

Debating Shusenjo - the Main Battlefield of the Comfort Women Issue: Director Miki Dezaki in conversation with Mark R. Frost and Edward Vickers

Miki Dezaki in conversation with Mark R. Frost and Edward Vickers

Abstract: *This Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus special issue on “The Comfort Women as Public History” concludes with documentary filmmaker Miki Dezaki in conversation with Edward Vickers and Mark R. Frost. Dezaki’s film Shusenjo, released in 2018, examines the controversy over “comfort women” within Japan, as well as its implications for Korea-Japan relations. Dezaki, himself Japanese-American, also devotes considerable attention to the growing ramifications of this controversy within the United States, as an instance of the increasing international significance of the comfort women issue. In this discussion, he, Frost and Vickers reflect on the messages of the film, the experience of making and distributing it, and what this reveals about the difficulty - and importance - of doing public history in a manner that respects the complexity of the past.*

Keywords: *Comfort women, film, filmmaking, public history, USA, Korea, nationalism, censorship, litigation*



Introduction

The documentary film *Shusenjo: the Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue*, by the Japanese-American director Miki Dezaki, was released in 2018. Over two hours, the film documents the controversy over ‘comfort women’ within Japan itself, its implications for Japan-Korea relations, and its extension in recent years to North America, where there have been acrimonious disputes over the erection of ‘comfort women’ statues. Dezaki conceived this project while a Masters student at Sophia University in Tokyo, and presents it as stemming from a personal desire both to explore the historical truth and, in particular, to understand why ‘comfort women’ history has become such a vexed issue internationally.

Following its premier in 2018 at the Busan International Film Festival in South Korea, the film has been widely shown around the world, including Japan. Dezaki is currently embroiled in litigation with several prominent Japanese

rightists who claim they were ‘deceived’ into agreeing to be interviewed for the film, though this dispute did not halt screenings. In September 2019, he kindly agreed to discuss the film at a special screening arranged as part of the Kyushu University conference on *The Politics of War-related Heritage in Contemporary Asia*, organized by Edward Vickers (Professor of Comparative Education at Kyushu University).¹ This conference was held in connection with the *War Memoryscapes in Asia Network*, coordinated by Mark R. Frost (now of University College London) in collaboration with Vickers, Tim Winter (of the University of Western Australia) and Daniel Schumacher (University of Essex).

Subsequently, Frost and Vickers arranged to interview Dezaki for this special issue of *Japan Focus*, with the aim of reflecting on the process of making the film, and its reception (though, for legal reasons, the discussion does not extend to the ongoing Japanese court action). The original intention was to hold the interview in Tokyo, during a planned visit to Japan by Frost, and midway through an international tour by Dezaki to promote his film in North America, Australia and elsewhere. However, the onset of the COVID-19 emergency forced both the cancellation of Frost’s Japan visit, and the abandonment of Dezaki’s roadshow. The interview was therefore conducted via Zoom.

Reactions to *Shusenjo*

MF: Miki, we wanted to start by asking you to give us an update on the reception of the film since we saw it in Kyushu. What has the ongoing response been, and how have you felt about this?

MD: Actually, the day after Kyushu I set off on my first US tour, for a month and a half; then on to Europe; and then in February I began

another tour of North America that was supposed to last until April, but because of the Coronavirus it got cut short. So, most of the responses since Kyushu, at least those I am most aware of, are from the US and Europe. Of course, in Japan the film had a very long run. It ran until the end of January (2020) at some theatres in Tokyo, about 9 months or 10 months in all.

EV: Wow. That’s impressive, considering the way right-wing groups in Japan typically try to pressure cinemas into dropping ‘sensitive’ films of this kind. I noticed that when our local independent cinema in Fukuoka screened *Shusenjo* last year, they extended their original planned run of about four weeks and showed it for several months. When I went to see the film there, the cinema was so packed that the staff put out an extra row of chairs along the back wall of the auditorium.

MD: Of course, we are still getting sued in Japan. One of the big things that happened was that my film got censored by the 2019 Kawasaki Film Festival. The city office there actually pressured the film festival, the city office which gives the film festival money. They told the organizers that maybe they should reconsider showing this film, using the lawsuit as the reason why they should reconsider. It’s a bit concerning that government offices are using this lawsuit, which supposedly has nothing to do with them, to censor the film, even though there is no verdict or anything yet. The lawsuit is achieving its goal of preventing people who want to show the film from showing it.

