Japan’s Far-right Politicians, Hate Speech and Historical Denial - Branding Okinawa as “Anti-Japan”

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Introduction

As part of this latest phase of what Japanese right-wing extremists refer to as the rekishi-sen (history wars), the Abe administration is now mobilizing female storm troopers such as Sugita Mio into the fray launching an aggressive, almost libelous, attack on overseas-based Japanese peace-activists. In her article Norimatsu outlines some of the key characteristics of how Japanese history deniers operate when overseas.

Sugita Mio is an LDP member of the House of Representatives who returned to parliament in 2017. A former civil servant of Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, Sugita retired from her job in 2010 and joined her first political party, Minna no To (Your Party). From there she switched to Nihon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) and was elected to the House of Representatives for the first time in December 2012. When the Restoration Party dissolved, she joined the new far-right party called Jisedai no To (Party for Future Generations) led by former Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro. She lost her seat in the House in the December 2014 election. Between then and her comeback last year, in conjunction with the far-right women’s group Nadeshiko Action, she pursued a neo-nationalist agenda centering on the denial of the history of Japanese military sexual slavery during the Asia-Pacific War. She is a board member of Atarashii Kyokasho wo Tsukuru Kai (Japan Society for History Textbook Reform).

Her comments on a range of issues have earned her a high status on the ARIC database referred to below. In fact, Sugita currently ranks number one in the LDP for the number of “racist or hate-related statements” by political candidates (with 74 as of 18 January 2018, she is second overall to the 81 of Nakayama Nariaki, the Nanjing Massacre denier and peripatetic right wing politician who is now affiliated with the Party of Hope). The ARIC database has been operating since mid-2016 and has already amassed almost 4,000 quotes.

Following the article by Satoko Norimatsu are twelve translated quotes from Sugita provided by Mark Ealey.

In November 2016, two universities on the west coast of Canada and the Peace Philosophy Centre, which I head, jointly sponsored screenings of John Junkerman’s documentary “Okinawa: The Afterburn” followed by Q&A with the director. The documentary is a hard-hitting work designed to inform Americans and
others in the Western world of Okinawa’s experience in the years since the Battle of Okinawa, through the period of US military occupation to the present day. It focuses on how Okinawa has been exposed by the governments of the United States and Japan to the travails of war and the presence of military bases from 1945 to today. With an audience including people of Okinawan heritage living in Canada, there was lively discussion of the issues raised in the documentary.

We later learned that someone who silently attended the first showing, at Simon Fraser University, subsequently described the event as an “anti-Japan gathering” on the Sankei Shimbun’s website. The person I refer to was Sugita Mio, who made a come back as an LDP member of the House of Representatives in the most recent general election.

On the database operated by ARIC (Anti-Racism Information Center) monitoring hate-related statements by politicians, the number of cases of discriminatory statements made by Sugita put her clearly ahead of the rest of the field. In her comments on the Sankei Shimbun’s website she chose not to mention that the film screening had been sponsored by a legitimate research institution within the university and instead sought to discredit it by calling it “an anti-Japan meeting.” She made numerous false and misleading statements ridiculing the anti-base movement and those in Okinawa seeking self-determination. Although there to cover the gathering, that she departed without speaking to anyone is probably because she realized that her opinions would not be shared by those living outside of Japan.

Her article in the Sankei Shimbun reveals that she and others now openly label as “anti-Japan” all who draw attention to the Japanese government’s discriminatory behavior towards Okinawa or highlight damage due to the oppressive presence of military bases in the islands. We knew that revisionist historians attached this label to those who seek to study about and convey the facts concerning Japan’s war of aggression, but this has now been extended to those engaged in the Okinawan citizens’ movement. In an attempt to shut down thinking or debate, they brand supporters of the current Japanese constitution and opponents of nuclear power as “anti-Japan.”

Most disturbing is that Sugita is far from alone. The truth of the matter is that the Japanese Diet is a hotbed for those neo-nationalists who continue to deny history. This is clear from the data compiled by Tawara Yoshifumi, an authority on the right-wing tendencies in Japanese education, on the far-right affiliations of the members of Abe Shinzo’s 3rd Cabinet.

Previously, the nationalistic netouyo (from netto meaning Internet and uyoku meaning right wing) had limited their activities to the Japanese-speaking world, where they trumpeted their distortions of history. But they are now sallying forth to foreign shores to take up the cudgels on what they term the rekishi-sen (history wars), shamelessly flaunting a sense of history as unique in its isolation from the rest of the world as the Galapagos Islands with statements such as “the comfort-women were prostitutes,” and “the Nanjing Massacre never happened.” Some closed-minded Japanese who live overseas but who access only Japanese-language sources of information are cooperating with them.

