Unresolved Comfort Women Issue: How Pragmatism Precludes Reconciliation

Patrick Hein

Even though 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, legacies about the sufferings of so-called comfort women (sexual slaves) continue to remain contested and unresolved in Japan. It is the purpose of the article to examine what kinds of reference points may shape prospects of reconciliation. Though scholarship keeps focusing on apologies and compensation issues, the prerequisites for reconciliation have seldom been dealt with. The article contends that a precondition for reconciliation is the existence of a common set of basic values and principles. How can one reconcile if evil is not recognized as evil? How can one be affected by reconciliation unless one actually meets survivors? By analyzing Japanese government sources, interviews and statements, the article shows how the change of narratives from universal and principled to pragmatic has undermined both state to state and bottom-up prospects for true and enduring reconciliation between Japan and countries affected by military sexual slavery. The comfort women issue has become an issue where history has become deeply intertwined with gender, whereby gender is used to obstruct and obscure history.

Key Words: comfort women, Japan, reconciliation, pragmatism

The international community only became aware of the comfort women issue in the 1990s, after it had been concealed for half a century. Since the first former comfort woman stepped out of anonymity in South Korea in 1991, former victims of sexual slavery across Asia have come forward to advocate for their case. In January 1992, Tokyo had for the first time ever admitted that the Japanese army had forced tens of thousands of women to serve as comfort women during World War II. Yet, despite apologies and expressions of remorse offered by Japan, former comfort women still await final resolution of their case. Due to the reshaping of historical war representations by Japanese Prime Minister Abe, the

*Patrick Hein (heinpt@yahoo.com) is a lecturer in the School of Global Japanese Studies of Meiji University, Tokyo. He obtained a master degree in politics from Marburg University, Germany and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Sunderland University, UK. His research on war reconciliation, immigration, civil society and nationalism has been published in international academic journals.

possibility of mutually acceptable solutions to all surviving victims seems a long way off. Abe has expressed his strong determination to revise what he calls the “masochistic view” of history education (Abe 2013, 204). To put it differently, Japan should be proud of its post-war achievements instead of focusing on pre-war negative, masochistic aspects. For Abe, the truth of the comfort women system remains controversial; he doubts the authenticity and veracity of the victims’ testimonies and he believes that historical facts have been distorted. As a result, the internal debate in Japan has moved back to the starting point, namely to the claim that comfort women were anything but sexual slaves. The current government position on comfort women has remained blurred and ambiguous, despite the fact that the Kono statement from 1993—named after the former chief cabinet secretary Kono Yohei who had acknowledged that the Japanese Imperial Army had forced women to work in military brothels across Asia during World War II—has been officially and formally upheld. Indeed, whilst Abe has pledged allegiance to the statement for diplomatic reasons, he has made it clear that he does not believe in the spirit of the statement. Otherwise he would not have publicly voiced his intention to revoke or revise the statement. Unimpressed by this, several cross national bottom up groups in Japan and other Asian countries have worked towards reconciliation by creating teaching materials or organizing exhibitions and conferences on comfort women. Reconciliation means different things to different people. Engert et al (2015) have framed reconciliation in the following terms:

It is worth noting that achieving reconciliation via issuing apologies will only be successful if the wrongdoer takes the initiative, apologizes voluntarily and in a remorseful way, demonstrates penance (e.g. via paying reparations) and proves that the transgressions that lie within the past behavior are fully understood (Engert et al 2015, 258).

With the acknowledgement of guilt comes the willingness to punish. Indeed, among the preconditions that are necessary for the possibility of reconciliation the identification, conviction and sentencing of perpetrators seems to be the foremost requirement. Yet Japan has never convicted or sentenced military officers or individual perpetrators for sexual slavery crimes and time seems to have run out for criminal prosecutions. Nevertheless, no one should assume that victims do not care about punishment. Last but not least, face-to-face meetings can also be a very effective way in promoting reconciliation. Former Prime Minister Murayama Tomoiichi took the opportunity to personally meet South Korean comfort women victims in Seoul during his visit in 2014. Mochizuki, a scholar

who co-directs the 'Memory and Reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific' research and policy project, stresses the symbolic importance of face-to-face meetings:

Prime Minister Abe, representing the country that is responsible for the comfort women's suffering, should personally visit the comfort women survivors and directly express his apologies and remorse. Of course, such an act would involve substantial political risks, but it is precisely the riskiness of it that would make the apologies powerful and sincere (Mochizuki 2016).

