

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire = Rivista storica svizzera

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte

**Band:** 57 (2007)

**Heft:** 1: La revanche des victimes? = Die Revanche der Opfer?

**Artikel:** Victims and Perpetrators in National Memory : lessons from Post-World War Two Japan

**Autor:** Orr, James J.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-98953>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 06.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Victims and Perpetrators in National Memory

## *Lessons from Post-World War Two Japan*

James J. Orr

### **Summary**

*Although over 60 years have passed since the end of World War II, remembrances of victim experiences in that conflict remain vital loci of contention with import for both international relations and the self-definitions of East Asian societies. This review of the evolution of victim consciousness, focusing on Japan with brief surveys on China, Taiwan, and South Korea, reveals a complex web of victim narratives informed by ideologies of political belief, ethnicity, nation, class, and gender. Within the context of these ideologies, shifting national and political party interests have privileged particular memories of war victimhood over others. Japanese victim consciousness emerged in the context of a defeated population's rejection of war and fears of the return of an authoritarian-style state. The focus on Japanese popular victimization under a militarized Japanese state has led to sympathetic regard for fellow Asian victims of that same state, though alienation from the state has troubled conservative observers. In China, Japanese perpetrations received less attention in the early postwar years and during the Cold War as the Chinese Communist Party's main interest was in legitimizing its authority against the Nationalist KMT. In recent years a Chinese nationalism has been accommodated in order to replace Marxist ideology and facilitate reunification with Taiwan. In Taiwan and South Korea too, political liberalization and changes in international gender sensibilities have brought into the public eye long suppressed ethnic and gendered victim experiences. Scholars can address the trivialization of victimhood caused by competition for status privilege among different victim groups in several ways. An empathetic rather than vengeful victim sensibility can be encouraged by resisting the stark vic-*

---

James J. Orr, Associate Professor of East Asian Studies, Bucknell University,  
Lewisburg, PA 17837, U.S.A. jamesorr@bucknell.edu

*tim/victimizer dichotomy, recognizing our complicity in ideologies of power that circumscribe our comprehension of the victim experience, and rejecting parochial hierarchies of horror that undermine eventual reconciliation.*

When we say “Hiroshima”, / do people answer, gently, / “Ah, Hiroshima”? / Say “Hiroshima”, and hear “Pearl Harbor”. / Say “Hiroshima”, and hear “Rape of Nanjing”. / Say “Hiroshima”, and hear of women and children in Manila / thrown into trenches, doused with gasoline, / and burned alive... In chorus, Asia’s dead and her voiceless masses / spit out the anger / of all those we made victims... That we may say “Hiroshima” / and hear in reply, gently, / “Ah, Hiroshima”, / we first must / wash the blood / off our own hands.

(Kurihara Sadako, “When We Say ‘Hiroshima’” May 1972<sup>1</sup>)

In Germany, to speak of German suffering in World War II elicits suspicion of apologist revisionism, of insufficient reflection on German responsibility as war perpetrator. In Japan, it is the norm to dwell on Japanese civilian suffering in narratives of the war. And while focusing on Japanese war victimhood has led at times to privileging domestic over foreign suffering, it has not normally been used with an intent to escape responsibility for war perpetrations<sup>2</sup>. To the contrary, war victim consciousness, or *higaisha ishiki* as it is called in Japanese, has sustained a pacifist ethic and embraces a sympathetic recognition of Asian victims of Japanese war perpetrations. Japanese peace activists, who generally embrace the notion that Japanese were war victims, have been most vigilant in calling for the need to own up to Japan’s war perpetrations.

The Japanese government has in fact formally apologized for its

1 Translated by R. H. Minear, in *Black Eggs* (Ann Arbor, 1994), pp. 226–227.

2 On the German case, see for example, R. G. Moeller, “Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies”, *History & Memory* 17.1 (2005), pp. 147–194.

3 On the resumption of diplomatic relations with the PRC, for example, the joint communiqué stated that Japan was “keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious damage that Japan caused in the past to the Chinese people through war, and deeply reproaches itself”.

[http://www.csis.org/images/stories/taiwan/japan\\_1972\\_jointcommunique.pdf](http://www.csis.org/images/stories/taiwan/japan_1972_jointcommunique.pdf) (accessed 9 Sept 2006).