There are times when it seems pointless to be concerned about these people, but the thought that there are members of the Japanese parliament who brand others as “anti-Japan” merely for discussing citizens’ movements in Okinawa is a different matter. We should not turn a blind eye to this. It requires a firm response.

This is a translation of an article that appeared in Ryukyu Shimpo on 24 November, 2017.
Translator’s note

To grasp the significance of Norimatsu’s findings we need to look a little more closely. Below find some of Sugita’s 74 statements recorded on the Anti-Racism Information Center website.

On Japanese “leftist NGO” members who participated in the session organized by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in Geneva

Posted on her blog on 2 February 2016.

“Into the UN Conference Room appeared some shabbily dressed women, some even dressed in Korean or Ainu ethnic costumes. There was a real lack of class. Among them I recognized one person whom I had seen before. It was Itokazu Keiko, a member of the House of Councillors [from Okinawa]. I’m sure that the House was even in session at this time. Thinking this was odd; I approached her. We exchanged business cards and spoke for a short time. I will write about that in detail at a later stage, but I think it’s strange that we live in a world in which there would be hell to pay if a Diet member were in a photograph with the likes of the Zaitokukai [Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the Zainichi] (which I do not support at all), but there is nothing at all wrong with taking a photograph with left-wing activists. Left-wing activists are more violent and dangerous, and members of the Communist Party are targets for surveillance to maintain public safety. When the Committee meeting was over they said that they were going to hold a press conference, so I decided to go along to listen. I wanted to hear what their reaction would be to the statement from the Japanese government. [abbreviated] Anyway, it made me feel sick to the stomach being in the same room with them. I actually felt ill by the time I left the UN. This trip to Geneva reminded me of how sickening and frightening left-wing people are. Let me be blunt, their very existence is a disgrace to Japan.”

On the gathering in Vancouver

Posted on her blog on 19 November 2016.

This was of course the prelude to Sugita’s article in the Sankei Shimbun that Norimatsu mentions.

“After I return to Japan I will give more detail in the ‘Sugita Mio Nadeshiko Report.’ I will return home shortly. With regard to yesterday’s anti-Japanese gathering, the movie was screened in English, following which the American director held a Q&A session. The movie is about Okinawa, but it works hard to glorify and justify the anti-base movement. It starts by talking about the terrible nature of the Battle of Okinawa and the mass suicides, moving on to comfort women propaganda, stating that “it was the norm that there were comfort stations wherever the Japanese Army was,” and then on to the Yumiko-chan murder of [a young Okinawan girl in] 1955. With that they stretch the argument to suggest that the military does not protect women. And that’s why the anti-base movement is correct. There was even the outrageous statement that discrimination towards the Ryukyuan people by the Japanese is similar to that of white people towards black people, and a female student appears to insist that Okinawa should have the right to self-determination. The guy who shouts “Marines out!” [in front of Futenma Air Station] is treated as a hero. It was a movie that’s really hard to watch. Why is a gathering like this held in Vancouver, so far from Japan? I will report on what sort of person the ringleader is.”

On Korean schools in Japan
**Posted on her blog on 30 June 2017.**

“Hyogo Prefecture pays 10.5 million yen every month to three Korean schools (500 people). They are using residents’ hard-earned tax money to do this. I have a problem with them providing subsidies when they have yet to check the educational content delivered at these Korean schools.”

**On immigration**

**Posted on her blog on 30 December 2017.**

“I would like to post some details about my visit to an island off the coast yesterday. Momoshima is an island just under 30 minutes by boat from Onomichi. In the past it had a population of almost 3,000 people, but now there are fewer than 400 people living there. [abbreviated]

We at least need to ensure that the children who were born this year on this island can live here for the next twenty years.

When I was there some people said, ‘The only way we can resolve the depopulation issue is by accepting immigrants. Japan should accept lots of immigrants and refugees. Mono-ethnic countries like Japan are rare. Japan should also become a multi-ethnic country.’

Time restrictions meant that I couldn’t go into detail, but I did explain to them that countries that have accepted immigrants are failing, that there are issues regarding public safety and terrorism, and I talked about Oizumi in Gunma, where I visited last year (that as a result of continuing to accept foreign workers, in some areas more than 30 percent of the population are foreign). I left saying that we will talk in more detail on the next occasion.”