How can the inability or unwillingness to squarely face history be explained? The article explores the shift of public opinion from sympathy and openness in the 1990s to negative narratives of comfort women in the 2000s suggesting that the pragmatic embrace of dealing with the comfort women issue (with a focus on South Korea) has negatively affected prospects for reconciliation because pragmatism is conflated with unprincipled, short-term expediency.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

According to constructivism, norms or principles determine how reality is perceived. Realists argue that not norms but interests and practical considerations guide political decisions. Media and academics have described Abe as a pragmatist-not someone who is driven by norms and beliefs. In a recent contribution, the former diplomat and foreign affairs specialist Togo Kazuhiko gives credit to the Japan-Korea agreement on compensating former comfort women by describing its positive, pragmatic character:

Whatever Abe's original thinking, he has always been a pragmatist capable of listening to a wide range of views. There are many reasons to prefer this new policy, including the moral authority that Japan could gain from resolving the issue, the importance of paying respect to gender issues in the 21st century, and the diplomatic necessity of forging stable relations with South Korea given a rising China. Such rational and pragmatic considerations likely outweighed Abe's fundamental nationalist thinking. Except for his Yasukuni Shrine visit in December 2013, the past has shown Abe to be a pragmatist, particularly on history issues (Togo 2016).

"Original thinking" or the lack thereof is at the heart of the problem: whether comfort were sexual slaves or not does not matter for pragmatists as long as

progress is made. How to define pragmatism? Pragmatism is an American philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and that unpractical ideas are to be rejected. In this context diplomacy becomes a means of problem-solving to achieve practical ends. Pragmatists claim that the end always justifies the means. For the political philosopher Hannah Arendt the “fatal flaw in this maxim is that it takes for granted a wholly unrealistic degree of control over future events” according to Canovan (1992, 167).

As Kawakita Atsuko has noted, compared to Germany, where the collective awareness and memory of past wrongdoings and the Holocaust have been fostered and nurtured, a palpable sense of uncertainty and helplessness can be observed for Japan:

It can be said that Japan’s “culture of remembrance” differs from Germany’s in that the value of “peace” is placed at the core. However, when examining Germany’s “culture of remembrance,” I always ask myself many questions about Japan’s culture. To what extent is there conviction for maintaining the core value of peace? To what degree does Japan’s “culture of remembrance” promote universal values such as democracy and human rights? If our “culture of remembrance” doesn’t promote such values, what do we have to do to strengthen these values? (Kawakita 2014).

The question “to what degree does Japan’s “culture of remembrance” promote universal values such as democracy and human rights?” in particular offers a comprehensive line for further inquiry and discussion about the meaning and scope of women’s human rights. In the national and diplomatic interest of Japan, Abe has reassured the world by formally upholding the Kono statement. But, at the same time, he has continued to depict comfort women as non-coerced prostitutes. In Japan the meaning of ‘comfort women’ is to make someone who is worried or anxious feel better by being kind and sympathetic to him. The Japanese language term for comfort women (ianfu) is used in the article because it is more familiar and common than the expression ‘sexual slave’ (seitekidorei). In international criminal law sexual slavery means that the perpetrator “intends to cause ‘one or more persons to engage in one or more acts of a sexual nature by force, or by threat of force or coercion” (ICC Statute, Article 7(1)). Sexual slavery has been explicitly recognized as a prohibited crime against humanity in the Rome Statute in 2002.

DIVIDED PUBLIC OPINION

This section examines whether public opinion follows the trends set by the respective governments of Japan and South Korea, or whether public opinion contradicts the respective government positions on comfort women. Little attention has been given to explore public opinion on the topic in general. Specifically, war-related opinion poll data is often hard to find. Indeed, empirical research on the public awareness of young people about past war issues has only recently become a topic of research and of interest among younger scholars (Bode et al. 2015). Available survey data suggest two things: the comfort women issue has remained a top priority that divides Korea and Japan and public opinion is rather supportive of the government position in Japan, whereas in Korea public opinion has voiced strong criticism against the handling of the comfort women issue by President Park Geun-hye.

First, in the latest July 2016 survey by the NPO Genron, 47.9 percent of Japanese respondents said they support the deal on “comfort women” and 20.9 percent said they disapprove of it. However, in South Korea, the deal was rejected by 37.6 percent of respondents and approved by 28.1 percent (*Japan Times* 2016). In 2015, a similar poll showed a hardening of public opinion on critical issues in the relationship between Japan and South Korea. When asked what constitutes the greatest hindrance to development of the relationship, 63 percent of Koreans and 58 percent of Japanese identified the comfort women issue (Genron-net 2015). Similarly, an Asahi Shimbun Special Public Opinion Poll from April 7, 2014 that was conducted in Japan, China and Korea has revealed a serious division over the comfort women compensation issue between Japan and Korea (data for China were not available).