Now luckily, at Kawasaki, there was an outcry – not a big outcry in terms of numbers of people speaking up, but we had some famous directors take a stand, such as Hirokazu Koreeda. Because he spoke out it became national news – it was on NHK. Then on the last day of the festival they were able to show my film. That was a win for us, in a way. But, for the

Japanese government, this is definitely on their radar, because when I was in Lyon, France, the University there got a call and, later on, an official letter from the Japanese Consulate saying that they were ‘disappointed’ the film was being shown.

EV: That sounds just like PRC tactics!

MD: The exact wording was they were ‘disappointed’ but ‘they do not forbid it’.

EV: That’s very big of them.

MD: And then UCLA got contacted by the Consulate.

EV: Oh really?

MD: Yep. And then UC Berkeley got contacted. I would say a lot of the more prestigious schools in the US are concerned. Even Berkeley was concerned about showing this film at one point. The Stanford screening was private - I couldn’t even promote it beforehand.

EV: A lot of people have written about the intimate connection between Japanese studies in many top universities and the Japan Foundation, the Japanese Government, and their funding networks.

MF: I think that in the neoliberal context in which universities now operate, the same thing happens with China and with Chinese studies, with universities concerned over critical scholarship that might impact on their loss of PRC students -

EV: But obviously with Japan it’s not so much about student numbers. It is certainly about funding. And very nice funding is available for overseas scholars who want to come to Japan. If you are a Japan Studies scholar and value your networks in Japan, you would perhaps be wary of biting the hand that feeds you.

On the other hand, I remember when, in 2015,

Abe made a state visit to America and addressed the Houses of Congress, there was an open letter from scholars concerned about his efforts to censor textbooks, to put pressure on historians, and to shut down public discussion of Japan’s ‘difficult’ wartime past. Lots of people signed up to it, if I remember correctly, including a number of Japan specialists. I also have the sense that since 2015, when Abe received that criticism in the US, the government in Japan has ramped up its campaign against Comfort Women activists and other critics of Japan’s wartime record globally.

MD: If there is some kind of trend, it seems to be that Japanese consulates reach out to universities that they have relationships with, where they help each other or do joint events together. It’s like: ‘Hey, do you really want to ruin this relationship?’.

EV: Earlier, I rather flippantly commented about PRC tactics. But I think it’s not an entirely flippant observation. I mean, the Japanese must be aware of what the Chinese are doing - in terms of pressuring universities and the media in the cause of national ‘image management’.

MF: Related to this, I have a further question, Miki. In the case of a former colleague of mine based in Hong Kong, an internationally-respected historian of modern China who pulls no punches when it comes to the past horrors the CCP has unleashed on its own people - if he goes on tour and speaks about, say, Mao’s ‘Great Famine’, there’s a mobilization of PRC students overseas. Colleagues of his get emails from alleged Chinese postgraduate students supposedly exposing his flawed research methods. There’s this whole online Ministry of State Security effort to undermine him and bring his research into disrepute. Have you faced anything like that? Or even, at a one-on-one level, anyone publicly denouncing your film?

MD: I have had a couple of encounters. One of them was in Sweden, during the Q&A. An older Swedish man in his 70s or 80s, who was married to a Japanese woman, said: ‘Comfort women is fake news! Sex slavery is a lie’, and all these things. There was that guy.

But when I was in Minnesota and at Notre Dame, I ran into some Japanese students there, some were on exchange and others were regular students. One of the students at Notre Dame said to me that she was just totally shocked after the film. She had just believed that Japan was doing the right thing. This is one of those things where she just had faith in Japan, because she probably thinks of herself as always trying to do the right thing. So, if suddenly the Japanese government is saying that there was *no* wartime coercive recruitment and *no* sexual slavery then she would tend to side with that. And so, when she was presented with all this information in the film, she was totally shocked; she was like, ‘I don’t know what to believe anymore’.

Another Japanese student I met was a football player who basically came to the US to play football – his professor was telling me about him before the screening, and that before the film he had been quite resistant to some materials on the comfort women issue that his professor had presented him. So, the professor thought it would be interesting to therefore see what the student said after seeing the film. After it, this student and I had a great conversation and he was basically shocked just like that girl was.

A similar thing happened at Waseda University. One of the professors there said he had a Japanese graduate student who was very resistant to evidence regarding the Japanese system of sex slavery, and he said ‘Well, I’ve presented you with the evidence and I believe I am on the side of sound research, why don’t you go and check out this film?’ And then apparently – and this was confirmed by other

students in his grad class – when this student came back after seeing the film his attitude had completely changed.

EV: That’s great! But the problem is getting them through the doors of the cinema in the first place, of course.