In August 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the war’s end, P.M. Koizumi Jun’ichirô again apologized using typical phrasing: “In the past, Japan, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. Sincerely facing these facts of history, I once again express my feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology, and also express the feelings of mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, in the war. I am determined not to allow the lessons of that horrible war to erode, and to contribute to the peace and



wartime actions many times<sup>3</sup>. Why then, does Japan encounter diplomatic difficulties over war memories in Asia over sixty years since the war's end, and why is it so often criticized for having failed to recognize and apologize for its misdeeds in the Asia-Pacific War? These apologies sound hollow in part through a misunderstanding of the central role war victimhood plays in Japanese domestic politics and popular pacifism, in part because Japan's conservative-led government has resisted claims for restitution, but mostly because the official expressions of regret are inevitably contradicted by the words and actions of government leaders. A Prime Minister's decision to visit Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's 2.5 million military dead, including a small number of convicted war criminals, are honored; a cabinet-level minister's scandalous denial of the Nanjing Massacre or apologist statement about Japan's colonization of Korea; official certification of an apologist history textbook that indulges in patriotic softening of Japan's prewar aggressions – these are the types of events that trample the memory of Asian victims of Japanese war policies and so elicit official and popular protest in China and Korea<sup>4</sup>.

It must be noted that such violations of neighbor country historical sensibilities also violate the prevailing but contested discursive import of Japanese victim narratives at home, reflecting a continuing struggle over public remembrance of the war in Japan. Centrist and progressive newspaper editorials criticize ministerial visits to Yasukuni, activists clamor for the resignation of tactless cabinet ministers, and the revisionist textbooks are hardly ever adopted by school districts. Denials of the Nanjing atrocity are exceedingly controversial in Japan, and represent what up until recently has been a minority and essentially remains a revisionist position. At stake is not just the international history that informs present Japanese foreign policy, but also the vision of postwar Japanese society as a liberal democracy with sacred civil liberties protecting the citizenry from abuse by a militarized state. In short, although Japanese war victim rhetoric has supported a dominant pacifist perspective on the Asia-Pacific War and civil society, remembrance remains a hotly contested field.

prosperity of the world without ever again waging a war.” From the website of the Japanese Prime Minister's office:  
[http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/koizumispeech/2005/08/15danwa\\_e.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/koizumispeech/2005/08/15danwa_e.html) (accessed 6 September 2006).

4 The incidents mentioned recur over time and are carried in the news media. Those interested in ministerial gaffes may reference Kawano, Noriyuki and Matsuo, Masatsugu, “Political Outcomes of the Slips of the Tongue of Japanese Ministers”. *Hiroshima Peace Science* 24 (2002), pp. 197–221.



## Defeat and Rehabilitation

Japan's defeat in World War Two was total. All agreed that the war had been a strategic mistake, most agreed that it had been a moral mistake as well. The dominant victim narrative in postwar Japan emerged out of Allied psychological warfare materials that aimed to undermine the credibility of the war leadership by positioning the Showa emperor, rank-and-file soldiers, and civilians as having been manipulated by a callous militarist leadership. This perspective was expressed formally in the Potsdam Declaration of 1945, litigated in the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, and promoted in Allied occupation policies in education and the mass media. In this retelling, Japan's expansionist policies constituted a war of aggression, perpetrated by a cabal of militarist leaders who mislead the Japanese people into waging it<sup>5</sup>. As the first post-defeat elementary school social studies text succinctly phrased it, "The people suffered greatly during the long war. This misfortune was caused by the militarists oppressing the people and waging a reckless war."<sup>6</sup>

In many ways the Showa emperor became symbolic of the people's experience, betrayed and manipulated by the militarists. His exemption in the Tokyo War Crimes Trials came to symbolize tendencies in the post-war settlement to elide memories of popular support for the war. In other words, the onus of Japan's war making was shunted onto the militarist leadership, with the Japanese people, both civilians and military personnel, regarded as victims of the Japanese imperial state, and of war generally. Popular pacifism and distrust of a strong state was institutionalized in the American-written postwar Constitution that banned the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy (Article Nine) and, equally importantly, guaranteed civil liberties from state infringement.

## 1954: A year of some consequence

In the years since the occupation ended in 1952, conservatives have attempted to overturn many of the occupation reforms. One of the first measures was the reinstitution of privileged treatment of the military and war veterans, and the rebuilding of a military. Despite these state

5 Article 6 of the Potsdam Declaration, "There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest, for we insist that a new order of peace security and justice will be impossible until irresponsible militarism is driven from the world." For a fuller treatment of the origins of Japanese victim consciousness, see J. Orr, *Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan*, Honolulu, 2001.