Q47: As for the compensation problem over the comfort women by the former Japanese Armies, the Japanese government keeps its position that such an issue has already been settled by the Japan-Republic of Korea Basic Relations Treaty ratified in 1965. Although a contribution donated by the Japanese was provided, former comfort women in Korea and the others demand an official compensation for each of the individuals. How do you think the Japanese government should tackle with this issue?

Answers: Official compensation is required Japan 26 China NA- Korea 95

No need for official compensation Japan 63 China NA-Korea 5

Source: The Mansfield Foundation (2014)

Second, public opinion is split on governmental policies in Korea and Japan. Figure 1 suggests a shift of public opinion in Japan: in a February 2014 poll con-

ducted on behalf of the right-leaning Sankei daily newspaper, with a circulation of 1.7 million copies, for example, a high percentage of respondents in Japan stated that they would be in favor of a revision of the Kono statement which acknowledged the coerciveness of the comfort women system.

Figure 1. Sankei Newspaper Opinion Poll on the Kono Statement

Source: <http://www.sankeibiz.jp/express/photos/140225/exa1402251008000-p3.htm>

By contrast, public opinion in Korea seems to be in disagreement with government policies on comfort women. A Gallup Korea survey of 1,021 adults conducted nationwide on January 5 and 7, 2016 linked President Park Geun-Hye's handling of the comfort women agreement with Japan to her fall in popularity (Hankyoreh 2016). Her ruling conservative party was defeated at a general election in April 2016. In sum, rather than suggesting possible ways to move forward or seek mutual understanding opinion polls on comfort women express a state of helplessness, of no go and of dissatisfaction. The next section will trace the changes in narratives that occurred in Japan with the rise of Abe.

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRAGMATISM

OFFICIAL NARRATIVES BEFORE 2012

Amidst the international context of increased awareness for women's human

rights, Japanese officials began in the 1990s to concede that women had been enslaved as prostitutes (Chan 2008). Many, though, who had experienced the war believed that they had personally done nothing wrong. Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, for example, who was Prime Minister from 1982 to 1987, has mentioned without any regret, guilt or shame in his memoirs how he set up a comfort women station on the island of Borneo when he was a young Imperial army naval officer.

In August 1993, the Japanese Government admitted for the first time that Korean and other Asian women had been forced to serve in Japanese military brothels and offered full official apologies. Examples of past apologies include the Kono Statement. This statement led to the creation, a year later, of the Asian Women's Fund, which provided aid and support to women who were forced into prostitution. In 1995, former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi issued the strongest state apology to date (Togo 2013). As for compensation, Japanese officials have insisted again and again that the reparations issue was finally settled by the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and Korea, and by the Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People's Republic of China in 1972. In 2000, an international mock trial organized by NGOs and women's groups, the 'Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery' presided by Judge Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, former President of the ICTY, rendered a non-binding verdict that criminalized the behavior of perpetrators and removed impunity for sexual offences during war.

OFFICIAL PRAGMATIC NARRATIVES AFTER 2012

There can be no doubt that the pre-2012 consensus on sexual gender violence seems to have broken down since Abe returned to power in 2012 (after he had abruptly announced his resignation in 2007). Abe's comments on comfort women have created new tensions and upset survivors as he considers the comfort women issue to be a controversial topic i.e. according to him the historical truth has not been fully established as historians disagree on the numbers of those recruited, recruitment methods and those ultimately responsible for owning and managing the military brothels. Moreover, he has publicly refrained from calling comfort women sexual slaves and he has never admitted in public that they were forcibly recruited. The latter point is the most contentious one as it marks a clear distinction between legitimate licensed/commercial prostitution and illegitimate sexual slavery. Abe repeated this claim again when he said in an April 2014 interview with *Time Magazine*: "At the time of the first Abe administration, a Cabinet decision was made stating that there was no information that shows people were

forcibly recruited" (*Time* 2014). The argument that the Japanese government has no responsibility because it was not directly involved in recruiting comfort women is not new. Japanese war memories have always been contested (Seaton 2007). What is new is the increased assertiveness of those who acknowledge that even though it was morally wrong to injure the honor and dignity of many women, it was "poverty" (Nishioka 2014, 16) and not force which explained and sustained the system.

To which extent has the public perception of comfort women been altered in Japan? As Szczepanska (2014) acknowledges, civil society and the left have neither been able to stop the conservative onslaught on the positive policies of the early 1990s, nor have they brought any changes to Japan's redress practices. Indeed, organizations in support of the government narrative are stronger in terms of membership -the conservative alliance Nippon Kaigi has about 38,000 members; the anti-Korean rightwing hate group Zaitoku-kai between 9,000 to 15,000 and the anti-comfort women group Nadeshiko Japan claims to have 14,000 members- and public impact than organizations that support the counter-narrative. Thus, the combined membership of pro-comfort women organizations has been estimated at 7,750 according to Szczepanska.

