

Out With Human Rights, In With Government-Authored History: The Comfort Women and the Hashimoto Prescription for a 'New Japan' -- 人権は外、政府作の歴史は内 -- 慰安婦と橋下の「新日本」構想

Tessa Morris-Suzuki

Hopes and Dreams

They exist all over Japan, like tiny sparks of light, flickering and fragile, but somehow surviving against the odds: the peace museums, the reconciliation groups, the local history movements that work to address problems of historical responsibility neglected or denied by national politicians. As Kazuyo Yamane notes, according to a UN survey, Japan has the highest number of peace museums of any country in the world (Yamane 2009, xii). But the heritage created at the grassroots by ordinary Japanese people is constantly under threat from the hostility of nationalist politicians and sections of the media: and never more so than today (see Chan 2008; Morris-Suzuki, Low, Petrov and Tsu 2012).

Among the sparks of light is Osaka's Human Rights Museum, also known as Liberty Osaka.

Founded in 1985, Liberty Osaka is Japan's only human rights museum. It features displays on the history of hisabetsu buraku communities (groups subject to social discrimination), the struggle for women's rights, and the stories of minority groups such as the indigenous Ainu community and the Korean minority in Japan. An important aspect of the museum is its depiction of these groups, not as helpless victims of discrimination, but rather as active subjects who have fought against discrimination, overcome adversity and helped to create a fairer and better Japanese society. By 2005 more than a million people had visited

the Liberty Osaka. (See the museum's website (Japanese) [here](#) and (English) [here](#).)

Today, the museum faces the threat of closure. The Osaka city government has until now provided a crucial part of the museum's funding, but the current city government, headed by mayor Hashimoto Tōru, has decided to halt this funding from next year, on the grounds that the museum displays are 'limited to discrimination and human rights' and fail to present children with an image of the future full of 'hopes and dreams' (Mainichi Shinbun 25 July 2012)

The 'Restoration' of Japan

Hashimoto's own hopes and dreams for the future have recently been on prominent display. His Ōsaka Ishin no Kai (generally known in English as 'One Osaka', though literally meaning the 'Osaka Restoration Association') has high hopes of gaining a substantial share of the seats up for grabs in Japan's impending national election, and Hashimoto is being hailed by many as a future national leader - even as a national savior. A relatively young politician with a successful career in law and the media behind him, Hashimoto has succeeded in winning popular support by projecting the image of an action man unafraid of taking the tough decisions.

Like Prime Minister Koizumi in the early 2000s, Hashimoto combines personal charisma, budget-slashing economic neo-liberalism and

hard-line political nationalism. (Koizumi's insistence on paying annual visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan's war dead including executed war criminals, caused particular tensions with neighbouring countries.) But Hashimoto is Koizumi on steroids. His radical plans for reform would see Japan converted into a quasi-federal system with prime ministers directly elected in presidential style, along with massive reductions in welfare spending and creation of a voucher-based educational system. He is famous for remarking that Japan would benefit from becoming a dictatorship - a remark that most commentators have not taken as seriously as they should. His penchant for attracting attention by deliberately outrageous statements gives his role on the political stage an unstable and ugly edge that was lacking from Koizumi's cooler and suaver performances.

At a time when Japan's political system is mired in factionalism and indecisiveness and in which prime minister's rise and fall annually, bold words have popular appeal. Until recently, Hashimoto has shown considerable skill in mixing policies drawn from various parts of the ideological spectrum, so avoiding being easily pigeonholed in conventional political terms. Ever quick to spot an opportunity to boost his political appeal, he responded to mass demonstrations against nuclear power following the Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown by hastily adding a call for reduced reliance on nuclear power to his agenda for a new Japan, though he then went on to support the reopening of two nuclear power plants in neighboring Fukui Prefecture (see Asahi Shinbun, English online edition, 1 June 2012).

But as the election draws nearer, Hashimoto's true colours become increasingly visible. He is now wooing the support of leading old-style nationalist Abe Shinzō, a scion of Japan's conservative elite and one of the rather

crowded field of very short-lived former Japanese prime ministers. (Abe's tenure lasted precisely one year, from 26 September 2006 to 26 September 2007). Abe, for his part, has expressed interest in working with Hashimoto to change Japan's postwar peace constitution (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, evening edition, 25 August 2012).



Hashimoto (left) and Abe

The 'Comfort Women' Revisited, and Revisited, Again and Again...

Amidst heightened international frictions in Northeast Asia, as both South Korea and China face significant changes of leadership, Hashimoto Tōru has found it impossible to resist stirring the pot of nationalist divisiveness. On 10 August, outgoing South Korean President Lee Myung-bak paid a provocative and self-serving visit to the island of Dokdo/Takeshima, the first visit of its kind by a Prime Minister in office. The island's sovereignty is disputed between Japan and Korea. Two weeks later, Hashimoto responded in kind, playing the shop-soiled card of historical revisionism: a favoured weapon of right-wing politicians in need of some free publicity.