6 *Kuni no ayumi* (Footsteps of the Nation; 1947), as quoted in Orr, *Victim as Hero*, p. 71.

measures to re-inscribe honor to military service and establish military capabilities, government leaders have not re-militarized with great enthusiasm. At first this was a pragmatic decision by Yoshida Shigeru, Prime Minister for most of the occupation and the first two years afterward, to privilege economic over military and diplomatic recovery. During the Korean War and soon after the cease-fire, Yoshida's government was under severe pressure by the U.S. and by the conservative opposition to build up the military. In response, Yoshida created a National Police Reserve Force in 1950 and then, in 1954, the Self Defense Forces (SDF) with land, air, and maritime service branches. Despite the constitutional prohibition as expressed in Article Nine, it seemed that Japan was going to remilitarize, ending the unique experiment begun under the Allied occupation. But this momentum – and with it a probably growing acceptance of the notion of honoring the fallen soldiers for service to the nation-state – was forestalled by a critical incident in the evolution of Japanese victim consciousness.

On March 1, 1954, a Japanese tuna trawler and its crew were exposed to radioactive fallout from an American H-bomb test<sup>7</sup>. On their return to port, the crew was suffering from radiation sickness, and their contaminated catch caused the closure of fish markets throughout Japan. Over 30 million Japanese, about a third of the total national population, signed petitions against nuclear weapons testing, and beginning in August 1955 annual ban-the-bomb conventions were held. This series of events, known as the “Lucky Dragon Incident”, transformed the victim discourse in significant ways. First, because it constituted a third instance of Japanese victimization by nuclear weapons – the crew suffered from radioactive poisoning and the nation's air, water, and foodstuffs became suspect – it reified the Japanese sense of war victimhood with a nationally shared exposure to nuclear danger. It seemed to give the Japanese nation a unique identity as a-bomb victim, and with it a mission to witness atomic bomb victimhood for the cause of international peace in an era of Cold War. Although the leaders of the burgeoning anti-nuclear peace movement stated from the beginning that Japan could not forget responsibility for laying waste “the countries of Asia with our muddy boots”, they also recognized that the experience of war victimhood was particularly effective at motivating people to hate war<sup>8</sup>. The focus on Hiroshima and Nagasaki privileged Japanese nuclear victimhood over

7 The following three paragraphs are based on Orr, *Victim as Hero*, pp. 36–70, 137–172.

8 This is especially evident in the strategy of the most prominent anti-nuclear peace activist, Yasui Kaoru. Quote is from Yasui's *Minshû to heiwa*, cited in Orr, p. 51, n. 50.



Japanese predations in conventional warfare and, abetted by the appeal to victim memories in general, led to a tendency to ignore sordid memories of Japanese perpetrations. Finally, the Lucky Dragon episode raised the *hibakusha*, or a-bomb victim, above other domestic victim groups as an icon for Japan's identity as war victim. Although *hibakusha* and their advocates had earlier lobbied for state support, it wasn't until after the Lucky Dragon incident that a consensus emerged to provide them with nationally funded medical and livelihood support beyond the general level of welfare support available to everyone.

In embracing this exceptional victimhood, poets and activists placed Hiroshima alongside Auschwitz, and atomic bomb victims were accorded special consideration by the state and political groups across the ideological spectrum<sup>9</sup>. Before the Lucky Dragon incident anti-nuclear pacifism was thought a communist project and attracted limited popular support; by the middle 1950s even Japanese conservatives recognized the singular power of Japan's perceived unique a-bomb victimhood. Although Japan's conservative national governments were committed to an American military alliance under the nuclear umbrella, for domestic political reasons at the very least party rank-and-file had to join ban-the-bomb groups and protest nuclear testing. Perhaps the most successful conservative politician in this regard was Satô Eisaku, who, despite his support for the U.S. war in Vietnam, managed to win the 1974 Nobel Peace Prize for his evocation of Japan's three non-nuclear principles: that Japan would not produce, possess, or permit the introduction of nuclear weapons into its territory<sup>10</sup>. In the middle 1950s after the Lucky Dragon incident, Japanese antipathy toward the military was re-enforced in the general national embrace of Hiroshima as national heritage, so it became politically impractical to push for large-scale re-militarization.

For a while the anti-nuclear peace movement accommodated participants across the political spectrum, though the communists and socialists remained most prominent in the national organization. Socialists were vigilant in constructing the victim discourse to support the postwar

9 For example, see Kurihara Sadako's 1989 poem, "Hiroshima, Auschwitz: We must not forget". In *Black Eggs*, p. 292. For an insightful discussion of vagaries of identity politics regarding identification with Jews as victims, see David Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa's "Identification and Denial: The Uses of Jews in the Postwar Period", in *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype*, New York, 1995, pp. 135–182. For a fuller discussion of the impact of the Lucky Dragon incident on Japanese victim consciousness, see Orr, "Hiroshima and *Yûitsu no hibakukoku*", in *Victim as Hero*, pp. 36–70.