In a December 2014 interview with *The Economist* magazine, Abe restated his view that no coordinated efforts had been undertaken to coerce women into war prostitution but admitted for the first time in public that crimes may have been committed:

During my first government the official Japanese government stance had been stated clearly, which was made into a cabinet-based decision that there was no evidence proving that there was an outfit abducting women or coercing the women in that way. So this is not my own personal stance, but it was the stance of the Japanese government then. And it's not a matter that belongs only to the then Abe government. The subsequent government of the Democratic Party of Japan stood by it too. No changes have been made. But ...personally I believe there existed some crimes which were committed by some soldiers at that time (*The Economist* 2014).

In the August 15, 2015 statement that was released to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II Abe rationalized the comfort women issue by declaring that women's human rights have always been violated during wars:

We will engrave in our hearts the past, when the dignity and honour of many women were severely injured during wars in the 20th century. Upon this reflec-

tion, Japan wishes to be a country always at the side of such women's injured hearts. Japan will lead the world in making the 21st century an era in which women's human rights are not infringed upon (Statement 2015).

The statement not only fails to clarify who bears responsibility for injuring women in the past and to clarify the identity and responsibilities of the perpetrators but it also mystifies history. The historical exploitation of comfort women is overshadowed by diffuse, utopian gender narratives suggesting imaginary protection, respect, equality or liberation. A discussion of the gender turn of Abe would go beyond the scope of the article. Suffice is to say that as far as Japanese comfort women are concerned the topic has been kept taboo in Japan from a modern gender perspective. The term *Nadeshiko*, for example, invokes the nostalgic ideal of a Japanese woman who dutifully serves family and state. Interestingly, the term '*Yamato nadeshiko*' was used during World War II as a euphemism for prostitutes. According to Yamashita (2009) an exclusion of Japanese comfort women from the group of victims would preclude a meaningful discussion about gender and human rights.

In December 2015, Japan and South Korea reached an agreement to set up a foundation of nine Million USD to compensate former victims of sexual slavery. The joint statement aims at resolving the issue finally and irreversibly. If the statement will fulfill its purpose is however doubtful and questionable as it does, for example, not mention either truth seeking or history education. In addition, the statement reflects a strong pragmatic stance: wounds are to be healed with money with both governments committed to settle possible differences discreetly. Indeed, the end that justifies the means (atonement money) is the improvement of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan and the protection of Japan's international reputation as UN member as the following two excerpts from the agreement suggest:

- (2) The Government of Japan has been sincerely dealing with this issue. Building on such experience, the Government of Japan will now take measures to heal psychological wounds of all former comfort women through its budget.
- (3) In addition, together with the Government of the ROK, the Government of Japan will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015)

The agreement is neither a legally binding treaty nor has it been approved by the Japanese Cabinet. At its 63 Session in Geneva, from 15 February to 4 March 2016,

the CEDAW committee expressed its regrets that the Japan-South Korea comfort women agreement did not fully adopt a victim-centered approach. Korean officials have been stepping up efforts to convince each of the 42 remaining comfort women to accept the terms of the deal. Regardless of the intentions, questions remain whether all the survivors will accept the atonement money, and whether there will be any survivors left when actual payments will be made. In addition, the agreement is not applicable or transferable to all the other Asian survivors belonging to at least 27 nationalities. In China, for example, about twenty victims are still living, yet no negotiations were initiated with China. Why did Japan not initiate parallel negotiations with China? One reason is that, from a pragmatic perspective and under the current circumstances, good Japanese-Korean state relations are perceived as crucial for stability and peace. Another reason might be Chinese indifference: Chinese leaders do not perceive the comfort women issue as ontological security issue (Gustafsson 2013).

Another point of possible conflict is the removal of the comfort women statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul which has been requested by Japan. Finally, the terms of both Abe and Park will expire by 2018, so no one knows if the current commitments will be honored by the next future leaders.