MD: Exactly.

Calling Out Nippon Kaigi

MF: The film really moves to this impressive climax where you uncover the political power networks behind the right-wing campaign to deny the Imperial Japanese Army’s system of sex slavery during World War II. This was something that went down very strongly at our conference in Kyushu, and in fact had some of us wondering what we were doing and why so little of our research had tackled the power behind the production of these rightist, revisionist, narratives.

You conclude that such denials are rooted in ultra-nationalist anxieties about human rights, global feminism, and the threat they pose to Japanese national identity (as Japanese rightists imagine it). And you particularly call out *Nippon Kaigi* as the key organization behind much of this denialists’ history-making, which is linked to *Nippon Kaigi*’s nostalgia for the Meiji era and to its ambitions to do away with Japan’s US-imposed post-war ‘peace’ constitution.

So we wanted to ask you about the investigative work that went into your uncovering of *Nippon Kaigi*’s influence and networks. How far were you out on your own doing this work? I realize there was a lot that began to be published in Japan from 2015 about *Nippon Kaigi*. But was this knowledge starting to spread amongst certain groups when you were making this film, or was this something you were really picking up and

circulating for the first time? And what has been the impact of your exposure of *Nippon Kaigi*'s involvement, not just in terms of the individual responses we've discussed but in terms of press coverage and broader political debate?

MD: I would say the impact in Japan is a lot less than in South Korea. In South Korea, a lot of people didn't know about *Nippon Kaigi* at all until my film came out, and then after that this issue sort of blew up. They were, like, 'Holy Moly, we didn't even know about this group', and this became a big 'thing' after the film's release there. Books were coming out about it; television shows were discussing it. It really blew up over there.

I'm not exactly sure of the sequence of books about the *Nippon Kaigi* appearing, in relation to my film. But the film came out in South Korea on July 25th [2019], and when I toured there most of the questions from the media were about the *Nippon Kaigi*, because they were so fascinated with it. At that time, Japan and South Korea had this trade restriction thing going on, so people there were really upset with Japan and trying to understand why Japan was doing what it was. My film gave them *some* answers. I assume a lot of people were skeptical of the Japanese government, but they didn't understand what was *really* going on.

In Japan, as you said, the whole *Nippon Kaigi* thing broke from 2015. But my particular take on this whole thing being connected to the erasure of historical memories – I hadn't really seen anybody write about it until after the film came out. I was shocked when I saw this article in the APJ-JF in 2018 by a political scientist named Okano Yayo²: I was like 'Holy Moly, we came to the same conclusion'. I was really happy that such a highly regarded political scientist shared the same hypothesis.

EV: My impression is that most ordinary people in Japan are not very conscious of the *Nippon*

Kaigi and what it gets up to. But the people who *are* interested in this kind of thing – many of them are already aware of what it is and what it does. The problem is reaching out beyond that coterie of scholars and activists to the broader public and getting them to take some interest and to care.

MD: I will say that a lot of professors in Japan now assign this movie as extra credit to their students, so there have been a lot of college students in the theatres, and a lot of screenings in Japanese universities. Most of these were not public, but universities *were* getting this out to their students who previously probably had no idea about this stuff. So that, to me, is really great.

EV: That's interesting because, I have to say, it probably varies a lot from university to university.

MF: I think the fact Japanese professors are setting this film in class is quite something, quite a sign –

MD: The Japanese professors who have done it seem to be very, very progressive. But I will say that at Toyko Gaidai [Tokyo University of Foreign Studies], I remember a student saying to me, 'Every time I hear about this issue, or other issues such as the Nanjing Massacre, it's always from my foreign professors'.

EV: Yes

MD: So because of that she has a suspicion about it or can't really accept it. I told her, 'It's not that they're lying to you or anything; your Japanese professors feel that they can't talk about it.

EV: Exactly. I mean, I've had this conversation with a couple of colleagues in Japan. I mention that I have been researching the representation of the 'comfort women' in East Asia, and they say: 'It's great you're doing that. But we couldn't do that'. And I'm thinking: 'But hang

on. I'm in Japan, this is a liberal democracy'.

MD: Exactly. But you know, young students when they see that none of their Japanese professors are talking about this, this gives them a lot of internal conflict. The student I mentioned actually challenged me, because she wished I had done the narration in Japanese, because she usually only hears this stuff in English. I told her there were practical reasons why I did it in English, but the reason why her Japanese professors don't talk about it is probably because they feel like they can't talk about it, and I told her that even a lot of Japanese journalists told me they don't feel comfortable writing about it, and that they wished they *could* have made or written something that was this blunt.

