

'The Second Time as Farce?' Abe Shinzo's New Challenge 二度目の笑劇（ファルス）？「安倍晋三」という再チャレンジ

Asia-Pacific Journal Feature

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Jinbo Taro

Translated by Rumi Sakamoto and Matt Allen

I'd like to start with a big question: "can the media overcome nationalism?" I ask this because the words "national interest" have been used both casually and often in communicating everyday information. The Japanese media seemingly lack awareness that these words are used contiguously with the words "conservative swing". What I'd like to know is the proportion of Japanese who felt angry versus those who remained calm when Korean president Lee Myung-bak visited Takeshima (Dokdo), and how that number changed when people learned that the reason for his visit was to pressure the Japanese government to take responsibility for the comfort women of the former Japanese military.

But the Japanese media are uninterested in such things. As I write this, what is on my mind is the capacity (or lack thereof) of Abe Shinzo, who has been re-elected as LDP leader, to make political judgements. In the LDP's draft election pledges, the party proposed to create an official "Takeshima Day" and to continue to object to "unreasonable viewpoints" regarding comfort women issues. Abe is also calling for a revision of the Constitution and proposing the establishment of "national defense forces." Can such a person provide an answer to such complex territorial issues and historical awareness? The editorial of Chosun Ilbo on 22nd November asked: "How can Abe meet with leaders of South Korea and China as Prime Minister, based on this election pledge?"

Japan's neighbors have not forgotten the resignation drama that took place five years ago. On 26th September, the day Abe was elected as leader of the opposition LDP, the South Korean media unanimously took on Abe's problematic understanding of historical awareness regarding the comfort women. NHK reported how Yonhap News, South Korea's major news agency described the situation: "Abe insists on revisiting the 1993 statement made by Kono Yohei, then Chief Cabinet Secretary, which expressed the Japanese government's apology and regret over the comfort women issue. Abe's political position is "extreme right." His election will speed up Japanese politics' shift towards the right." Meanwhile, Shukan Bunshun (a Japanese weekly general magazine with a conservative orientation) printed a piece applauding his

“comeback to politics” with some colour photographs of Abe “polishing off an upmarket curry in a luxury hotel,” which reminded me of the fuss surrounding Abe’s resignation, which I had almost forgotten till then.

When he became Prime Minister in 2006, he said that he would continue to support Kono's position on the comfort women. But in 2007 he denied that the term “coercion in the narrow sense”, was appropriate saying that “there was no coercion in the sense that officials forced themselves into houses to kidnap women.” The Washington Post criticised this statement saying that, “if Mr. Abe seeks international support in learning the fate of Japan’s kidnapped citizens, he should straightforwardly accept responsibility for Japan’s own crimes – and apologize to the victims he has slandered.” Abe’s view – that the Japanese state does not have to take responsibility because the women were “persuaded by the sweet words” of the military – did not cut it in US society. Irrespective of how they became comfort women, the fact remains that the Japanese military subjugated the women to long-term sexual slavery.

The US Congress and the European Parliament adopted resolutions that recognised Japan’s military comfort women as one of the largest cases of human trafficking in the 20th century and demanded the Japanese government officially apologize to the victimised women. Similar resolutions were later adopted in Australia, Holland, Canada and the Philippines. South Korea and Taiwan, too, adopted resolutions to demand apologies and compensation. It is easy to guess that Korean-Americans and Chinese-Americans worked behind the scenes, persistently lobbying and employing shrewd media strategies.

Facing this unfavourable situation, Abe, then prime minister, “took back” his words. But five years later, on his return to the position of LDP leader, he has resumed his old stance. As a supporter of “The Committee for Historical Facts,” he has been linked with publishing a private advertorial in New Jersey's Star-Ledger newspaper that stated “no historical document has ever been found that positively demonstrates that women were forced against their will into prostitution by the Japanese army. Official documents banned abduction and forcing women to work against their will.” Although this advertorial is the next potential source of dispute, few in the Japanese media have criticised Abe’s “recklessness.”

