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Contextualizing the Centennial of Japanese Colonial Rule in Korea

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Abstract

This article examines the 2010 commemoration of the centennial of Japanese colonialism in Korea. Prime Minister Kan Naoto's apology generated controversy, exposing the longstanding domestic divide within Japan over the imperial past. The politicization of history, apologies and acts of contrition impedes reconciliation between Japan and its Asian neighbours. Apologies and acts of contrition may not be sufficient to advance reconciliation, but remain essential elements of that process. Japan's legalistic position based on the 1965 Basic Treaty may protect it from further compensation claims, but also precludes the grand gestures that are essential to reconciliation.

Keywords: Japan, Korea, colonialism, reconciliation, apology

Izveček

Članek preučuje komemoracijo ob stoletnici Japonske kolonializacije Koreje, ki je potekala leta 2010. Opravičilo predsednika vlade Kana Naotoja je sprožilo polemike, saj je razkrilo dolgoletno delitev znotraj Japonske o imperijalni preteklosti. Politizacija zgodovine, opravičila in kesanja ovira spravo med Japonsko ter njenimi azijskimi sosedi. Opravičila in kesanje morda ne bosta zadostna za napredek k spravi, vendar ostajata esencijalna elementa tega procesa. Japonska legalistična pozicija, ki temelji na sporazumu o odnosih med Japonsko in Korejo (Treaty of Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea) iz leta 1965, bo Japonsko sicer obvarovala pred nadaljnimi odškodninskimi zahtevki, a ji hkrati preprečuje večje geste, ki so bistvene za spravo.

Ključne besede: Japonska, Koreja, kolonializem, sprava, opravičilo

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1 Introduction

The 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Annexation in 1910 between Japan and Korea commemorated in August 2010 illuminates the state of bilateral relations and the politics of history. Although colonial rule ended in 1945, the scars have not healed and Japan's relations with Seoul and Pyongyang remain vexed by history. Numerous apologies by Japanese politicians and Emperor Akihito have been sabotaged intentionally by discordant voices of denial and unrepentant justification. These conservative voices are small in number, but disproportionately influential because they operate from within the political and intellectual mainstream. Public opinion polls show that the majority of Japanese are not in denial about history or shirking responsibility, but the media focuses on the shrill voices from the right, generating a misleading image. The mixed messages from Japan about its colonial era explain why some Koreans remain unconvinced by Japan's sincerity and are unwilling to put the past behind them.

And yet, beneath the fiery rhetoric and testy exchanges there is also a wellspring of compassion. South Korean charities raised over \$52 million for disaster relief in Japan, a record sum that speaks volumes about the reservoir of benevolence among Koreans towards a nation that is often vilified for colonial oppression. Donations dropped dramatically, however, after Japan reasserted its claim to sovereignty over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands in new middle school textbooks, approved at the end of March 2011 and in the Diplomatic Bluebook 2011 issued on April 1st by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This, in microcosm, is the nature of the rollercoaster relationship between these "frenemies." And so the former comfort women resumed their weekly protests outside the Japanese Embassy and the media furore revived a sense of betrayal rooted in sharp differences over shared history. Tsunami relief amidst ongoing territorial spats reminds us that growing grassroots-level goodwill triggered by exchanges, tourism and popular culture remains hostage to episodic conflict at the government level. The good news is that such rifts are not as paralyzing and all encompassing as they once were, indicating that history is not what it was. (Park 2011, 39–54)

2 Kan's Apology

On August 10th, 2010 Prime Minister (PM) Naoto Kan issued a Cabinet endorsed apology to South Korea regarding colonial rule, expressing deep regret over the suffering inflicted, stating, “The people of South Korea at the time were deprived of their nation and culture, and their ethnic pride was deeply harmed by colonial rule that was against their will.” He added, “...those who render pain tend to forget it while those who suffered cannot forget it easily.” (Statement 2011) Although more specific about Japanese transgressions in Korea, and helpfully forthright on the issue of wounded ethnic pride, the apology was to South Korea alone, neglecting North Korea.

The apology was issued before the August 29th centenary of Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula and August 15th, a day when South Koreans celebrate independence from colonial rule. The timing suggests that the Japanese government decided to sidestep days when the apology might get overlooked, distorted or somehow inflame public opinion on days “reserved” for outpourings of nationalistic fervour. In addition, this pre-emptive, forthright apology took the political heat off the South Korean government and lowered the temperature of media coverage about the centennial, an anniversary that was bound to remind Koreans of past depredations. Yet, it fell short of being a cathartic moment in either country.

The South Korean foreign ministry responded, “We accept the prime minister's statement as the Japanese government's resolve to overcome that unfortunate past between South Korea and Japan and to create a bright South Korea-Japan relationship in the future.” The ministry added that, “South Korea also takes note of Kan's mention that colonial rule had been done contrary to the will of the Korean people, and that those who inflicted sufferings are likely to forget while those who suffered do not forget easily.”

Navigating the legal minefield, Kan spoke carefully when broaching the subject of Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) court protocols, called the Joseon Wangsil Uigwe, that were in the possession of the Japanese government. Consistent with the Japanese government's legal position that the 1965 Basic Treaty normalizing bilateral relations settled all matters of compensation, Kan explained at a news conference that he wrote “transfer” rather than “return” in his statement promising the handover of the royal artefacts that the South Korean government has been demanding. Kan also promised that Japan will continue its ongoing humanitarian

cooperation with South Korea, including efforts to recover the remains of Koreans who died during the occupation, and support war-displaced South Koreans left behind in Sakhalin (a Russian island near Hokkaido that was held by Japan 1905–1945).