MF: This is something many of us were struck by at the screening in Kyushu: the work your film is doing in this respect. I feel there is a tendency not to really understand what today's right-wing leaders are thinking, or how they are appealing - especially when it comes to their use of historical memory. Myself and fellow liberal-minded academics based in the West tend to lump these leaders all together - from Trump, to Modi, to Duterte, Bolsonaro, Abe and, to a degree, Johnson - as, for want of a subtler way of expressing it, scary 'nut jobs' with whom we don't agree, who appeal to the basest instincts in their electorates. We're often reluctant to really get inside these leaders' psyches to understand their deep-seated anxieties about national identity, or the perceived threats they, or their supporters, see coming in the form of global feminism, or human rights, or Western individualism. In that respect, it really is revealing in your film having the *Nippon Kaigi* rightists speak for themselves. It's sometimes highly amusing; frequently very shocking. Nonetheless, they do openly put their beliefs out there.

Historical Understanding in the Comfort

Women Battle

MF: Miki, this is a slightly trickier question, but one which your film raises. Ed and I are interested in what happens to historical understanding in these battles over history involving the state, activists and activist-intellectuals. Because in your film you present yourself as an 'outsider' to this contest, not initially driven to take up one position or the other, on a quest to find out the truth for yourself, you do manage to open this issue up.

So, what do you think happens to historical research when it becomes part of a wider political battle which relates as much to present-day politics as it does to the past? We're all aware of the selective histories that governments produce in their creation of unifying populist nationalisms. But to what extent has the comfort women issue also become 'usable' history for those on the other side attempting to resist state narratives? We partly ask this because you bring this issue out in the film towards its end, when you chide the comfort women activists for their own exaggerations.

MD: Well, there's so many different activist groups out there. For example, when I was recently in San Francisco I got to talk to activists over there, and their goals are very different than probably the goals of Korean comfort women activists.

EV: That's right, because they are mostly Chinese, or Chinese-American activists in San Francisco.

MD: Yes. And then there's the Japanese leftist activists who support the comfort women, who have their own goals in mind. From what I've heard, they themselves actually have conflicts within their own groups, which is very interesting to me. But, of course, the overall goal is to bring more awareness to this issue and prevent this from happening again, and hopefully get justice for these women.

And at least in South Korea, whereas in the '90s politicians were not so concerned about this issue – a lot of male politicians thought of the comfort women as a national shame – now you have President Moon ceremonially paying his respects to the comfort women statue, to show Korean people that he's on the comfort women's side, and thus on the side of feminism, anti-imperialism, all these things that are now wrapped up in the comfort women struggle.

There is that. But then alongside that there is the fact that now, in the past half year, the comfort women activists in Korea are saying that the comfort women were the *original* #MeToo. We're all saying how courageous these #MeToo women are, but *these* are the *originals*.

MF: That's interesting!

EV: Not only #MeToo but #MeFirst!

MD: Right. I think that what they are doing is: the #MeToo movement is such a big thing they want to ride that wave a bit, to say: 'Hey, be concerned about our issue as well'.

EV: You think Harvey Weinstein was bad, just wait until you meet a Japanese Imperial Army officer!

MD: **Haha**, exactly.

EV: Perhaps that last remark was inappropriately flippant... But I did want to ask whether you ever felt there were attempts to co-opt *you* made by certain activist groups?

MF: In fact, Miki, what is great about your film is it seems the right-wing denialists featured in it thought: 'Well, here is this naïve grad student making a student film', and believed that *they* could co-opt *you*. So, they were so open.

EV: But were there any attempts to co-opt you coming from the other side?

MD: Well, yeah. When I was doing media in South Korea, I could feel an attempt to push the whole film into this box where it was all about attacking the Japanese government. Whereas I felt that though my film does criticize the Japanese government, it also criticises the US government, and it even criticizes Korean patriarchy. I could feel them pushing me that way and I tried to push back a little. But it was hard because all their journalists' questions were geared towards the anti-Japanese line. So, I do think they were trying to co-opt me and my film.

This was actually one of my big concerns with making the film. There were books that had come out on the comfort women issue that *were* co-opted. One of the biggest was Chunghee Sarah Soh's [*The Comfort Women: Sexual violence and postcolonial memory in Korea and Japan* (2008)] which a lot of right-wingers used. I thought this was really dangerous, because the book is very nuanced and very complex but they cherry picked information from it to support their side. That is part of the reason I was so clear at the end of *Shusenjo* as to what my conclusion was. Because I didn't want it to be co-opted in that way. A lot of people said, 'Well, why didn't you keep it open-ended?' And I was, like, 'Well, I *do* think you need some fact checking, and you *do* need to call people out when that's warranted – And I called out even the Left, too, right?