10 See the text of speeches and biographies at the Nobel website, <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1974/>

formulation of a reformed Japan, reborn as a peace-loving, cultured society. For example, in arguing for better state support for *hibakusha*, Socialist politicians persistently implied the government was inconsistent in claiming to represent the “only nation to have been a-bombed” (*yûitsu hibakukoku*) and while continuing to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, the Socialists were vigilant in resisting revival of the strong state, which popular progressive victim discourse linked with militarism. When, in 1959, for example, they sponsored a bill giving *hibakusha* effectively the same benefits military veterans and bereaved families received (pensions, etc), they hoped to elevate the a-bomb victim and all he stood for to equivalent status as the soldier. Tensions over such issues existed from the very beginning of the main anti-nuclear bomb organization, Gensuikyo, formed in 1955, and ultimately differences over the renegotiation of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in 1960 led to the break-up of peace groups along political party lines. But while the brief moment of national unity fragmented organizationally, the legacy of national consensus on a history of war victimhood remained, as did the anti-militarist sentiment. In August 1963, to illustrate with one example, when the government initiated annual memorial ceremonies for war dead, spokesmen were silent on whether the war dead had died for the nation’s sins or for its honor, but they were quite explicit that all Japanese war victims, civilian and military, were being honored for their sacrifice<sup>11</sup>.

The distinctive point here is that Japanese victim consciousness remained imbedded in a pacifist framework that colored any political process related to it. In the late 1950s, for example, the government instituted stricter textbook certification procedures intended to ameliorate what conservatives saw as overly left-wing, unpatriotic tendencies in Japan’s peace curriculum. While the resulting textbook narratives tended toward apologist renderings of Japan’s wartime past, military policies were not typically vindicated. Rather one observes narratives that counteracted the postwar progressive distrust of state but retained the condemnation of war and militarism. The imperial Japanese military continued to be vilified in most texts, made the scapegoats for Japan’s war excesses. In one widely used text, the government and people seemed united in being victimized by the militarist cliques<sup>12</sup>.

11 See Orr, *Victim as Hero*, pp. 137–139.

12 See Orr, *Victim as Hero*, pp. 71–105.



## Vietnam War: Complicity in War

By the early 1960s, Asian victims of Japanese wartime perpetrations received short shrift in discourses structured by an exclusive Japanese embrace of atomic bomb victimhood. Yet Japanese state support for the American war in Vietnam, the expansion of Japanese economic ties with East and Southeast Asian countries, the re-establishment of relations with mainland China, and global shifts in the moral economy among nations encouraged a reawakening to Japanese responsibilities toward Asian victims of Japanese wartime aggression. Oda Makoto, widely published social critic and unofficial spokesperson for Japan's loosely organized citizen group for solidarity with the Vietnamese people (Beheiren), articulated the progressive case for refocusing popular memory on individual as well as collective Japanese wartime perpetrations. As he put it in the middle 1960s, "Our own victimization, now skillfully portrayed as the ordeal of the Japanese people collectively, has become, willy-nilly, a state experience ... In the course of that transformation, we have again identified ourselves with the state, depended upon it, and fallen into its grasp."<sup>13</sup> He also brought back into victim discourse awareness of the complex nature of victim experiences: rarely are victims and perpetrators uniquely one or the other. The myopia of pure victimhood might be cured with the bracing medicine of self-examination of past complicity. Progressives like Oda feared dependence on the state and the likelihood of being manipulated into supporting war again.

There had always been those who noted the need to recognize personal complicity as well as to condemn wartime policies of aggression, but such recognition became increasingly common after the 1960s, even as victim narratives remained dominant. The following decades witnessed textbook treatments that linked Japanese military expansion with victimization of both Asians and Japanese civilians alike, and organizations such as the United Church of Christ in Japan publicly reflected on their own war responsibilities. Since the 1970s a sense of "postwar responsibility" has led Japanese citizen groups to seek, with very limited success, formal state redress and apology to Korean and Taiwanese veterans of imperial military service, Korean *hibakusha*, forced Korean and Chinese laborers, and Korean "comfort women". Japanese scholars have been energetic in publishing studies on Japanese war perpetrations and the legal and moral implications of the Tokyo War

13 Oda Makoto, "The Ethics of Peace", in J. V. Koschmann (ed.), *Authority and the Individual in Japan: Citizen Protest in Historical Perspective*, Tokyo, 1978, p. 166.

Crimes Trials, with a significant cohort from the postwar generation emerging in the early 1980s<sup>14</sup>.