Through his apology Kan hoped to put historical issues behind the two countries and focus on ways to enhance future ties with South Korea in addressing bilateral and regional issues, including those related to North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its abduction of Japanese nationals. Emphasizing Japan's ambition of nurturing future-oriented ties, Kan attempted to draw a line under history, although ensuing developments indicate how difficult this remains.

In November 2010 the two governments agreed on the scope of what royal records would be included in the "transfer". Altogether this includes 1,205 volumes of Korean archives, constituting the Joseon Wangsil Uigwe, a meticulous record of royal ceremonies and rituals in 167 volumes that has been kept at Japan's Imperial Household Agency. The deal over the looted royal protocols ran into a speed bump, however, when the government sought Diet approval. Members of the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) criticized the agreement as being one-sided and demanded that Seoul reciprocate by returning historical Japanese documents now held by South Korea and also sought to link the return to ongoing controversies related to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. This nationalistic posturing was mostly about ensuring the agreements would not generate untainted good will. Finally, having poisoned the well, the LDP-controlled House of Councillors in the Diet ratified the treaty in May 2011 authorizing the transfer of the South Korean archives. The archival transfer was finalized by Kan's successor, PM Noda Yoshihiko, in December 2011.

3 Apology Divide

Kan's statement draws heavily on the 1995 Murayama Statement, one that has become a mantra for subsequent Japanese expressions of remorse about its rampage through Asia ("Murayama Statement"). In his statement, PM Murayama apologized for Japan's, "...colonial rule and aggression, [that] caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations." The 2005 Koizumi Statement issued on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of WWII is similar and during his tenure when he stirred up controversies

centred on Yasukuni Shrine, PM Koizumi Junichiro often invoked the Murayama mantra.

Given that Murayama was the head of a coalition government dominated by the LDP and Koizumi was LDP party president when he issued his apologies, the LDP's peevish criticism of Kan for his contrite remarks smacks of hypocrisy and politics. By acknowledging Japan's transgressions in Korea while overlooking its contributions, Kan's apology proved an unacceptable version of empire for conservatives. The apology is symptomatic of a more fundamental battle over interpreting Japan's colonial rule; was it relatively beneficial or was it mostly malign. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (2006–07) of the LDP took off the gloves, ridiculing Kan's statement as "foolish and ignorant", strong criticism from someone who speaks with authority on both charges.

Abe during his brief tenure as premier became an object of derision when he quibbled about the level of coercion involved when recruiting tens of thousands of teenage Korean girls as comfort women and a national punching bag when he tried to rewrite the history of the Battle of Okinawa and the role of Japanese troops in instigating group "suicide" by Okinawans.¹ Perhaps Kan felt vindicated that he offended a leading air brusher of history and proponent of patriotic education. Other politicians also criticized Kan's apology including LDP President Tanigaki Sadakazu who complained that he thought the statement was backward looking and agreed with Abe that it might revive the issue of further reparations. Hiranuma Takeo, President of the tiny party Tachiagare Nippon ("Stand Up, Japan"), also pointed out the dangers of raising Korean hopes for reparations and criticized the apology for being excessively masochistic. In contrast, the Komei leader Yamaguchi Natsuo praised the emphasis on future-oriented relations while Fukushima Mizuho of the Social Democratic Party welcomed the apology.

Despite efforts at rapprochement, the perception gap remains a chasm, with a July 2010 NHK/KBS poll indicating that 62 percent of Japanese have positive attitudes toward South Korea, while 70 percent of South Koreans have negative attitudes toward Japan. It is revealing that Japanese associate South Korea with a

¹ The Battle of Okinawa was one of the bloodiest in the Pacific War. The US suffered 50,000 casualties while Japan lost some 100,000 soldiers. It is estimated that some 125,000 Okinawan civilians, about one quarter of the population, were also killed in the conflict. This battle is a bitter memory for many Okinawans who resent that Japan used them as a sacrificial pawn to buy time to defend the inner islands. Oral testimony of eyewitnesses implicates the Japanese soldiers in some of the group suicides. See "Army's Okinawa Role" 2008.

now-popular soap-opera actor (stage name Yon-sama (Bae Yong Joon)), while South Koreans cite colonial overlord Itō Hirobumi when they think of Japan; light-hearted pop versus heavy history.²

4 Revisionism Rekindled

Abe and like-minded conservative ideologues are called “revisionists”, those who are eager to revise what they see as a masochistic history imposed on Japan following WWII. They favour instilling pride in nation through a more favourable assessment of Japan’s colonial and wartime actions and bridle at repeated apologies since the early 1990s that they feel tarnish the nation’s honour and endorse an unacceptably negative narrative. In response to Kan’s apology, the conservative press called for a more balanced and less self-flagellating history, pointing out that Japan’s colonial rule was not only negative and contributed to the modernization of the peninsula. (Harris 2010)

Tobias Harris observes,

As Kan himself noted, there is nothing cowardly about frankly acknowledging one’s transgressions without hedging or equivocating. And while the list of apologies to Japan’s neighbours is lengthy, it is precisely because conservatives question the legitimacy of those apologies...that prime ministers are compelled to keep issuing new ones. The revisionist right believes that a “proper” and “truthful” historical perspective are critical for national pride, which it believes to have been corroded by left-wing academics and media personalities and pusillanimous politicians. While they claim to be interested only in historical fact, their selective reading of history belies a blatantly opportunistic approach to Japan’s imperial past that belittles the claims of Japan’s victims and presents a blatantly self-serving narrative in which Japan was not a colonizer, and even if it was, it was a benevolent one that hastened the demise of those wicked European empires. (Harris 2010)

