers took advantage of this new atmosphere to challenge nationally narrated truths of Japan's twentieth century. Sometimes purposefully, and sometimes unintentionally, their claims for redress from Japan coincided with a larger, global trend of apology and reconciliation, giving rise to what even the movement's detractors acknowledge as a decade of apology politics.

As is well known, in Japan, highlights of this era included historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki brandishing a wartime Army document on television in 1992 to disprove denial about Japanese governmental involvement in sexual slavery. The height of the movement came, arguably, in December 2000 when hundreds of surviving women from throughout Asia gathered in Tokyo to hold a peoples' tribunal that judged Hirohito personally accountable for crimes against humanity. Moments such as these meshed internationally, for example, with Germany's increasing statements of atonement and reparations to holocaust survivors, and Australia's attempts to come to terms with aboriginal issues, leading there to the establishment of a National Sorry Day.

In Japan, the 1990s witnessed the demise of the era of so-called miracle economics, following the burst of the bubble. Leaders anxiously debated Japan's national interests in light of their aspirations to have Japan be considered a "normal state" in the international system, mainly defining "normal" as a nation with a permanent UN Security Council seat and an internationally active military. Both are, however, expensive to maintain. Though often ignored yet hotly contested among political parties, Japan's official statements of apology became deeply entwined for the country's leaders with Japan's national interests. In the wake of far-reaching statements of apology by Prime Ministers Hosokawa and Murayama in the mid-90s for Japan's past, the ruling LDP veered towards what many came to call the pragmatic approach. This held that it was in Japan's national interest to apologize for the past in order to strengthen Japan's ties with its Asian neighbors. Put differently, doing so also fostered unencumbered economic exchange in the region.

The limits of the national interest approach to apology were easy to see. The government's craven refusal to apologize directly to the survivors of sexual slavery, for example, led to the establishment of the quasi-private, always suspect Asian Women's Fund. Although, as mentioned above, its organizers make the claim that some women found closure through its efforts, only 285 women from throughout Asia took advantage of the Fund. What of the rest of the women, and, more important, what of the deep-level problem that plagues Japan's relations in the region concerning the telling of modern Japanese history?

Japan's relations with China have spiraled to the lowest point in years, and Japan has also clearly entered a period of mounting conflict with North and South Korea, heralding quite a start to the so-called Year of Friendship between Japan and South Korea commemorating the 40th anniversary of

normalized relations. Recent statements and actions make clear, however, that apology -- and the reparations that come with it -- may no longer be so important to Japan's leaders. For all its obvious shortfalls, the apology era allowed the women formerly enslaved by Japan to find a voice against the deafening, collective silence, shattering Japan's long-standing claim that the government bore no responsibility because it had nothing to do with these women's suffering. It was, of course, possible to sense throughout that official Japan was just playing a waiting game until the women's inevitable death to make things easier for itself, yet it was also possible still to hope for change largely due to the emotional and intellectual strength generated by these women as they wrote themselves into Japanese history. Some

of them, it seems, were able to believe before they died that their existence had mattered. Unfortunately for the oldest remaining survivors, however, it appears that Japan will throw them away after all.

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On the recent uproar over suppression of the NHK film on the comfort women see Gavan McCormack's Japan Focus report, [War and Japan's Memory Wars: the media and the globalization of consciousness](#)