### **An Emperor's Death: Reopening the dialogue on postwar Japan**

The question of war responsibility was perhaps most widely discussed at the time of the Showa Emperor's death in 1989, when the phrases *kagaisha ishiki*, or "perpetrator consciousness", and *higaisha ishiki*, "victim consciousness", became slogans of the day. The Emperor's own responsibility for war had been a taboo subject, but as they neared the end of their own lives, many in the wartime generation felt compelled to discuss the forbidden. Often, as in the well-known case of Nagasaki Mayor Motoshima Hitoshi, they would admit their own complicity as they suggested the Emperor should take responsibility for the war waged in his name. With the Showa Emperor now a part of history, the dialogue over war responsibility has been more open. For example, in 1991 the *Asahi Shinbun*, a national daily newspaper, solicited essays from their women readers about their own war experiences. While the first remembrances focused on pure victim experiences, the columns came to include expressions of regret for supporting the war. With time, non-Japanese "comfort women", who had been forced into sexual service for the troops, submitted their own remembrances, and eventually even the *mea-culpa* confessions of men who sent young women into such duties were published<sup>15</sup>.

Patriotic revisionists have also come forward in the public debate. Since the first Gulf War, when Japan was criticized for offering abundant financial but no troop support for the American-led military actions, the government has dramatically expanded the legal and popularly acceptable range of using military force as an instrument of foreign policy. And there has been a discernable rise in conservative success in revising the postwar settlement, as evident in efforts to amend the peace constitution to normalize Japan's military status, and reassess its postwar constitution in general. It now seems probable that the postwar constitution will be revised, although the specifics of that revision are as yet unclear. It appears that as new generations come into their own, there is less popular resistance to leaving the existing postwar settlement behind.

14 For a summary of Japanese scholarship from the 1980s regarding war responsibility, see Okabe, Makio, "Senso sekinin to kokumin bunka", *Sekai* (August 1990), pp. 32–41.

15 A selection of these published essays were collected into *Onna-tachi no Taiheiyo senso: higaisha soshite kagaisha* [Women's Pacific War: Victim, then Victimizer], 3 volumes. Tokyo, 1991–1992.



Remembrance of the war victim is evolving along with this emerging consensus for change. The rhetoric of victimhood is still relied on in political speech. In efforts by the misnamed “Liberal Historiography Group” to rewrite supposedly “masochistic” history textbooks that impugn national honor, for example, there is a sense that patriotic Japanese have been impugned or marginalized, Japan victimized by the dominant historiography. These texts rightly draw criticism from Korean and Chinese observers because they discount Japanese responsibility for Korean and Chinese war victims. In a word, they challenge the Tokyo War Crimes version of history that became the standard interpretation internationally, one that labels the conflict a war of aggression. Domestically, such conservative efforts continue to elicit fears of a reconstituted authoritarian state. They provoke effective rebuttals that have advanced understanding of the national war experience. The scholarly community has moved beyond simply excavating popular wartime complicity from the dustbins of memory, to exploring the complex motivations for that wartime support. Space limitations prevent a full exposition of the intellectual origins of this endeavor, but they can be connected to conservative dissatisfaction with the adversarial or, at best weak, relationship the population has had with the state in discourse over Japanese war victimhood, and the implications that weak relationship has for loyalty to the national community<sup>16</sup>. Recent work in cultural history, to mention one example, addresses this concern by illustrating how pervasive support for wartime policies was. It does so in a way that makes such collaboration understandable if no less deserving of criticism<sup>17</sup>. Such work leads to a more sophisticated understanding of war victimhood that does not necessarily take popular alienation from the state as an axiom for pacifism. Nor does it take absolute loyalty to state policy as integral to patriotism. In this sense it transcends both the old Tokyo War Crimes Trial version of Japan’s war of aggression with its image of a passive and manipulated populace, and the old revisionist rejection of the Trials as mere victor’s justice.

16 See banker and mainstream conservative critic Yoshida Mitsuru’s body of commentary on a lost sense of national identity in postwar Japan. E.g., “Sengo Nihon no ketsuraku shita mono” [What postwar Japan has lost], in *Senchuha no shiseikan* [The “War Generation’s” Sense of Life and Death], Tokyo, 1984.

17 See for example B. Kushner, *The Thought War: Japanese Imperial Propaganda*, Honolulu, 2006; and Akazawa Shiro, et al., *Senjika no senden to bunka* [Wartime Propaganda and Culture], Tokyo, 2001.