Harris adds,

Since Abe’s downfall in 2007 the revisionists have been increasingly marginalized in Japanese politics, their influence virtually non-existent under the DPJ despite having sympathizers within the party. Indeed, their influence

² Itō was Japan’s first prime minister (1885–88) and was Resident General of Korea from 1906–09. In November 1909, four months after he stepped down from that post, a Korean independence activist named Ahn Jung Geun assassinated him in Harbin, Manchuria.

may be inversely proportional to the amount of noise they are capable of generating through various media outlets. (Harris 2010)

Perhaps, but Abe's dubious legacies in Japanese politics continue to haunt Japanese-Korean relations. He is most responsible for politicizing the fate of the abductees (Japanese nationals kidnapped by North Korea agents in the 1970s and 1980s), and stoking media hysteria over the issue. (Morris-Suzuki 2009) In addition he promoted legislation in 2006 mandating patriotic education. The battles over history do not look to be abating anytime soon because new teaching guidelines for patriotic education come into effect in 2012 as a result of this 2006 legislation.

Indeed, in August 2011 the Yokohama school board adopted a controversial history textbook for junior high schools citywide (in 2009, 8 of 18 wards adopted it) that overlooks the atrocities that accompanied Japan's imperial expansion. Korea and China have criticized this text prepared by an offshoot of the rightwing Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai*), published by Jiyūsha and approved by the education ministry, because it justifies and glorifies Japan's wartime actions. Until now the two nationalistic junior-high history texts with Tsukuru Kai links published by Jiyūsha and Fusōsha commanded less than 2% of the national market, but the Yokohama decision is a big boost as this is the first time a major city, population of 3.67 million, has adopted one of them citywide. It appears that the revised Fundamental Education Law (2006) calling for more patriotic education played a role in the selection. In spring 2012 new teaching guidelines in support of the revised law require teaching patriotism and respect for Japan's culture and traditions were issued. Supporters of the text overcame spirited opposition by arguing that of all the textbook options, the Jiyūsha textbook is most consistent with the new guidelines, ensuring that over the next four years, approximately 100,000 Yokohama junior high school students will use the text.

Nurturing patriotism in this manner, however, risks sparking controversies with neighbours by embracing a narrative of history that ignores sensitivities and neglects important lessons of history. As Kan said, those who render pain tend to forget it and these patriotic texts and guidelines represent an organized forgetting that won't be acceptable, or forgotten, in Korea and China.

5 Nullification?

Intellectuals and civil organizations in Japan and Korea lobbied Kan to declare the 1910 Treaty of Annexation illegal, promise official reparations and apologies for forced labourers and comfort women, and to also apologize to North Korea and normalize relations with it as part of a more comprehensive process of reconciliation. Nullification would render the entire colonial era illegal and thus also invalidate the 1965 Basic Treaty since it is based on recognizing the colonial era as legal (but not just). Proponents campaigned for this agenda in 2010, drawing significant support on the Korean peninsula, although their efforts attracted little media attention in Japan. Koreans and some Japanese maintain that the annexation treaty was never valid principally because it was negotiated under coercion, involved bribery and is marred by procedural flaws and discrepancies.³ The Japanese government maintains that the treaty was valid at the time it was signed until Korea's liberation in 1945.

Wada Haruki, professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo known *inter alia* for his prominent role in the Asian Women's Fund, has played a key role in pressuring the Japanese government to nullify the 1910 treaty of annexation, but to no avail.⁴ During 2010 prior to the centennial he along with colleagues in Japan and South Korea gathered over 1,000 signatures of intellectuals from each nation on a joint statement calling for official recognition that Japanese colonialism in Korea was illegal. In doing so, the hope was to open the door for individual compensation and heighten awareness about the specific crimes of colonial rule in Korea among Japanese while igniting a wider debate about colonialism. The petition, delivered on July 28, 2010, also called on the government to normalize ties with North Korea in order to end the Cold War stalemate. Hopes for an inclusive East Asian community rest on ending the isolation of Pyongyang. (Ryū 2010, 127–151)

The nullification movement received mixed reviews, as its principled aims were not effectively promoted. Historian Alexis Dudden states that,

... the point isn't whether or not the annexation was legal or illegal, but rather to understand what constituted "legality" in 1910, thus, even though it is possible to demonstrate that the annexation was legal at the time, that doesn't

³ On the illegality of annexation see Park 2010, 13–41.

⁴ The Asian Women's Fund (1995–2007) was an ill-fated attempt to indirectly and unofficially compensate former comfort women for wartime sexual enslavement that promoted more recriminations than reconciliation. See Kingston 2011, 197–205.

mean it was “good.” Japan’s annexation of Korea was legal because forced and forged treaties, assassinations, bribes, and deceit were the colonial game. In the summer of 1907, the world sided with Japan to agree collectively that the Koreans were “unfit to rule themselves.”⁵

And thus Korea was abandoned to Japanese violence and ambitions.

Peter Duus, another historian, sees little hope in the nullification movement, arguing,

The recent movement to have the Japanese government declare the annexation treaty “null and void” from the start seems quixotic at best, and questionable as a matter of international law unless there is evidence that Yi Wan-yong, the Korean prime minister at the time, was bribed or signed the treaty at gun point. All the major world powers, US included, accepted the treaty as legitimate, and most thought that Korea would be better off under Japanese guidance.⁶

Andrew Horvat, Director of the Stanford program in Kyoto, is equally sceptical, describing the nullification movement as the polarizing equivalent of Jane Fonda going to Hanoi during the Vietnam War.⁷ Horvat argues that reconciliation depends on forging a consensus within Japan about the colonial era, one that will lead to concrete acts of contrition. In his view, the nullification movement polarizes domestic actors in Japan and prevents any consensus, thereby derailing reconciliation initiatives.