Using Twitter as his means of communication,

Hashimoto chose this sensitive moment in Japan-Korea relations to denounce the Kōno Statement: a key element in Japan's search for reconciliation with its Asian neighbours.

In 1993, after the government had collected and studied extensive documentary evidence over a two year period, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei acknowledged that the Japanese military had been responsible for forcibly recruiting Korean, Chinese and other 'comfort women' to work in wartime military brothels where they were subjected to extreme sexual abuse. Kōno's carefully worded statement of apology noted that brokers had often been used to recruit the women, but that in some cases Japanese soldiers or officials had carried out the recruitment themselves

Extract from the Kōno Statement

As a result of the study which indicates that comfort stations were operated in extensive areas for long periods, it is apparent that there existed a great number of comfort women. Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.

For the full text, see [here](#).

Fourteen years later, the Abe cabinet issued a partial retraction, denying that Japanese military or government officials were personally involved in forcible recruitment of 'comfort women'. This retraction was part of a broader, and loudly proclaimed, nationalist salvo, one of whose chief goals was the revision of the postwar constitution to allow more rapid military expansion.

The Abe resolution was flawed on two grounds. First, it completely ignored the substantial but inconvenient historical evidence that contradicted its premise. The 'comfort women' story, largely neglected until the 1990s, has now been very well researched by numerous Japanese and international scholars and international agencies including the International Commission of Jurists and two UN special rapporteurs on human rights (Radhika

Coomaraswamy, who reported in 1996, and Gay McDougall, who reported in 1998 - see their reports: [here](#) and [here](#)). Despite the complexities of the issue, a relatively clear story has emerged from their work.

From the early 1930s onward, but particularly following the outbreak of full scale war in China, the Japanese army created a massive network of military brothels throughout its empire and occupied territories, to which hundreds of thousands of women were recruited. The brothels took a number of forms, including those run by the army itself, those run by brokers commissioned by the army, and temporary ad hoc brothels set up for short periods near the battle front. The official Japanese documents collected by the Japanese government, as well as the testimony of victims, former Japanese soldiers and the early 1990s provide incontrovertible proof of the role of the military and state in planning and running this system. They also provide incontrovertible proof that many (though not all) comfort women were recruited by trickery or abduction, and that they were commonly confined in brothels where they were subject to appalling treatment and drastic punishments if they attempted escape.

Recruitment, particularly in the earlier stages of the system, was often assigned to private brokers, colonial police and others, who operated at the request of the military. Particularly in the latter stages of the war, and in the case of 'informal' battlefield brothels, there is well-corroborated evidence of the direct forcible recruitment of women by Japanese soldiers. Japanese soldiers were, of course, also directly involved in keeping women forcibly confined in brothels, and subjecting them to sexual and other violence while they were there (see, for example, Yoshimi 2002; Tanaka 2002; Soh 2008; Totani 2008, 126-128 and 176-185; Wada Haruki, The Digital Museum: The Comfort Women Issue and the Asian Women's Fund [here](#); testimony of Jan

Ruff O'Herne [here](#); the website of the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility [here](#).)

The Abe resolution discounted all testimony from survivors, even when it was detailed and corroborated by other evidence, as well as testimony from third party observers and oral testimony from former Japanese soldiers. In other words, it took the view that only official documents produced by the perpetrators could be acceptable as 'evidence' even as it chose to ignore those documents that survived official attempts to destroy all documentation. In particular, it ignored oral and written evidence (including official documentation) showing the intimate collaboration between Japanese military and police and brokers, and making clear the forced confinement and inhuman treatment of women by Japanese military and brokers in the brothels.

The second flaw in the resolution was that it also failed to answer the obvious question: how does the use of brokers (which no-one denies) diminish the moral responsibility of the Japanese state and army? Or, to put it more bluntly, even if we were to discount the clear evidence of direct involvement of the military in forcibly recruiting some of the comfort women, does employing others to do your dirty work make it OK?

History by Government Resolution: Foreign Policy by Tweet

Hashimoto Tōru's analysis of this profoundly sensitive, painful and controversial issue is a long, rambling and uninformed tweet which runs in part as follows: 'In 2007 the Abe cabinet made a cabinet resolution that there was no evidence that comfort women were forcible recruited by the military or officials. That is the view of the Japanese government. I am a Japanese, so I stand by the view of the Japanese government. Besides, I am not a historian, so I'm not going to do the work of collecting historical documents to deliberately

overturn the Japanese government's cabinet resolution.' (For the full text and unofficial translation of the series of tweets, which is recommended reading for anyone interested in the current state of Japanese politics, see the text at the end of this article.)

Hashimoto's bright new Japan, it seems, will be a place where not only the country's future but also the events of the past are decided by government resolution. George Orwell would have loved it.