For the Korean people the territorial issues and historical awareness are two sides of the same coin; but the Japanese people do not share this understanding. In August 2011, the 101st year since the annexation of Korea, the South Korean Constitutional Court decided that it is unconstitutional that the Korean government has made no effort to solve the comfort women’s right to demand reparation. Lee Myung-bak’s firm attitude is based on this. On 14th December 2011, The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan erected a statue of a comfort woman in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Later some Japanese activists tied a stick to the statue, on which was written “Takeshima is Japanese territory.” Then a young Korean man drove a truck into the gate of the Japanese embassy. And on 10th August 2012, President Lee visited Takeshima.

The times have changed

Japanese politicians have not given up on the line that the Japan-South Korea Basic Treaty of

1965 “solved completely and finally” all claims pertaining to the comfort women issue. In spite of the 1993 Kono statement and the establishment in 1995 of the “Women’s Fund,” Korea has pursued the Japanese government’s admission of legal responsibility. Since they did not make much headway, they are now requesting the application of Article Three of the Basic Treaty. This is a new move. Article Three stipulates that while in principle any dispute between the two countries is to be resolved through diplomatic channels, if this turns out to be impossible, then they can follow procedures for requesting mediation by a third country. South Korea, conscious of the international community, seems one step ahead of Japan in its media strategy.

On 13th August 2012, President Lee commented that Japan’s influence on the international community is “not the same as it was.” On the following day it was reported that he said that if the emperor wishes to visit Korea, he “should apologise to the victims of independence movements during the war.” Japanese media responded with reports full of nationalistic sentiments: “Korean president comments on the “emperor”; Foreign Minister says “no plan of the emperor’s visit” “extremely regrettable” (NHK). “Mr Abe says President Lee’s statement was “disrespectful”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs says “unexpected” (Asahi newspaper), etc.

But the Korean side has not relaxed its pursuit of Japanese admission of responsibility. On 28th September, South Korea’s Kim Sung-hwan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, gave a speech at the UN General Assembly, and stated that “wartime sexual violence against women is a fundamental infringement of human rights. History has left important lessons that warn us against such egregious acts.” Further, this issue was brought to the UN Human Rights Council and became an even larger issue, also

involving US public opinion. In November the UNHRC adopted a report that called for Japan to resolve the issue of comfort women and requested Japan to reply by March 2013.

Despite rising international concern, the Japanese media remain totally uninterested. On the contrary, they continue printing words that sound pleasant to Japanese ears, calling the action of President Lee a lame duck’s vain struggle, and nothing but a displacement of the political deadlock onto territorial issues. It has thus become the norm to conclude news with wishful thinking. For example, NHK news reported: “as the diplomatic tension between Korea and Japan increases over the Takeshima issue, by raising the comfort women issue as “human rights,” [Kim’s speech] seems to aim at putting even more pressure on Japan (5th October, 2012). If this is the case then the following cannot be true: “As the diplomatic tension between Korea and Japan increases over the human rights issue of the comfort women, by raising Takeshima, [Kim’s speech] seems to aim at putting even more pressure on Japan.” In short, NHK practically stated that the human rights issue of the comfort women is simply expedient. This is not, however, a mere rhetorical matter.

After the war, Japan offered the US a large area of land for US military bases, but in this context the Japanese government has never expressed strong anti-US, nationalistic sentiments. On the other hand, when it comes to neighbouring countries, Japan’s attitude can hardly be described as a calm one. When we think about it, Japan, perhaps more than any other country, is under the “de facto control” of the US, of course. Seen from the perspective of neighbouring countries, the double standard of Japanese nationalism is obvious. If we included Okinawan perspectives in this, they could easily discern a triple standard.

Korean society in the US

The number of Koreans in the US has increased by 30 per cent in the last decade, and their influence in local communities and other places has increased.

In early November, the US presidential election ended with Obama's re-election. During the campaign period, NHK aired news from the US about Korean communities in the US, which, with their rapidly increasing cohesion and presence, are now influencing the outcome of the presidential election. The reporter from the US commented at length that Koreans there had serious concerns over the comfort women issues.