Another expert requesting anonymity adds, “For a movement with overt political aims, its organizers dizzying lack of political acumen on multiple fronts will likely yield unnecessary backlash to a worthy and necessary aim: historical understanding between Japan and Korea.”

⁵ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent statements attributed to Dudden draw from this interview. Alexis Dudden is author of *Japan’s Colonization of Korea* (2005) and *Troubled Apologies* (2008).

⁶ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent statements attributed to Duus draw from this interview. Peter Duus is emeritus professor of history at Stanford University and author of *Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea 1895–1910* (1998).

⁷ Interview July, 2010. Subsequent statements attributed to Horvat draw on this interview. Andrew Horvat previously served as Director of the Asia Foundation’s Tokyo office and sponsored and participated in numerous conferences on reconciliation between Japan and Korea.

6 Beyond Apology

The Kan Statement aims to put historical issues behind the two countries and focus on the future, but there is little chance that Koreans will let Japan off the hook of history even if they do appreciate the sentiments. Kan admitted the injustice, but not the illegality of colonial rule, leaving Koreans (and some Japanese progressives) dissatisfied. No apology could ever be enough, as Koreans cling to past injustices as part of their national identity and value actions above words. Christian Caryl, contributing editor to *Foreign Policy* argues that, "...part of the problem is a Korean nationalism that is built around a deep-seated notion of Korean victimhood. Koreans need to get over this if they're ever going to have a healthy relationship with their neighbours."⁸

Few Japanese seek refuge in the glorifying narrative favoured by conservatives, understanding there is little dignity in denial. Former ambassador to the Netherlands (and grandson of wartime Foreign Minister Tōgō Shigenori) Tōgō Kazuhiko states,

I don't think that Japan suffers from apology fatigue nor is the Japanese people's willingness to do more exhausted. There is a big hole in the Murayama statement. He acknowledged that Japan did bad things including aggression and colonial rule, but did not determine who was responsible and as long as this issue remains unanswered, reconciliation will not proceed.⁹

A Japanese expert on Korea, requesting anonymity, observes that, "Japan must be made to perpetually apologize and there can be no resolution and no gesture can ever be enough." As the victim, the Koreans are in a position to decide about how to deal with the colonial past and see few incentives in reconciliation. Given that apologies are offered, but shunned, and gestures of contrition never quite measure up, the odds against reconciliation are high. Rather than seeking a dramatic breakthrough, several experts recommend that Japan pursue concrete measures dealing with outstanding issues such as forced labour, the comfort women, textbooks, Yasukuni Shrine and the disputed islands of Dokdo/Takeshima. Advancing this agenda is the best chance for giving some momentum to a healing process that eventually may create an opening. Not to do so will only prolong the stalemate.

⁸ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent attributions to Caryl draw from this interview.

⁹ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent attributions to Tōgō draw on this interview.

7 Compensating Forced Labour

Tōgō contends that the Japanese government and companies now have a chance to live up to their moral responsibility regarding claims for forced labour compensation. He states,

In May 2007 the Supreme Court ruled that neither the Japanese government nor companies bear any legal liability and are not criminally responsible for forced labour, but I think that this opens up an opportunity to consider the moral point of view. It behoves Japan to establish a joint fund by government and the private sector to provide individual compensation to victims...but the problem is determining the criteria and which victims are eligible.¹⁰

Seizing this chance may not be easy, because it has implications for Chinese forced labourers, POWs and others who seek individual compensation, but in 2010 Mitsubishi agreed to compensate some 300 conscripted Korean women workers at its wartime Nagoya aircraft factory. According to William Underwood, a historian who has conducted groundbreaking research into the forced labour issue, this decision,

...is potentially Copernican. The big factors were the committed demonstrations against Mitsubishi in Seoul and Tokyo and well-coordinated transnational activism at the community level. Then there was a petition signed by more than 130,000 South Korean citizens and 100 members of the National Assembly, and talk of a boycott, that put this effort over the top. It is hard to see how Mitsubishi will now draw a line between the *teishintai* (Conscripted Women's Brigade) and other Korean citizens conscripted into working for its various companies. A Mitsubishi program for compensating its former labour conscripts would up the ante for other companies to follow suit."¹¹

Underwood also finds it encouraging that in March 2010 the Japanese government finally provided, "...the long sought civilian name rosters and payroll records that the South Korean government needs to carry out in its own program for compensating former conscripts and their descendants." The list has 175,000 names of Korean forced labourers and details about some \$3 million of their money held by the Japanese government. (The Hankyoreh and Underwood 2010) Why it took sixty-five years to turn over this list reveals much about Japan's mishandling of reconciliation and why Koreans remain so resentful.

¹⁰ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent attributions to Tōgō draw on this interview.

¹¹ This and subsequent statements attributed to Underwood draw from an interview in August 2010. Also see: Kim and Kil 2010.

Standing in the way of compensation is the low awareness and denial in Japan concerning forced labour and abuses. (Underwood 2008) It is astonishing, Underwood says, that,

Prime Minister Asō (2008–09) could contend with media support that the 10,000 Koreans at Asō mining (his family’s mining business) were well-treated and not unduly coerced. The Japanese media, which rarely covers the vigorous activism within Japanese society that seeks to resolve historical issues... barely covered the Mitsubishi announcement. It is also amazing that Keidanren (Japan’s leading business federation) has been able to completely ignore the myriad claims upon Japanese industries by taking a *mokusatsu* (“ignore with contempt”) stance, especially in this age of corporate social responsibility and despite Keidanren’s charter on ethics valuing human rights. (Underwood 2008)

Underwood also points out that a comprehensive settlement of forced labour compensation is complicated by claims of conscripts from North Korea with which Japan does not have diplomatic relations. Unlike with South Korea, there are no treaty waivers.