**On the Comfort Women issue**

**Posted on Twitter on 17 March 2017.**

[Referring to a movie depicting Japanese military comfort women]

“There are still Japanese out there who shed tears watching a ‘fake documentary movie’ made by people who say ‘I made a movie because there isn’t any evidence.’ Our work progresses at a snail’s pace. The message still hasn’t gotten through. It pains me to think of my powerlessness.”

**The comfort women statue in Glendale, California**

**Posted on Twitter on 15 May 2017.**

“The ‘comfort women issue’ is not a ‘human rights issue.’ This is clearly stated in the *amicus* brief submitted in February this year by the Japanese government to the Supreme Court of the United States. I too think this way. It is wrong for this to be handled as a human rights issue given that it is a lie to say that they were pressed into service and were sex slaves.”

**Posted on Twitter on 13 June 2017**

“I say this again and again - I am not denying the existence of comfort women. I acknowledge that there were comfort stations and that the military managed the hygiene aspects etc.
What I am saying is that there is no evidence that comfort women were forcibly relocated in order to carry out this role, that referring to them as sex slaves is not a statement of fact and that numbers such as 200,000 (or 400,000) are absurd. That’s all. That is the position of the current government.”

Posted on Twitter on 30 June 2017

“I have never made that sort of statement. All I am saying is that there is no evidence that forced relocation (kyosei renko) occurred and that [referring to] sexual slavery is contrary to the facts of the matter. The majority of the comfort women were Japanese. As a woman, I cannot bring myself to say that these women who were doing best for their country were ‘just prostitutes’. I have never said that.”

Posted on Twitter on 4 July 2017

“Strictly speaking, the term ‘comfort woman’ was created afterwards. It is a lie to say that ‘comfort women = sex slaves’. I don’t use the term ‘comfort women’. I say, ‘so-called comfort women’ when I do refer to them.”

Posted on Twitter on 15 August 2017

In response to the Jiji Press news, "Dissatisfaction regarding ‘Comfort Women’, ‘Impressed Laborers’ leads to escalation in demands, South Korean President”

“There are no solutions to be gained from false history…. ‘The National Liberation Day of Korea being the date of freedom from being a Japanese colony’ - this in itself is a lie. The Japanese annexation of Korea did not involve colonial rule.”

Posted on Twitter on 7 November 2017

In response to South Korean President Moon Jae-in inviting a former comfort woman to the state dinner held to welcome President Donald Trump: “Pushing the claims of one’s own country into the hosting of a state visitor - [this is] behavior that Japan as the ‘country of hospitality’ just cannot understand. [It is] fabricated history that has not one ounce of fact to it. It’s all ridiculous... pathetic.”

On gender equality

In a session on gender equality in the House of Representatives on 31 October 2014.

“In the past, in Japan, a clear delineation of the roles of males and females, with women being treasured within that equation, has made us the country in which women have shone more than anywhere else in the world. That women have ceased to shine can be traced back to the end of the Cold War, when, in the name of gender equality, women began to aim for the nonsense of equality between males and females which has led to the destruction of traditions and customs. Equality between men and women is an immoral delusion that can never be achieved. Only women can give birth. As a result of ongoing policies that avoid this reality, we have become a society in which not just men, but also women have assumed a negative view of the fact that only they can bear children.”

This statement is significant because Sugita will have carefully prepared the wording in advance of the session in the Diet.

While these quotes help to clarify her stance, Sugita’s most infamous statement, recorded in the “Women Fight the History Wars” (Rekishi-sen wa Onna no Tatakai), was made in a dialogue with non-fiction writer Kawasoe Keiko.
On page 141 of this book published in 2016, Kawasoe criticized the Japanese government for relying on the Korean government to remove the “comfort women” memorial standing in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. She said: “Russian President Putin wouldn’t hesitate to order the removal of the memorial. Then one day, without warning, someone would use a bulldozer or something like that to get rid of it.” To this, Sugita responded: “Maybe I should go and do that! In America too, people wouldn’t think about building any more comfort women memorials once they realized that they would be blown up, however many they build. We should blow each memorial up as it is built.” Even this statement, in which she effectively incites an act of terror, did not attract significant criticism until it was noticed by an overseas-based academic and then brought up on the Japan-U.S. Feminist Network for Decolonization (FeND) website.