Even without being a historian, Hashimoto might have recalled that the 'comfort women' fiasco was one of the less glorious moments of his would-be ally Abe Shinzō's brief tenure as Prime Minister. Having pushed through the cabinet resolution, which caused considerable damage to Japan's relations not only with South Korea and China but even with the United States, Prime Minister Abe then publicly backed down and repeatedly stated that his government intended after all to stand by the Kōno Statement. In the context of debate surrounding the 2007 US Congress' House Resolution 121, which demanded an apology from the Japanese government to surviving former 'comfort women', he went on (bizarrely) to make a rather half-hearted apology, not to the victims themselves but to President George W. Bush, for any hurt caused (Okinawa Times, 27 April 2007). Equally bizarrely, Bush solemnly accepted the apology.



Korea Liberation Association members take part in an anti-Japan rally outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul on August 23, 2012. The banner reads: "Demand an apology and compensation for the wartime sex slaves from the Japanese government."

Hashimoto goes on to bitterly criticize Japanese bureaucrats who wish to argue that issues of war responsibility were settled by the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. But his alternative diplomatic solution to the crisis in relations with Korea, as far as it is comprehensible from his tweet, would appear to involve overturning the Kōno Statement, accepting the Abe cabinet resolution from which Abe himself subsequently retreated, drawing some arcane distinction between 'being forced' and acting 'contrary to one's own will', demanding proof from 'the Korean side' of something that has been historically documented many times over, and on this basis offering (or threatening) to rescind and renegotiate the 1965 Treaty with

South Korea.

Hashimoto's politics poses a dilemma for his critics. This is not politics by persuasion but politics by performance. The object of the current performance is obvious. It is to provoke impassioned counter-attacks, preferably from those who can be labeled left-wing and foreign - best of all from those who can be labeled Korean or Chinese nationalists. This will then allow Hashimoto to assume the 'moral high ground' as a martyred nationalist hero assailed by 'anti-Japanese' forces. In responding to Hashimoto-style politweets, it is important not to act out his predetermined scenario. But it is equally important that the considerable number of relatively sensible people who have seen Hashimoto as a possible beacon of hope for Japan should recognise his political agenda.

Another Future is Possible

More broadly, the Hashimoto phenomenon can be placed in the context of the current political instability in Northeast Asia as a whole. A presidential election is imminent in both South Korea and Japan; a change of leadership is underway in China; and an untested new leader has taken power in North Korea. All of this magnifies the uncertainties created by the massive disaffection from the mainstream parties in post-disaster Japan. It is from this context of change and anxiety that the resurgence of territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Takeshima/ Dokdo, as well as of nationalist rhetoric such as Hashimoto's, emerges.

This makes a careful and considered response to the Hashimoto phenomenon particularly important. Above all, this phenomenon should not be 'nationalised'. Hashimoto does not speak for Japan, and to condemn Japan because of his comments would only be to boost his demagogic appeal. The best reply from those who hope he never will speak for Japan is to allow his words to speak for themselves. Those outside Japan who are alarmed or offended by

these words should seek out and lend support to the embattled peace, human rights and reconciliation groups in Japan which also seek a different future, so that their voices too may be heard at the national level.

Japan urgently needs political renewal and hope. But this is not going to be achieved by replacing the dull faces of traditional party politics with an egocentric would-be megastar who plans to conduct foreign policy by Twitter. Rather, it is at the grassroots level, in places like Liberty Osaka, that the real hopes and dreams for the future are still being quietly nurtured. The worst tragedy of all for Japan would be to allow the search for 'restoration' to extinguish the sparks that still burn bright in many parts of the country.



Sources

Chan, Jennifer. 2008. *Another Japan is Possible: Social Movements and Global Citizenship Education*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Morris-Suzuki, T., Low, M., Petrov, L. and Tsu, T. 2012 (forthcoming). *East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Conflict*. London and New York: Routledge.

Soh, C. Sarah. 2008. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tanaka, Toshiyuki. 2002. *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Totani, Yuma. 2008. *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Yamane, Kazuyo. 2009. *Grassroots Museums for Peace in Japan: Unknown Efforts for Peace and Reconciliation*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller.

Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. 2002. *Comfort Women. Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II, Asia Perspectives*. trans. Suzanne O'Brien. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki is Professor of Japanese History in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, and a Japan Focus associate. Her most recent books are

[Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War](#), [Borderline Japan: Foreigners and Frontier Controls in the Postwar Era](#) and [To the Diamond Mountains: A Hundred-Year Journey Through China and Korea](#).

Recommended citation: Tessa Morris-Suzuki,

"Out With Human Rights, In With Government-Authored History: The Comfort Women and the Hashimoto Prescription for a 'New Japan,'" *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 36, No. 1, September 3, 2012.