

Talking Points: Brief Thoughts on the Discussion with Uemura Takashi at NYU

Tom Looser

NYU is at its origin a community-oriented university,¹ and there was never any question that Mr. Uemura's talk should be a public event. The central themes, furthermore, include not only the wartime history of Japan, but also the role of women in history, the idea of a free press, and the nature of politics now—matters which are immediately relevant to everyone. Although the talk was scheduled in the last week of classes and publicized less than a week beforehand, it drew a standing room only crowd. The audience was diverse, and included students and faculty from NYU, Columbia, and nearby universities; artists; a filmmaker; journalists from Japan and Korea, Asahi Television New York, CNBC, and the New York Times. Carol Gluck provided a clear, sweeping history of the role of the comfort woman issue in public discourse, including its transformation into a global topic after Kim Hak Sun's public testimonies in 1991; Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono's statement in 1993 acknowledging the government's role in the forced prostitution of women during the war; the 1995 apologies of Prime Minister Murayama; and the contestations of these statements that have since developed. One could see in Prof. Gluck's overview an increasing attention given to the comfort women, particularly by those groups who tend to argue against their importance. Yukiko Hanawa then offered additional thoughts and provocations after Mr. Uemura's talk. For Prof. Hanawa, the comfort woman issue becomes global at the point when women become able to define the problem in their own terms. She also warned against becoming caught either in the boundlessness of emotional appeals or arguing over the details of a positivist history in ways

that sometimes miss the larger picture.



Uemura speaking at NYU. Photo by the Department of East Asian Studies, New York University.

Because the very idea of the comfort women has become a fulcrum for current politics in Japan, and Mr. Uemura has become a central figure of that idea, we expected a more strident audience than we typically have and that proved to be the case. The audience clearly would have stayed well beyond our two-hour time. While some early questions were attempting to understand and locate the Japanese case of the comfort women within broader historical and geopolitical frameworks, toward the end the more stridently critical voices narrowed things back and repeated almost verbatim the critiques that have been expressed elsewhere: demanding to know why Mr. Uemura was so "cowardly" as to run off to the U.S. and occupy the stage by himself; accusing him of fabricating the entire history; asking him what he had against Japan; and asking why he wouldn't respond to the charges

raised against him. As voices on all sides grew louder (and as supporters of Mr. Uemura urged me to shut down the increasingly shrill denunciations), the discussion ended back on the question of Japan and the truth of its history.



The audience at Uemura's speech at NYU. Photo by the Department of East Asian Studies, NYU.

There was something reassuring about the angry if predictable debates—as if we could still believe hopefully in the role and objectivity of the fourth estate, and the public role of an urban university. As if the autonomous boundaries of journalism (along with the realm of politics) hadn't melted into the channels of anonymous network technologies and networked capitalism, and the university lecture hall was by itself somehow a position from which social debate might yet actually drive social betterment. Perhaps an event like this still could productively move the dialogue on an issue like the comfort women? And maybe still stand outside the ever more fixed structures of talking points?

There is certainly a discursive character to the current debates around the comfort women. As is well known, Mr. Uemura's reporting in 1991 did not initially spark any strong reaction; now, it has become one of the central axes of Japanese political discussion. The comfort

woman issue manages to call up everything from ongoing territorial disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima Island, to questions over the writing of textbooks and the status of history, to the politics of national patriotism. This is part of the reason why it seemed important to hold the NYU event. So I want to know, what are we really talking about in these disputes over the accuracy of the comfort woman reporting? How do the comfort women come to bear the weight of mediating all these other issues? (One can ironically see here, among other things, a remarkable potency of womanhood, even if in this case a potency allowed to be expressed only in the negative.)

The fact that the general terms of debate were not only predictable, but were in fact already legible in online discussions and in emails, that I received beforehand, etc., is not surprising; these are part of the conditions for what was once news and politics. The effects of talking points—especially the increasingly totalizing grounds for talking points now—are also clear: they quickly trap us into seemingly all-important quibbles over whether an island is truly Korean or Japanese, or whether American universities love or hate Japan. They enclose us within a vengeful return of all the categories of nationalism and politics that are apparently at risk or have even already shifted underneath the visible surface. Especially insofar as this closure (one that eventually subsumes politics within a postpolitics) looks to be the ultimate effect of the comfort woman debates, then these debates should truly be placed within a global context, as an expression of the larger historical, socioeconomic and technological conditions that are shaping the way politics works around the world. In this sense too, the comfort woman issue truly is not just about Japan at all.

The risk in being pulled into this debate is therefore less the risk of being shouted down than of unreflexively engaging in these very lines of debate. Still, it is encouraging to see

the real desire of people, both from within and outside the university, for the opportunity to actually come and debate—to engage somehow. And it may be that the harrowing conditions of the comfort women, and more immediately of Mr. Uemura's own life (or rather, his being deprived of a legitimate life), is at least a good place to start. We might hope that this can return us not only to a true and accurate history of Japan, but also to a consideration of what's at stake in talking about this now.

Please see parts 1
(<https://apjff.org/-Tomomi-Yamaguchi/4360/article.html>),
2
(<https://apjff.org/-Eunah-Lee/4361/article.html>),
4
(<https://apjff.org/-Katsuya-Hirano/4363/article.html>),
and 5
(<https://apjff.org/-Uemura-Takashi/4364/article.html>) of this series.

Tom Looser (PhD in Anthropology, U. of Chicago) is Associate Professor of East Asian

Studies at NYU. His areas of research include Cultural Anthropology and Japanese studies; art, architecture and urban form; new media studies and animation; and critical theory. He has served on the editorial boards of journals such as *Mechademia* and the new *Asian Diasporic Visual Arts*, and has published in a variety of venues including *Boundary 2*, *Japan Forum*, *Mechademia*, *Shingenjitsu*, *Journal of Pacific Asia*, and *Cultural Anthropology*.

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Notes

¹ See "A Brief History of New York University (<https://www.nyu.edu/faculty/governance-policies-and-procedures/faculty-handbook/the-university/history-and-traditions-of-new-york-university/a-brief-history-of-new-york-university.html>)."