Before looking at the case in question, we should clarify that in addition to using Twitter and blogs, Japanese nationalists launch some of their most vociferous attacks through right-wing newspapers such as the Sankei Shimbun, television channels such as Channel Sakura, and books written for nationalist voters. Given that this allows them to avoid having to defend their stance in front of a diverse audience in English, or another foreign language, it is a logical approach. So, at the screening of Junkerman’s documentary in Vancouver, we should not be surprised that rather than speaking, she left and only later launched an attack from the safety of her column in the Sankei Shimbun. The uyoku deniers of history have thus far chosen to direct their most aggressive statements from Japan to their neonationalist supporters in Japanese and have rarely debated their critics abroad.

To date, the English language delivery of their denial diatribe has occurred using the likes of former Mormon missionary Kent Gilbert or “Texas Daddy” (Tony Marano - a former telephone company employee turned nationalist Youtube figure). Possibly frustrated at the lack of impact these mouthpieces bring to the history wars they have upped the ante by getting a current Diet member such as Sugita to go on the offensive. Within uyoku ranks, she is not a loose cannon – people very close to the top will be encouraging her every step of the way. Her aggressive approach and ultra-right wing perspective make her an appealing candidate for promotion within the ranks of the Abe administration.

The uyoku’s increasing use of females in the vanguard of the history wars is conspicuous, particularly with regard to the comfort woman issue. In addition to Sugita, the front-line on
denial of history features the likes of Yamamoto Yumiko, former vice-president of the extremist anti-Korean group the Zaitokukai and founder of the comfort woman denier group Nadeshiko Action, journalist Sakurai Yoshiko, who recommended the Sugita stand for election on the LDP ticket in 2017, and non-fiction writer Kawasoe Keiko. At the lower end of the scale, video blogger Mada Yoko broadcasts rightist messages in English on her “Random Yoko” Youtube channel. That ultra-nationalist forces in the rekishi-sen are dominated by females is no coincidence. This may partly be because the comfort woman issue is currently the main focus of the rekishi-sen and so the uyoku perception may be that pitting men against the predominantly female activists and academics would risk their being accused of misogyny. Be that as it may, their strategy seems to be effective.

With regard to Sugita’s comments in the Sankei Shimbun article about the screening of Junkermaisan’s documentary “Okinawa: The Afterburn” and the Q&A session that followed, the two main factual errors that Norimatsu pointed out were swiftly removed by the newspaper. Sugita did not respond to Norimatsu’s request for correction.

In sum, ultra-rightwing politicians such as Sugita Mio who feel unrestrained operating in Japanese can be reined in to some extent if the outside world is made aware of their racist statements and hate speech. The Anti-Racism Information Center is seeking volunteer translators to help on this front. I for one will be putting my hand up to help.

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Mark Ealey is a New Zealand-based freelance translator specialising in Japanese foreign relations. In recent years he has focussed on Okinawan affairs, with his most recent publication being Descent into Hell - Civilian Memories of the Battle of Okinawa, a joint work with the late Alastair McLauchlan. Descent into Hell was his seventh book-length translation and his fourth work of non-fiction. He has also translated three historical novels written by Yoshimura Akira.

Satoko Oka NORIMATSU is Director of the Peace Philosophy Centre, a peace-education organization in Vancouver, Canada, with a widely-read Japanese-English blog on topics such as peace and justice, war memory and education in East Asia, US-Japan relations, US military bases in Okinawa, nuclear issues, and media criticism. (View English-language posts only here.) She is co-author with Gavan McCormack of Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012; an updated paperback version was published in the spring of 2018). The Japanese translation is 冲縄の〈怒〉—日米への抵抗 (法律文化社, 2013, the Korean translation is 저항하는 섬, 오끼나와: 미국과 일본에 맞선 70년간의 기록 (창비, 2014) and the Chinese translation is 冲縄之怒 美国同盟下的抗争 (社会科学文献出版社, 2015). She is also co-author with Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick of よし、戦争について話そう。戦争の本質について話をしようじゃないか!(Let's Talk About War. Let's Talk about What War Really Is!)金曜日, 2014. She is editor, author, and translator of 責任 正義への世界から沖縄へ (Responsibility for Justice - From the World to Okinawa) Vol 1,2,3 (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2015, 2016, 2017) and 沖縄は孤立していない 世界から沖縄への声、声、声 (Okinawa Is Not Alone - Voices for Okinawa from the World)(Kinyobi, 2018). She is an Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus editor.