## Asian Victims of Japan's War of Aggression

So far this narrative has treated Japanese victim consciousness as an aspect of Japanese national identity. When we turn to examine victim consciousness in the other societies that contest memory of the Japanese war, we find more than simply national groupings competing for the mantle of victim. Observing which war victimhood is privileged in political discourse helps reveal the shifting lens through which contemporaries have understood their past, with victim and perpetrator defined in terms of class, political belief, and gender as well as ethnic nation<sup>18</sup>. For example, in the Chinese case, Japanese perpetrations and Chinese victimhood were given less prominence in public Chinese arenas (e.g., museums and other state-sanctioned propaganda) in the early decades of PRC existence during the Cold War. At that time, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) main interest lay in legitimizing its authority against the fundamentally capitalist Nationalist Party (KMT) and, later, in gaining material development assistance from the Japanese. In recent years, with the solidification of its economic infrastructure, the embrace of capitalism, and post-Tiananmen anxieties, the CCP has increasingly encouraged ethnic Han nationalism both to facilitate reunification with Taiwan – Taiwanese politics have made the KMT the best hope for eventual peaceful reunification – and to replace Marxism-Leninism as the ideological underpinning for its rule. Narratives of China as Japan's victim – the Nanjing Massacre being a prime example – have come to overshadow heroic narratives of victory over the capitalist and bourgeois classes<sup>19</sup>. In other words, Chinese victimhood at the hands of the Japanese has become nationalist glue just as peasant victimhood at the hands of the capitalist classes once cemented Marxist rule.

In Taiwan, remembrance of war and the Japanese colonial era are complicated at both the societal and individual level by ethnic divisions, by ambivalent individual experiences during the Japanese period and after the postwar return of sovereignty of the island to the KMT Nationalist Chinese, and by the current struggle over the future of Taiwan as part of China or as an independent nation. Taiwanese aboriginal peoples and “native Taiwanese”, ethnic Han Chinese descended from mainland

18 These cursory comments on victimhood in China, Taiwan, and South Korea are based on a reading of the secondary literature, but space limitations dictate that only the most directly relevant sources are cited. Author will provide list of sources on request.

19 For a discussion of the Wanpang War of Resistance Museum in the context of other Chinese museum exhibits from earlier times, see R. Mitter, “Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Nationalism, History and Memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987–1997”. *The China Quarterly* 161 (March 2000), pp. 279–293.



immigrants dating from the dynastic era, suffered and benefited from forced assimilation under Japanese colonial rule that brought law, order, and general modernity to the island. Although return to Chinese sovereignty after Japan's defeat seems to have been generally anticipated with expectations of ethnic solidarity, cultural clashes and mistrust between ostensible former enemies led to a brutal suppression of Taiwanese leadership. In the February 28 incident in 1947, KMT troops fired into crowds and rounded up Taiwanese civic leaders who had organized in protest of disproportionate use of force by a mainlander policeman. After liberalization of the ruling regime in the late 1980s, especially among those in the "pan-green" camp today who favor Taiwanese independence from the mainland, the KMT occupation of Taiwan came to be regarded as colonial succession rather than liberation. In such quarters, the victims of February 28 are remembered as Taiwanese heroes and the Japanese occupation is not infrequently seen in a nostalgic light<sup>20</sup>. In the early years of KMT rule, the leadership held a capitalist ideology and a cold war interest in gaining Japanese recognition, so the heroic narrative of victory over Japan was embedded in an ideological struggle with the CCP. In a post-liberalized Taiwan today, the inclusion of native Taiwanese and aboriginal communities into the public dialogue has transformed the ethnic national narrative from within. The present KMT "pan-blue" position favors eventual peaceful unification with the mainland, and privileges narratives of shared mainland Chinese, native Taiwanese, and aboriginal suffering and struggle to overcome Japanese imperialism<sup>21</sup>.

Korean narratives of victimhood arise from a complex web of historical circumstance in which Koreans have played the roles of victim, collaborator, and perpetrator in conflict involving Japan, the United States, and Vietnam. It has been suggested that Korea exhibits a "victim/victor complex" in relation to Japan as the Japanese government has not typically shown the deference to Korea one would expect for a defeated nation<sup>22</sup>. Japan's 40-year colonial occupation is remembered for its heavy-handed rule, policies of forced assimilation, and prejudicial

20 Huang, Chih-Huei, "The Transformation of Taiwanese Attitudes toward Japan in the Post-colonial Period", in Li, Narangoa and Cribb, Robert, eds., *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia*, London, 2003, pp. 296–314.

21 Simon, Scott, "Contesting Formosa: Tragic Remembrance, Urban Space, and National Identity in Taipei". *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 2003, 10, pp. 109–131.