Now, interestingly, some comfort women activists in the US were considering showing the film but they decided not to because parts of the film also criticized them and some of the arguments they put forward.

EV: Really?

MD: And some of them were even telling me to edit the film. Like, take parts out!

EV: And they are criticizing Japanese rightists for imposing censorship?

MF: This is a key question Ed and I have been discussing: what happens to complexity, nuance, historical accuracy - in these battles?

EV: It is a very difficult one because, I mean, I experienced this to some extent during my research into the representation and remembrance of comfort women, where I've been interviewing activists and museum curators etc. involved in this. It's tricky and you probably feel the same way.

You admire a lot of these people. Maybe not all of them, but mostly, their hearts are definitely in the right place; their case is pretty rock solid (at least at its core). And yet as soon as you get involved in such research, for the activists you are interviewing or getting your data from, it's like: 'Are you with us or are you against us?' It has got to be one or the other. And if you are with us then you are part of the activism, you are part of the movement.

MF: It can even be a bit more complicated. When I was researching *Singapore: A Biography* [2009, co-authored with Yumei Balasingamchow], I had encounters with the country's leftist political detainees. I interviewed them; I wanted to get their stories across. Partly, I also wanted to understand why their politics failed, and where that failure's roots lay within their own organizations and actions. So, the book opened up complex areas that had not really been discussed.

I talked to some of these leftists after the book's publication and one prominent former detainee told me that he personally enjoyed the book, but amongst his circle it had not been received very positively. He said that in their ongoing struggle for historical truth and justice (most of them are still represented officially in Singapore as communist terrorists): 'Now is not the time for that nuance and complexity'. The fear seems to be that every time you provide that nuance and complexity, you are feeding the other side with ammunition. It's almost as if you have to come in hard and polemical, to

match the claims made by the other side.

MD: I would say that not all the activists in the US are like that. It just so happened that they were the leaders of this particular group. So that is why the screenings didn't happen. But there were also people in this group who disagreed with those leaders.

However, I would say that activists, as you say, have a goal and a plan of how to get to that goal. And a lot of them feel that the public can't handle nuance. And there is some truth to that, I believe.

MF: But this is what authoritarian states say as well, and this is the thing that got me into public history in the first place. I was working on the National Museum of Singapore's History Gallery over 15 years ago, and we had to go to the Ministry of Culture to discuss certain 'sensitive' areas of what we were presenting. We had thought we had been given freedom to open up historical complexity and nuance, and therefore accuracy. So I will never forget this very senior Ministry official saying to me: 'You and I understand that complexity. We have degrees, you have a PhD in History. But we need to have a simpler narrative for the ordinary citizen.'

EV: That's a very revealing comment - coming from that source! When we get involved in researching 'difficult history' such as the comfort women issue, we come at it as scholars who believe that complexity is good, detachment is what a scholar should aim for. But in the process of engaging with these activists, sometimes you find yourself beginning to wonder whether there are circumstances, perhaps, where there is a trade-off between complexity and clarity? Especially when you see how these activists are up against powerful interests who are basically seeking to manipulate and suppress...

MF: I think it's very dangerous, and that's why I was telling this story. Because authoritarian

regimes use that argument just as much. I think it's very dangerous not to search for and communicate that historical truth, even if it's complicated. I am still an old believer that *that* scholarly quest, as ultimately unachievable as it may be, will set you free.

Miki, I think one of the reasons your film will have more impact, quite frankly, than other efforts, is because you haven't shied away from complexity. Of course, one has to fight one's fight. When you are misinterpreted, when what you say is skewed and misappropriated, you have to fight back and make clear what you did and did not say. But if you don't have that subtlety, then you are allying yourself in these partisan battles that a lot of people in the middle ground just don't want to be part of. They are not going to have those revelatory moments you've described, if this film only amounted to more Japan-bashing.

So, I have come round to the view that historical complexity and nuance is vital, but *clarity* is everything.

MD: The point I was trying to make at the end of the film was that when you simplify and exaggerate things too much it does become ammunition for the other side. And that is what I was trying to tell the comfort women supporters, 'When you use so much hyperbole and only focus on certain extreme cases, or push those cases so much, then it's easy for them to knock you down'. And the way that their opponents knock their arguments down is by bringing nuance, right?