8 Enshrinement

Koreans are also incensed that some of their countrymen have been enshrined without permission at Yasukuni Shrine, Japan’s ground zero for unrepentant, bellicose nationalism. Before the end of WWII, 415 Korean conscripts were enshrined at Yasukuni, but beginning in 1958, an additional 21,000 Korean souls were enshrined without permission from, or notification of, bereaved families. Curiously, Japan’s Ministry of Health and Welfare provided the list of war dead to this private religious facility that was used for their enshrinement. The government’s evasive justifications notwithstanding, its role in facilitating deification breached Article 20 of the Constitution regarding separation of religion and the State while also, in many cases, offending bereaved families.

Yasukuni Shrine asserts that the Koreans were actually Japanese at the time they died and thus remain so after they died. Alas, enshrinement is something of an ironic “consolation prize” as this logic has not helped any Korean veterans or their survivors obtain pensions after the government rescinded their Japanese nationality following WWII. The shrine maintains that the Koreans were enshrined also, “...because they fought and died believing that they would be enshrined as

deities of the Yasukuni Shrine when they die as Japanese soldiers.” Perhaps, but this argument has not convinced many Koreans about the virtues of soul snatching. Kim Hee Jong, an octogenarian veteran, was surprised in 2007 to find that he was enshrined at Yasukuni and complained to authorities that he is still alive and wanted his soul back, but apparently this is an exorcism too far. In 2001 relatives of enshrined Koreans sued the government to expunge the names and liberate the souls of their deceased relatives from Yasukuni, arguing that,

the souls of the victims, who were forcibly mobilized and killed during Japanese colonial rule, were enshrined as deities for the war of aggression—against the religion of the victims themselves and the will of the bereaved families—and have been violated for over a half century. (Northeast Asian)

This case was dismissed in 2006 with the judge falling back on the 1965 Basic Treaty and justifying the handing over of names to the shrine as ordinary administrative procedure. In 2007, relatives sued the shrine directly for inappropriate consecration and are seeking one yen as symbolic compensation and an apology. (Hongo 2007)

Taiwanese have also had no success in gaining dis-enshrinement for the very good reason that shrine officials do not want to set a precedent. In resisting pressure from some quarters to remove the Class-A war criminals, one of the main “attractions,” shrine priests maintain that deification is a one-way ticket. Purging the shrine of colonial souls might open the floodgates for other restless souls and shift attention to establishing a national war cemetery without Yasukuni’s historical baggage. (Kingston 2007)

9 Islands of Eternal Dispute

The cluster of ninety islets and reefs that are located between the Korean peninsula and Japan, are disputed territory. Japan and the Korean governments refer to them as Takeshima and Dokdo respectively. The South Koreans maintain a Coast Guard presence and an octopus fisherman and his wife permanently reside there. The Koreans and Japan all maintain that their claims are stronger and better documented, but discussion of Takeshima is relatively muted in Japan, with the exception of Shimane Prefecture which in 2005 declared February 22 Takeshima Day to commemorate the seizure of the islands back in 1905. And so on February 22nd in Matsue there are annual festivities attracting nationalists from around Japan who

try, with little success, to stir up some primordial emotions among an indifferent public that goes about its business while the deafening “hate buses,” blare out patriotic songs and exhortations.¹²

In South Korea, Dokdo is a very big deal and much more than a territorial dispute. While taking the ferry to Dokdo passengers can get in the mood by watching an anime featuring a massive robot repelling Japanese invaders. South Korea’s (and North Korea’s) assertion of sovereignty over Dokdo enters the realm of the sacred and is indisputable while Japan’s claim is profane, a groundless legacy of colonial rule and imperial arrogance. Any suggestion of submitting the rival claims to international arbitration is rejected because to do so would be tantamount, from the Korean view, to rewarding colonial aggression. While international lawyers certainly could find some merit in the competing claims, this is to ignore the vehemence that animates public discourse in South Korea about the dispute that renders legal hair-splitting irrelevant. The seizure of Dokdo in 1905 is seen as a perfidious act of Japanese colonial aggression and as such unforgivable and non-negotiable.

The Japanese government is keenly aware of Korean sensitivities and, in order to avoid provoking uproar during the fraught centennial, delayed release of the 2010 Defense White Paper because it refers to the taboo Takeshima. If this all seems a bit over the top, remember that in July 2010 a Korean threw a rock at the Japanese ambassador in Seoul and some Koreans have cut off fingers to register their anger about Japan’s conceit over Dokdo. The fact that the Japanese government maintains its claims and middle school textbook guidelines now require teaching about Japan’s “spurious” sovereignty outrages Koreans.

Tōgō, who once served as Director General of the Treaties Bureau in the Foreign Ministry, explains,

Korea’s position is that there is nothing to talk about. But in order to resolve the dispute, it is necessary to talk. Track 2 (non-official) efforts by academics and scholars can open discussions and it is possible to have good exchanges. There is room to learn from the confidence building measures (CBMs) such as fishery agreements, no visa visits and humanitarian assistance that helped change the context of negotiations between Japan and Russia regarding the Northern Territories. CBMs can help shift perspectives and allow actors to see

¹² Colleague Julian Dudden has coined this vivid expression to denote the *uyoku* (“ultra-nationalist”) buses festooned with loudspeakers that loudly circulate through city centers in Japan.

the situation from a different angle and break the impasse. They do not have to be islands of eternal dispute.¹³

Perhaps, but as Christian Caryl, editor of *Foreign Policy*, points out, “North Koreans publish their own set of Dokdo postage stamps; any smidgen of compromise by Seoul on territorial issues will immediately be seized upon by the North for its own propaganda purposes.”¹⁴

Moreover, one cannot underestimate the power of CDMs (confidence destroying measures) to undermine CBMs. As Paul Midford argues,

...history-related confidence-destroying measures on the part of some Japanese politicians, if not the Japanese state itself, have conspired to encourage, if not push, ROK administrations towards confrontation rather than cooperation with Tokyo. (Midford 2011)

In this context it is understandable that more South Koreans view Japan as a threat than China.