22 Soh, Sarah Chunghee, "Politics of the Victim/Victor Complex: Interpreting South Korea's National Furor over Japanese History Textbooks". *Asian American Review* XXI.4 (Winter 2003), pp. 145–178. Lee, Chong-Sik, "Japanese-Korean Relations in Perspective", *Pacific Affairs* 35.4 (Winter 1962–63), pp. 315–326, esp. 320ff.

treatment on the basis of Korea's subaltern status. But such victim narratives were early overshadowed by the crisis of civil war and complicated by a leadership that was itself implicated as collaborators in colonial Japanese rule.

In the past decade or so, two passages in Korean history have come to the forefront of Korean victim discourse. The first is remembrance of Korean army atrocities and "harsh, ferocious, and even brutal behavior" committed in Vietnam in the 1960s, and similar techniques later practiced on its own (mainly working class) citizenry in the May 1980 crackdown of the civil uprising in Kwangju<sup>23</sup>. Since the Korean units were nominally under the organizational command of U.S. forces in both instances, the event symbolically conflates subaltern Korean complicity in waging a foreign war with the domestic maintenance of political order. There are also potentially troubling echoes of past Korean complicity as subaltern in the Japanese imperium. The second topic that has risen from obscurity to public attention is the issue of Korean "comfort women", the between 50,000 and 200,000 girls and women who were drawn forcibly and otherwise into a system of Japanese military brothels from the early 1930s up to 1945<sup>24</sup>. A patriarchal statist ideology in Japan but especially in Korea inhibited and discounted the plight of these women, who had come generally from poor farming households and the lower classes, until the rise of internationally connected feminist movements shifted social sensibilities in the 1980s and 1990s. Clearly, these women's victimization and the 40 years of silence after the war was made possible by the inequities of power and privilege based on a mixture of subaltern, class, and gender status<sup>25</sup>. It has been argued that former comfort women have laid claim to redress "not so much as Asian victims of Japanese aggression, but as women"<sup>26</sup>. In both these instances recognition of Korean victimhood had been circumscribed by the class and gendered identities of the oppressed and their oppressors. Any analysis of victim-

23 "Operation Dragon Eye" figures prominently in these narratives. See Armstrong, Charles K., "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam", *Critical Asian Studies* 33.4 (2001), pp. 527–539.

24 Chunghee Sarah Soh is the premier scholar who treats Korean comfort women. She has published extensively on the topic. For a concise treatment see, for example, "Infertility among Korea's 'comfort women' survivors: A comparative perspective", *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006), pp. 67–80.

25 Min, Pyong Gap, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class", *Gender & Society*, 17.6 (2003), pp. 938–957.

26 Piper, Nicola, "War and Memory: Victim Identity and the Struggle for Compensation in Japan", *War and Society* 19.1 (May 2001), p. 144, citing F. Seraphim in "Der Zweite Weltkrieg im öffentlichen Gedächtnis Japans", in I. Hijiya-Kirschnereit, ed., *Überwindung der Moderne? Japan am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt, 1999, p. 49.



hood should consider alternative indices of identity beyond the ethnic or national even when these seem the most apparent.

## Conclusion

Implicit to the foregoing analysis is sensitivity to the historicity of events and the grounding of remembrance in political agendas. The frames of remembrance in East Asian societies have shifted over the last 60 years depending on the interests of those having political and social authority. Clearly, in order for victim suffering to be recognized in social memory, a critical mass of political interest must exist, and the resulting frames of reference create relevancy for the victim experience. Beyond this bare statement of first principles, however, it should be noted at the outset that victim rhetoric itself is a powerful tool. It taps into our essential human compassion for those who suffer, and raises our indignation; and these two emotions can move people to action. If that compassion is directed only toward one's own community, indignation can lead to self-righteousness and discounting the plight of others. As Jacques Sémelin has observed, this can lead to further victimization, as in the case of future perpetrators who justify their predations on the basis of their own sense as victims of history<sup>27</sup>. When war's perpetrators avail themselves of victim mythology after the fact, their sense of responsibility tends to lessen, and this is why in Germany the mere hint of sympathy for the average German's suffering – be it the Wehrmacht soldier, the Sudeten refugees, the firebomb victims – is suspect. Yet in Japan, it has been through the lens of victimhood that the Japanese people were able to sympathize with Japan's victims and reject military solutions. It helped limit Japanese remilitarization and bolstered popular insistence that postwar Japan maintain its liberal democratic society. These are not inconsequential benefits.