MF: True.

MD: All of a sudden these right-wingers look more nuanced than the left-wingers, right?

MF: That's a very good point.

EV: They manipulate nuance.

Reconciliation, Forgetting and Culpability

MF: Miki, Ed and I are also interested in researching the theme and practice of reconciliation. Part of that is trying to understand what people mean by reconciliation, from the state-to-state level right down to the very much individual level. So, my big question for you, having made this film and then found yourself in the middle of the whole political contest that has emerged out of it: if you could imagine a way forward, to achieve some sort of reconciliation over this issue, what would it be?

I ask this also because of what one prominent Korean activist admitted to me privately during the conference in Kyushu: that she felt the possibility for reparations and then reconciliation between South Korea and Japan was now gone. Only memory work, i.e. the record of comfort women testimonies that establishes the historical truth, was her remaining hope.

MD: It still seems that the goal for most Korean activists is for the Japanese government to take full legal responsibility and that would mean it passing legislation that formally apologizes and provides some kind of reparations - although it seems that financial compensation is now not such a big deal to the former comfort women themselves. Also, legislation that commits Japan to teaching the truth about its wartime history, making this legally binding so that this history cannot easily be erased, as it has been in the past. That seems to be the goal.

Maybe a more idealized version of that goal is something like what we see in Germany. When I was in Germany recently it was interesting because some students told me that Germany was not always so apologetic. They didn't always teach their wartime history as they do now. Only from the 60s right through to the 80s, was there this push from within the country to look at its wartime past. So, hearing

that, I felt, ‘Maybe there is some hope in Japan’. Because, as I said, a lot of younger Japanese people, when they do see the film, are challenged by it and their attitudes change.

A lot of the problems we have come down to the lack of information. The mainstream narrative that these former comfort women are lying is accepted in Japan because people don’t hear the other side. But if they had all the information, there might be hope that some reconciliation – a good kind of reconciliation – could be had. But it takes people who care enough to watch the film, who care enough to read about it or write about it in the media. It might take discussions on social media and then maybe even a movement of younger people, to at least become aware of this issue and then, when they become powerful, to elect the right people.

EV: The comparison with Germany is a tempting and attractive one that many people make. But a key difference with Germany in the 60s and 70s – well actually, a key similarity with Japan *then* – is, of course, the existence of a big youth and student movement. What happened to that movement in Japan, though? It was ruthlessly suppressed. Whereas in Germany, one by-product of that youth movement was a big political shift that ultimately transformed public memory. Here in Japan, that youth movement ran into a wall, and what followed was a reaction and the significant suppression of academic freedom.

MD: But you know, when I was talking about how things might change in Japan, I forgot to mention that during this coronavirus pandemic there’s been a high school student strike in Ibaraki, basically because the school was reopening and forcing students to come to school, and the students were like, ‘This is dangerous, why would we do that?’ And apparently the students won! I don’t know, maybe this is the beginning?

Coming back to Germany in the 70s and 80s,

you had a new young generation of historians who were pushing to teach a more accurate wartime history. But in Japan, now, the difference is that most historians actually agree with, say, Yoshiaki Yoshimi’s history of the comfort women [*Comfort Women*, 1995]. It’s just that, maybe because of the way media works today, these historians have much less impact on society.

MF: That is something we are asking ourselves: why academic history has such a diminishing impact... –

EV: But in Germany, the mainstream media did give these historians a platform.

MD: Yes, they did.

EV: I mean there was the famous case of the American television series *Holocaust* [1978] with Meryl Streep. There was nothing like it at the time and this history wasn’t terribly well known in Germany in the ‘70s. And when they showed it on TV, every episode was followed by a serious discussion amongst historians in the studio – on the German equivalent of NHK. But as we know, there is no way NHK will *ever* do anything similar.

MF: Instead, what NHK does is it gets into bed with Netflix to produce a miniseries about the Tokyo war trials [*Tokyo Trial*, 2016], all about the dissenting Indian trial judge, Justice Pal, a hero to Abe and his rightists because he argued that Japan *did not* wage a war of aggression in Asia, just a war of self-defence and liberation against Western colonialism.

MF: A question that now comes up in wider discussions about remembrance, the remembrance of violent pasts that is, is the issue of forgetting and the benefits to societies of seeking to forget. I am thinking particularly of David Rieff’s book [*In Praise of Forgetting*, 2016].