10 Imperial Visit?

In September 2009 President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea invited Emperor Akihito to visit on the occasion of the centennial, in the hope this would facilitate a future-oriented relationship. Emperor Akihito did not do so even though he has been a tireless envoy promoting reconciliation in the region. Imperial visits have played an important role in promoting reconciliation and the door is still open. The Japanese government is mindful, however, that the Emperor’s 1992 visit to China was premature and did little to appease public opinion or ease tensions over history. Any incidents during such a visit also carry the risk of causing a significant setback for bilateral relations.

Dudden suggests another option,

...if Japan is serious about moving on from the so-called “history problems” in productive and substantive ways befitting East Asia’s most successful democracy, the answer lies NOT in sending Emperor Akihito to Seoul, but first in having him address the Japanese nation on TV and apologizing (with a

¹³ Interview with Tōgō, August, 2010.

¹⁴ Interview with Caryl, August, 2010.

bow) to those in Asia and in Japan (in that order) whose lives were devastated by the course of the Japanese empire and war.¹⁵

Historian Kenneth Ruoff acknowledges that Japan was slow to own up to its wartime behaviour and make amends, but thinks this has changed, “...beginning with Emperor Akihito’s apology to President Roh Tae-woo during his 1990 visit.” Subsequently, in 2001 Akihito made reference to his Korean ancestry,

...a statement with tremendous symbolic importance because it mocked the notion that the Japanese are a “pure” race. A visit, if carefully choreographed by both governments might improve relations. The emperor is Japan’s national symbol after all, and it was also in the name of the emperor that Japan’s colonial policies were executed.¹⁶

11 Prospects for Reconciliation

Historian Mark Caprio believes reconciliation will not happen anytime soon and recalls that colonial officials believed it would take a century to assimilate a people they regarded as inherently inferior. (Caprio 2009) He notes that the wounds of belittling and eradicating Korean cultural identity and trampling ethnic pride remain painful and healing them could take just as long.

The flawed attempt to compensate the comfort women through the Asia Women’s Fund (1995–2007) helped relatively few victims (364) while stoking anger and disappointment in both nations. (Wada 2008) It was an equivocal effort over an issue demanding a grand gesture, thus provoking recrimination and underscoring how important a problem it remains for Japan.

Redress is hostage to domestic politics and general heedlessness. Kenneth Ruoff observes, “Although more and more Japanese have a general sense that their country’s colonial rule over Korea was exploitative, they still lack a sense of just

¹⁵ Interview with Dudden, August, 2010.

¹⁶ Interview August, 2010. Subsequent statements attributed to Kenneth Ruoff draw from this interview. He is author of *The People’s Emperor* (2001) and *Imperial Japan at its Zenith* (2011). In 2001 in his annual Speech from the Throne, the Emperor acknowledged his ancestors’ Korean ancestry, a surprising admission to most Japanese if they read about it. Only the relatively liberal Asahi Newspaper reported this part of his lengthy speech. His frank admission was aimed at improving relations in the run up to the joint hosting by Japan and Korea of the FIFA Football World Cup in 2002. Given that popular Japanese attitudes towards Koreans are fairly negative, and ethnic Koreans resident in Japan (*zainichi*) suffer from discrimination, Akihito’s assertion that “they” are “we” was not entirely welcome, especially among conservatives. See Kingston 2004, 246–250.

how dreadful it was for Koreans.” The same could be said for attitudes towards China and other victims of Japanese aggression as well. Duus notes the lack of “...a willingness on both sides to take the other’s point of view into account, but unfortunately those with extremist views often seem to speak with the loudest voices—or maybe just attract the most media attention.” Moreover, as Horvat points out, giving the Japanese their due might help, saying, “...much also depends to what degree Koreans are willing to gaze steadfast into a past in which economic progress took place in a period of national humiliation.”¹⁷

Howard French, former New York Times bureau chief in Tokyo and Shanghai, asserts that,

Japan’s acts of reconciliation have been inadequate in scope, in terms of the weight of the language or the drama of the acts themselves... never rising to the level of a consensus wholly embraced among the mainstream political class. Japanese governments have come and gone, and their ardour for reconciliation has varied considerably.... the impression this leaves others is of insincerity.¹⁸

But, he adds,

There is a responsibility incumbent on Japan’s neighbours to extend their hand of friendship, to make it easier, in effect, to make the definitive magnanimous gestures that are needed. This means giving up the cynical use of war issues and flag waving to energize the base. It means accepting the idea that real reconciliation requires generosity from all parties. It requires a willingness to expend some political capital to end an unsightly and ultimately harmful state of affairs.

12 Understanding the Politics of Apologies

During the 1990s, following the death of Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) in 1989, Japanese learned more than they were prepared for about their history. This sudden flood released from the cesspool of Japan’s past proved shocking and unsettling to a people accustomed to a less troubling narrative. In terms of the politics of history, the conservative consensus denying, minimizing, and shifting responsibility that prevailed since the US Occupation ended in 1952 (despite the critical judgment of Japan’s wartime conduct at the International Military Tribunal

¹⁷ Interviews with Ruoff, Duus and Horvat, August, 2010.