LESS VISIBLE PRAGMATIC NARRATIVES

One way to achieve pragmatic goals is to highlight national war memories and national sufferings. Monuments, statues, plaques, cenotaphs and museums are ways to remember and memorialize the dead. There are no public museums commemorating slave laborers or comfort women in Japan. Most public museums and monuments focus on the sufferings of Japanese victims and display only the sufferings of Japanese citizens. There are very few prefectural museums displaying exhibits that show Japanese war atrocities. The Osaka International Peace Center Museum used to be one of them until recently, when exhibit items related to Japan's aggression in Asia were removed from the museum upon political pressure from conservative political groups. There are, however, a few examples of museums that contain exhibits stressing Japan's role and responsibility as former aggressor and victimizer of women. One of them is the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace that opened in 2005 in Tokyo. Another one is the private Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum that devotes its exhibits to non-Japanese victims of Japanese wartime atrocities, including Asian slave laborers and comfort women. It is one of the few museums chronicling the atrocities of the Japanese Empire during World War II against Asian people.

Traditional peace museums have continued to focus very narrowly on heroic military aspects or stories of hardship and Japanese suffering. By contrast, the victim perspective has been kept alive in South Korea: 23 comfort women statues have been erected in the country to commemorate the sufferings of comfort women. Students from Busan National University and private groups announced in early 2016 that they wanted to erect an additional statue of a girl in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan.

Another way to achieve pragmatic goals is to suppress the memory of a painful past in history textbooks. Japanese high school textbooks tend to dryly present a chronology of historical facts, with little interpretive narrative added according to Shin et al. (2011), who were involved in an in-depth comparison of history textbooks used in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States. Dierkes comes to the same conclusion when he notes “the power by bureaucrats in constructing an empiricist historiography” in Japanese textbooks (Dierkes 2010, 108). Thus, all history school textbooks for use in public as well as private schools in Japan require the approval of the Ministry of Education. An approval can only be obtained by submitting the text for screening to an anonymous panel appointed by the Ministry every four years. As a matter of fact, school textbooks that have mentioned comfort women in the past do not anymore mention the issue at all or only very briefly (Tawara 2015). In addition, even if a comfort women reference exists in the textbook, it is up to the individual teacher to give more detailed information or have students think and discuss about the topic at school. Hence, many Japanese students don't know anything about comfort women because their teacher did not mention or explore the issue. By contrast, in Germany, for example, the aim of history instruction has evolved towards the “education of students for political decision-making based on an analytical understanding of the past” (Dierkes 2010, 76). In most parts of Germany, researchers, student representatives, parent representatives, teachers and bureaucrats are jointly involved in the history textbook drafting and selection process. Each German state has the freedom to independently approve textbooks that meet the principles of the German Constitution and educational objectives set forth in the German Education Act and teachers have the freedom to decide on the textbook to be used in their school. As long as the narratives of comfort women are not fully recorded in history school textbooks and become part of the regular school curriculum, it will be difficult to raise awareness about these issues.

Pragmatists know how to put pressure and shame on those who dare to cast doubt on government narratives. Again the end justifies the means. The competing narratives between government supporters on one side and critics on the other side represent conflicts that deeply affect the representation of the loyal cit-

izen: good Japanese are assumed to be the ones who support the government interpretation, whereas critical citizens are labeled or portrayed as un-Japanese (such as the former Asahi Shimbun journalist Uemura Takashi for example) or even anti-Japanese (such as overseas Koreans or Chinese who lobby for the building of comfort women memorials).

CONCLUSION

The article has attempted to explain why the comfort women issue has regained some centrality in Japan expanding beyond national boundaries. It described how the transformation of narratives from principled to pragmatic has undermined both state to state and bottom-up prospects for a real and enduring reconciliation. Under the current circumstances it is not surprising that mainstream public opinion in Japan is supportive of the government position. It can be concluded that Abe has succeeded in altering perceptions and shifting the comfort women debate from the past to the future or, put differently, from history to gender. Hence, historical truth and the question whether comfort women were sexual slaves do not anymore occupy the central place in the official discourses. What matters most is to make progress and improve diplomatic relations. The pragmatic approach chosen by Abe bears however also risks and is problematic for several reasons: first, Abe has reopened old wounds by questioning the spirit and letter of the Kono statement; second, he has given the wrong impression that reconciliation with comfort women is foremost a top-down, executive driven issue that only involves diplomats and only concerns Korea; third, he has diluted and rationalized the comfort women issue by reframing it as diffuse, utopian gender issue of the 21st century and by failing to name and shame the perpetrators and acknowledge- at least moral-responsibilities; fourth, the comfort women issue has been intentionally erased from Japanese textbooks and government critics have been portrayed as un-Japanese or anti-Japanese; fifth, Japan's international credibility in the fight against global sexual violence crimes suffers; and finally, Abe has missed the final opportunity to meet with survivors. If one lesson is to be learned it is the following: it will not be possible for Japan to internationally take the moral high ground on issues such as human rights, gender equality and democracy as long as there are survivors and descendants who feel that their dignity and honor have not been fully restored.

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