I raise this because a few years back I made a film about the Fall of Singapore and the Japanese Occupation [*I Remember: The Fall of Singapore*, dir. Michel Cayla, 2017], and which we screened in Singapore at a conference which some Japanese academics and others joined. I just assumed that the Japanese attending that conference were all going to be quite liberal and open, and able to cope with the past. But there was a strong reaction from a few to the end of the film, where a former Japanese perpetrator [the late war memory activist Takashi Nagase]³ says sorry and apologizes for Japanese war atrocities. The reaction of two Japanese audience members was to storm out accusing the filmmakers of demanding that all Japanese people make an apology. It seemed the feeling was ‘Hold on, we suffered too, we were victims too’ – which used to be the popular discourse – ‘so why do we have to remember, why do we have to keep digging all this up?’ I wondered to what extent you had come across this reaction when making your film and when showing it? That the way forward is to forget.

MD: Not with the people I interviewed for the film because they were obviously very much trying to convince me of their side of this comfort women issue. Whereas I feel like regular people I just chat with in Japan, they are more like that. The most common phrase I hear is, ‘Horrible things happen in war’. ‘It’s all basically and equally bad, and so that’s why we should fight for peace’. And my response to that is often, ‘It’s hard to have peace if you don’t have justice’. But I feel the mentality is: we can’t move on until we forget about it. If we keep bringing this up, then we can never be friends with Koreans. The problem is they don’t understand that Koreans have not forgotten this. They are not forgetting this. They are not going to forget this.

EV: Perpetrators don’t get to decide when it’s time to forget.

MD: Exactly. It’s so easy for the perpetrators to forget, right? Or to make that point about forgetting. Whereas the people who were actually the victims –

EV: The equivalent would be for Obama when he came to Hiroshima, instead of saying, ‘You know, this was really terrible, tragic etc.’, he says, ‘OK, look guys, let’s all forget about this. I mean why did you bother to apply for UNESCO World Heritage status?’ –

MD: We could build some condos!

EV: Yeah! Let’s have some condos! I know this great guy called Trump who’d love to build you a hotel, right here.

MF: We joke, but actually it’s a very good equivalent, because of the way that some leaders and states would like difficult memory to be worked out.

I want to say something about this in relation to an interview a Japanese colleague and I did with a prominent Japanese war memory activist in Southeast Asia called Prof. Takashima Nobuyoshi.⁴ He has been running Japanese tours to war atrocity sites in Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia since the early 1980s. He was part of that whole leftist student movement in Japan which emerged during the ‘60s, and part of the Japanese peace movement. And this was when everything was about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and when Japan, globally, was still cast very much in the role of the victim.

Now, Prof. Takashima said that the reason he departed from the Japanese peace movement in the late-’70s was that the victim discourse occluded, it obscured, culpability for Japanese war crimes – the crimes his research was revealing had occurred in Southeast Asia. He felt that the peace movement, by embracing this notion that ‘we are all victims,’ was abetting this erasure.

EV: Because, of course, it was reflecting Cold War concerns about nuclear annihilation.

MF: Right. Because there was generally a narrative within these Japanese student activist circles regarding war crimes that ‘this wasn’t us’ – the Japanese people were also the victims of Japan’s own rightists. If you were a left-wing activist, you were yourself a victim of the same rightists in the LDP who were there in the war and now still trying to oppress you. And this was the way China, in the ‘70s, was able to pursue its friendship diplomacy, with Japan, especially through forging ties with leftist civil society groups. The message was that the rightists were responsible, not the Japanese people. And rightists were a global problem.

I understand Prof. Takashima’s views, but I also sometimes now get concerned at how nationalized this contest has become. And talking with the comfort women activists we met in Kyushu, I was struck by just how easily, given their frustrations, it becomes about *all* Japanese. Yes, it’s partly to do with the majorities that the LDP commands, and the way politics have gone in Japan since the 90s. I used to always say, ‘Don’t blame the whole US for Trump, don’t blame all of Britain for Thatcher, or for Brexit’. But eventually if someone like Abe keeps winning big majorities, it gets difficult to argue that.

EV: It gets very difficult.

MF: Nonetheless, I always get concerned when these disputes get nationalized and become part of a rising xenophobia. I noticed when I was talking on the sidelines of our Kyushu conference with certain Korean activists, that in some of their language, no doubt because of the pain involved in this issue, while they were aware of Japanese sympathizers, they viewed the entire Japanese nation as the problem.

MD: Well, the nice thing about the responses I was getting in South Korea was that a lot of younger Korean students were saying that this

was the first time that they had ever seen Japanese academics, activists and politician-type people supporting the comfort women. So, for them, it was like, ‘This isn’t a nation versus nation thing’.