Why did Japanese victimhood take this empathetic rather than vengeful form? For one thing, it is possible that empathy rather than vengeance was dictated by the trope of Hiroshima as emblematic of the thermonuclear destruction of the human race<sup>28</sup>. Our mutual survival depended upon it. On a less apocalyptic level, Japan not only lost the war, public blame was laid squarely on the shoulders of state leadership who were seen to have betrayed the political compact with misguided

27 Sémelin's comments in "Quand les bourreaux se présentent comme des victimes", a paper delivered at the conference "Revenge of the Victims?" Geneva 1 April 2006.

28 John Whittier Treat discusses these matters in theoretical depth in *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, Chicago, 1995.

wartime policies. As Oda Makoto observed, Japan's defeat in World War Two transformed the way death in battle was regarded, turning something that was glorious – a beautiful “shattering of the jewel”, in the wartime phrasing – into a “dog's death”<sup>29</sup>. With military service deprived of its usual honor, the victim consciousness that emerged from this political wasteland was liberalist not statist, pacifist not militarist. Empathy for fellow non-Japanese victims of the Japanese state could emerge relatively easily, though some moderate and most conservative Japanese are troubled by the implications for a healthy polity of such popular alienation from the state.

What of war victimhood in the context of ultimate victory, as it is remembered in China? Battle death and civilian suffering in a victorious cause valorizes claims states make on its members and complicates self-examination of one's own individual and collective perpetrations. We need to examine the ways Chinese treat their victimization of fellow Chinese across the last century, and their victimization of others, perhaps of Japanese civilians after the war, or of Tibetans later on. Japanese peace education intellectuals treat their nation's history of perpetration with a good deal of compassion. Do the Chinese? In asking these kinds of questions we must be careful not to create a falsely monolithic Chinese position<sup>30</sup>. The essential point is whether a society's history of victimhood is remembered in the context of what might be called a belligerent and self-centered nationalism, or a compassionate, empathetic one.

As a strategy of analysis the focus on victimhood is useful because it promises to reveal the underlying political interests and, if the analytical results are brought into the political arena, shift the terms of debate in which opposing sides are entrenched. In the first place, focusing on victimhood highlights the inhumanity of war and the responsibility of the perpetrators, and it affords recognition to the humanity of those victimized. Social recognition is an essential first step if victim societies and individuals within them are to mourn and so transcend their trauma in a socially redemptive way.

How do we prevent competition among victim groups from subverting this healing process and abetting the trivialization of evil? Perhaps the next step is to recognize the ambiguity of the victim/victimizer

29 For a discussion of the impact of defeat on Japanese nationalism, see Oda Makoto's *“Nanshi” no shiso* [The Philosophy of the “Dog's Death”], Tokyo, 1991.

30 Taboos on some tenets of Chinese victimhood complicate our task. Mark Eykholt notes, for example, how difficult it is for Chinese scholars to seriously question the high estimate of Chinese deaths in the Nanjing Massacre. See his “Aggression, Victimization, and Chinese Historiography of the Nanjing Massacre”, in Fogel, Joshua A., ed., *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, Berkeley, 2000, pp. 11–69.



dichotomy. There are few pure victims, and those we can agree to be free of guilt are innocent only as individuals. Even if we consider ourselves to be victims of history, an awareness of the complex interweaving of individual and social responsibility compels our consideration for the victim experience of others. Revealing the ideologies of power, that is, the parameters that circumscribe our comprehension of others' victimhood, enables us to transcend them. The trick is to see beyond our community boundaries and recognize our own complicity, as Hiroshima compelled so many to do during the era of Cold War, and "comfort women" testimonies have since.

Finally, we must resist the temptation to privilege one victim experience above others, especially in scholarly analysis of atrocities. This temptation is of course very strong. In his 1965 *Hiroshima Notes*, for example, Nobel Prize winner Oe Kenzaburô relates without censure the comments of a Hiroshima regional newspaper editor that Hiroshima was not as well known as Auschwitz<sup>31</sup>, "even though the scope of misery caused in Hiroshima far exceeds that of Auschwitz". Far more constructive is Kurihara Sadako's moral witness illustrated in her poem excerpted at the beginning of this essay. While typologies of victimhood are necessary if we are ever to grasp the process and learn to avert it, we should respect the historical and moral uniqueness of each incidence<sup>32</sup>. Hierarchies of horror ultimately constitute self-interested forms of parochialism that undermine efforts for eventual reconciliation.

31 Oe Kenzaburô, *Hiroshima Notes*, New York, 1981, pp. 107, 131, and 161, as cited by R. Gerster in "Hiroshima No More: 'Forgetting' the Bomb", *War and Society* 22.1 (May 2004), pp. 59–68. See p. 61.

32 See J. A. Fogel's insightful short essay in his "Introduction: The Nanjing Massacre in History", in Fogel, 2000, pp. 1–9.