¹⁸ Interview with Howard French, August, 2010.

for the Far East, 1946–48) was overwhelmed by a torrent of disturbing and credible revelations in the 1990s that supported progressive critiques of the war. The pendulum swung rapidly in favour of Ienaga Saburō and other progressive intellectuals who had been fighting to force the government and nation to embrace a more forthright reckoning. This is where I think Jennifer Lind, an Assistant Professor of Government at Dartmouth College, misunderstands the politics of history in Japan. (Lind 2008)

Lind asserts that Japan's official apologies and acts of contrition regarding the imperial past trigger a nationalistic backlash in Japan, provoking denials and acerbic comments by Japanese conservatives aimed at undoing the apologies. She asserts that these remarks fuel resentment in Korea and China, and thus apologies have been counterproductive. This is confusing the symptoms for the cause. The fundamental cause of discord is the disagreement in Japan about what happened, and whether Japan's actions were wrong; this controversy continues to this day and these battles precede the apology diplomacy that began in the early 1990s. In Germany, there has been no question about whether the Nazi's wartime misdeeds were wrong. Germany initially demonstrated limited contrition and introspection, focusing for many years on its own suffering just like Japan, but it was never denying or justifying what Germany did during the war. In Japan, conservatives have persistently done so while battling progressives for the past six decades over what happened and why. High profile conservative revisionists continue to assert that Japan was engaged in a noble Pan Asian mission to liberate Asians from the yoke of Western colonialism. They have contested the substance of history regarding imperial aggression and expansion, fighting a forthright reckoning. Their reactions to gestures of contrition and apologies are symptoms of the more fundamental divide over war memory and Japanese imperialism.

The politics of Japan's shared history with Asia, a longstanding battle, drive and define the subsequent battles over apologies and acts of contrition, and thus it is misleading to suggest that apologies are the source of rancour and suspicion. Japanese conservatives are upset that their narrative is losing credibility and that the progressives' candid account they managed to sideline for much of the post-WWII era has become the mainstream narrative. The apologies bother them because they represent a shift in what is being acknowledged, a revision with implications for the rectitude of Japan's actions. Apology denial is merely continuing the broader pattern that has animated conservatives' approach to troubling history. It is also important to note that Chinese and Koreans have long

resented Japanese equivocations and thus are predisposed to discount the apologies. In this sense, apology denials only reconfirm what neighbours already believe (and dislike) about revisionists' selective amnesia.

Revisionists distract neighbours from the prevailing mainstream consensus among Japanese on their shared history with Asia, one that largely acknowledges and takes responsibility for the wrongs perpetrated and supports greater efforts at atonement. (Saaler 2004) Conservative constraints on Japan's rapprochement in Asia are largely responsible for the government's dilatory and inadequate deeds of atonement, a process suffering from the absence of any grand gestures. Thus it is not too much apologizing that impedes reconciliation, but rather the government's timidity over history and reparations, one that is at odds with majority opinion. There are conservative elements in the bureaucracy and political establishment who are revisionists or pander to them. They do not represent public views on history when they obstruct bold initiatives and rethinking how to overcome rifts over history. This government fecklessness and an inability to "think outside the box" ensure that history will remain divisive in Asia.

In his centennial apology, Kan strayed from the Murayama mantra, the "approved" apology that is routinely proffered and causes no great backlash in Japan, even among conservatives. Kan went well beyond the perfunctory gesture by expressing remorse about what was inflicted, acknowledging that South Koreans were, "deprived of their nation and culture, and their ethnic pride was deeply harmed by colonial rule that was against their will." He added a *mea culpa*, conceding that the oppressor tends to forget transgressions and implying that Japan has been remiss on this score. What infuriated conservatives was not making an apology, *per se*, but the greater specificity about Japan's transgressions and the admission that colonial rule was imposed against the Korean's will. Conservatives argue that Korean leaders accepted annexation, pointing to stamps and signatures on documents attesting to this willing agreement. Kan bluntly swept aside such sophistry and further angered conservatives by apologizing for perpetrator's amnesia, meaning them. His wording could not have been a more explicit repudiation of the conservative narrative of colonialism in Korea. Moreover, it is what he did not say regarding Japan's promotion of Korea's economic development that nettled conservatives who continually invoke this as a redeeming feature of colonial rule on the peninsula. And so within hours of the apology former premier Abe Shinzō castigated PM Kan for being ignorant and stupid, this from a man who believes in sanitizing and beautifying Japan's history, and using it

to stoke patriotism and pride. This has become the usual pattern, as apologies are quickly repudiated in the ongoing fight over narrative, dignity and probity. Kan believes that only by acknowledging past transgressions can Japan redeem itself, while revisionists insist he has gone too far, besmirching national honour and pride in the process.

Apologies alone are not sufficient to heal the wounds of history, but they are a necessary part of that process. (Levidis 2010) To deny the importance of apology in reconciliation in northeast Asia, and to suggest it is an obstacle to that process as Lind does, is to ignore expectations and realities. Apologies stem from a less blinkered reckoning, and the acknowledgement of misdeeds that undermine the exonerating nationalistic narrative embraced by conservatives. Thus it is this candid evaluation of the past, not the apologies, that is the taproot of discord within Japan.