For example, the program mentioned that in Flushing Meadows near Manhattan, New York, the former "Roosevelt Avenue," was soon to be renamed "Comfort Women Memorial Way." This was included as a news item that reported on the close race between Obama and Romney; but citizens of Korean descent interviewed on the news talked of the comfort women rather than the election. Or at least that's how the news had been edited: "[When I think about the comfort women] I feel sad. It is good that the street name is going to change." "Every time I see the name of the street I will think about the suffering of the comfort women" etc. The news also reported on a monument that was installed in New Jersey "in memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of Imperial Japan," as well as on the move towards building a "[comfort women] Memorial" in New York City.

I therefore watched with keen interest how Mr Ogoshi, the anchorman in the studio, was going to sum up these reports from the US and explain the link between "Korean-American votes," the "comfort women issue" and the "presidential election." But he did not mention the word "comfort women" even once. Instead he reflected on his experience during the time he spent at NHK's Washington branch and observed that the Korean community in the US has a stronger unity than that of Japanese community. Why such an odd response?

If I am to sum up these reports: 1) Korean-Americans have even started exerting influence on the US presidential election; 2) they are very much concerned about the resolution of the comfort women issue; 3) their point of argument is naturally directed at Japan's shift to the right; 4) considering the resolution of the US Congress five years ago, Abe's words and actions will become their target. Therefore, while it may have been impossible for the anchorman Mr. Ogoshi to abruptly mention Mr Abe in the context of the news, it would have been quite appropriate to comment that once the US president is elected with Korean-American support, he may well intervene in Japan's view of history.

Abe was implicated in the scandal that surrounded the 2001 NHK programme "How to Put War on Trial #2 Questioning Wartime Sexual Violence." While serving as Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary to the Koizumi Cabinet, Abe requested, along with the members of "The Young Diet Members' League to Consider Japan's Future and History Textbooks," that the programme be made "neutrally," to which NHK executives overreacted by cutting more than three minutes of footage they thought would cause

problems. I will not elaborate on the details of the incident here, but I hear that since this scandal, programmes about the comfort women have disappeared from NHK.

What is expected of NHK now is to understand the question "can media overcome nationalism?" and work with the awareness that wartime sexual violence is a breach of international human rights law and has become an international issue. Chosun Ilbo has published the following words of Professor Sohn Yul, Dean of the Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University: "South Korea must not develop a cynical foreign policy that implies that the Japanese people as a whole are leaning to the extreme right." These words contain an example of how to overcome nationalism.

Five years ago Abe relentlessly attacked the Constitution. Outraged citizens from all walks of life reacted, which led to the political farce of his sudden resignation due to a stomach ache. Today boasting of his hearty appetite, he is now said to be set to "challenge again" the task of revising the Constitution. What is expected of the media now is to make a clear statement that "there can be no second farce" and to overcome its own nationalism.

Jinbo Taro writes for Sekai (World). This article appeared in the January, 2013 issue of Sekai.

Rumi Sakamoto and Matt Allen, who translated this article, are Asia-Pacific Journal Associates. They are coeditors of [Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan](#).

Articles on Related Subjects

Okano Yayo, [Toward Resolution of the Comfort Women Issue—The 1000th Wednesday Protest in Seoul and Japanese Intransigence](#)

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, [Out With Human Rights, In With Government-Authored History: The Comfort Women and the Hashimoto Prescription for a 'New Japan'](#)

Makiko Segawa, [Nikon, Neo-Nationalists and a Censored Comfort Women Photo Exhibition](#)

Wada Haruki, [The Comfort Women, the Asian Women's Fund and the Digital Museum](#)

Jake Adelstein, [Comfort Women" Show Makes Nikon Uncomfortable But Not Tokyo Courts](#)

[Comfort Women Memorial](#) - On June 25 The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace opened an exhibit a Tokyo exhibit on Okinawan comfort women including testimonies by 300 comfort women, including Okinawan and Korean women <JapanTimes: Okinawa Exhibition>. The exhibition will move to Okinawa in July.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, [Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth \(in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word\)](#)

Honda

Kikue Tokudome, [The Japanese Apology on the "Comfort Women" Cannot Be Considered Official: Interview with Congressman Michael](#)

Rumiko Nishino, [The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace: Its Role in Public Education](#)