Conservative insistence on a vindicating and valorising history, rather than apologies, drives dissension within Japan and between Japan and Korea. Conservative revisionists have also been incensed by what they see as the “instrumentalization” of history in China and Korea since the early 1990s. From a revisionist view, the incessant criticism of Japan is a cynical ploy to win concessions, keep Japan kowtowing, extort apologies and undermine Japan’s global standing by tarnishing its image. To some extent the revisionists are right that Japan’s failure to promote reconciliation is not entirely its fault, but it is largely responsible for this state of affairs. As a result, contemporary disputes within the region over a range of issues remain hostage to history and the rancour it inspires, rendering resolution elusive.

13 Immunity?

The costs of the unrealistic and unrealized hopes that the Japanese government has placed in the 1965 Basic Treaty are obvious.¹⁹ This treaty has not turned the page

¹⁹ There are unrealized hopes in South Korea too. In 1965 Japan gave the South Korean government \$800 million in grants and soft loans to cover all compensation claims related to the colonial era in exchange for waiving any further government or individual compensation claims. In 2005 the South Korean government released 1,200 pages of documents about the diplomatic negotiations over the treaty that revealed the Japanese government offered to compensate individuals directly. Instead, the South Korean government received all the money and agreed to distribute individual compensation, but actually used most of the money for economic development projects, providing only small

on the past and has clearly not resolved historical controversies as discussed above involving, *inter alia*, comfort women and forced labour. Much as the Japanese government desires that the 1965 Basic Treaty serve as a lockbox for this inconvenient and damning history, it can only do so in a narrow legal sense.²⁰ But legally drawing a line under the past has not made it go away, has not freed contemporary Japanese from facing demands for a more forthright reckoning and undermines broader efforts to nurture a future-oriented relationship. Wary of subverting its legal position that all compensation claims are settled, the Japanese government refrains from the grand gestures reconciliation requires. In this sense, simply invoking the 1965 Basic Treaty undermines the Japanese government's efforts to support reconciliation and raises questions about the sincerity of its remorse.

The Asian Women's Fund, for example, was a flawed compromise between those who sought to do something for the former comfort women, however inadequate, before it was too late, and conservatives who opposed the gesture precisely because it sabotaged their denials. The arms length nature of the AWF, established as a quasi-government project to distribute public and private assistance to comfort women, is an example of how carefully calibrated gestures of atonement calculated not to compromise Japan's legal position on compensation backfire precisely because they are seen to be half-hearted.²¹

Clearly, the 1965 Basic Treaty has not convinced Koreans to forgive and forget. The emergence of democracy in the late 1980s in South Korea heated up battles over history, as a more robust civil society put a spotlight on the comfort women and forced labourers while lobbying for redress. The lifting of military repression led to a flowering of a vibrant democracy in South Korea and greater attention to historical wrongs and the absence of individual redress, let alone unequivocal apology or acknowledgement of responsibility. So, just as South Korea was awakening from the darkness of authoritarian rule, Japan too was shedding the denial and half-truths that shaped Shōwa-era (1926–1989) memories

amounts of compensation to relatively few individuals. Within the ROK some Koreans are now appealing for further compensation from their own government based on these revelations.

²⁰ In a court case in March 2010, documents emerged that show in 1965, soon after the treaty was signed, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted the claims waiver as being "legally separate from the individual's own right to seek damages". This discovery has not changed the current official legal stance closing the door on individual compensation. See The Hankyoreh and Underwood 2008.

²¹ In fact the government provided most of the AWF funding so it seemed it was outsourcing compensation. Thus, it could promote humanitarian redress without compromising its legal position. See AWF Digital Museum.

of colonial rule among Japanese. Emperor Akihito did apologize to visiting President Roh Tae Woo in 1990 for the colonial era, but this did little to quench the Korean thirst for a fuller accounting. The obscured past suddenly jumped to the fore and became the focus of intense battles both bilaterally and within Japan, especially over the comfort women. The coercive recruitment of tens of thousands of teenage Korean women at the behest of Japanese military authorities to serve as sex slaves for Imperial soldiers was a long suppressed story, one that has ignited a strong backlash among Japanese conservatives because it is one of the most damning episodes subverting their preferred narrative. Civil society groups in both nations disinterred this story and lobbied for redress. Revisionists have targeted the 1993 Kōno Statement for acknowledging Japanese state responsibility for the horrors endured by comfort women and the Asian Women's Fund precisely because these measures contradict their political agenda of "rescuing" Japanese history from the damning revelations that have accumulated since the early 1990s. Efforts within Japan and South Korea to expose more about the tribulations of the colonial past are confronted by revisionists emphasizing Japan's contributions to Korea's modernization.

The chimera of immunity from the past was never sustainable. In August 2011 the Korean Constitutional Court ruled that the government's failure to help comfort women seek compensation directly from the Japanese government violated these women's constitutional rights. (Verdict on Comfort Women 2011) The court also issued a similar ruling in favour of 2,500 Korean atomic bomb victims, adding pressure on the Korean government to seek a diplomatic resolution. The court ruling undermines the compensation waiver of the 1965 Basic Treaty arguing that it deprives victims of their basic rights and is thus unconstitutional. As a result, South Korea raised the issue of Japan's legal responsibility at a UN human rights committee in October 2011, asserting that, "...the issue of comfort women, which may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, has not been settled by bilateral treaties." Advocates also contend that since the Japanese government denied any knowledge of, or responsibility for, wartime sex slavery when the 1965 Basic Treaty was concluded, comfort women's rights to individual compensation are not covered. On the eve of his mid-October visit to Seoul, PM Noda reiterated Tokyo's position that the comfort women compensation issue was "legally resolved" in 1965 while the Korean government continues to seek talks. With only 69 of the original 234 women who chose to register as comfort women with the South Korean government still alive, redress efforts may be running out

of time, but it is doubtful their deaths will confer immunity in the court of public opinion.

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