MF: That’s really interesting.

EV: The revelation is: Japanese are not all right-wing ‘nutjobs’!

MD: Right! It’s not the whole country – the whole country isn’t like this in Japan. What they took from this is that this isn’t a national issue, it’s a human rights issue. And it was very interesting to hear them come to these conclusions. I didn’t know this was the case, that they had never seen Japanese people supporting the comfort women. So it was a nice surprise.

EV: But at the same time very revealing – the fact they were surprised to find sympathetic Japanese in your film – of how nationalized and nationalistic the whole discourse is in Korea.

MF: That’s also true. But what is interesting to me is just what a documentary film might do that other media can’t. I mean, the fact you are interviewing these people and getting their ‘testimony’ on the record, as it were – and bringing in the complexity of Japanese society and Japanese political and intellectual life, bringing in the nuance and getting away from the essentialism and reductionism – that is a very important achievement. You might have historians writing their books in Japan; yet, as we said, is anyone reading them and are they available in South Korea? Actually putting these people on screen to bear witness has that impact.

MD: I try to remind Korean people when they come out with these comments, that it was actually left-wing Japanese activists and scholars who first broke the news about this stuff in Japan. Although you might want to demonize Japan, you have to remember that.

EV: As you say, that's how Koreans and Chinese became aware of the 'comfort women' issue in the first place.

Positionality, Geopolitics and Militarization

MF: Let's move to a question about positionality. I was in Sri Lanka recently, starting a project about memory and the civil war there. And I was told by a Sri Lankan human rights activist, who's been working with displaced Tamil communities, something to the effect that: It's important we have your affiliation to an international university, if not you yourself as an involved outsider. Because every time we do this memory work from within the country, things immediately descend into accusations of partisanship.

Now, Miki, in the way you've set up your film, you seem to be taking the role of the outsider, perhaps the naïve or innocent outsider, who has come to explore this contested history without allying yourself with a particular position from the start. But at the same time, you are Japanese-American, and so you occupy, if I can say it, a kind of *hybrid* status - as both insider and outsider.

MD: Well, this is really interesting to me because what people - younger Japanese people - have told me is that had I only been American, Caucasian-American or African-American or whatever, they wouldn't have responded to the film as they did. Because I had lived in Japan for so long and am Japanese, they can feel some familiarity with me, and it gives me some kind of credibility. They couldn't just write me off. And I think that is probably also why the right-wingers are also so pissed off.

EV: They saw you as this young Japanese American coming back to discover his roots. They were going to tell you what's what.

MD: Right. But it's also that they can't do the thing they did with the film *The Cove*,⁵ where they say these are just Americans who don't understand Japan. They can't say that. And as you said, when I was making this film, I do think the right-wingers were thinking, 'Oh, we could use this guy. We can co-opt him'.

On the other hand, the Koreans in the film, they would not have done their interviews - a couple of these interviewees actually told me this - if I had *only* been Japanese. So my Americanness was also a key factor in getting them to open up.

MF: Interesting.

MD: Many of the Koreans had done interviews with Japanese media before and been burned by them. So, they didn't trust Japanese media. And one of them was actually really funny. She was like, 'You're coming into my office with your shaved head and your moustache which looks like f***ing Hideki Tojo and you expect me to do this interview without being suspicious of you?'. And I was like, 'Yeah, I totally get it. I totally get it. I can show you my American passport if you want?'

EV: Before we finish, I want to add a final thought, which takes us back to *Nippon Kaigi*, but also to the broader present-day political issues which have become wrapped up in this comfort women battle.

When I first moved to Japan in 2012, I was asked to write a piece on Sino-Japanese relations for a journal linked to the Japanese foreign ministry.⁶ In that paper, I actually said that, at some point, the peace clause in the Japanese Constitution is probably going to have to be revised - because China poses a real threat and Japan can't rely on American forever. But I said you'd better be *very careful* - you'd better be very sure, that when you do get around to revising it, you don't do it in a

situation where Japan is still in denial about its wartime history, where Japan is still in this incredibly antagonistic relationship with its East Asian neighbours, at a popular as well as a diplomatic level. Because that is incredibly dangerous.

MD: Because there are very legitimate reasons for the remilitarization of Japan, right? But if you do it with an administration that is mostly *Nippon Kaigi*, that wants to bring the Emperor back to power -

EV: You cannot trust these guys with remilitarization!

MD: Right!

One thing that one of the Japanese activist-intellectuals I interviewed said, but it didn't go into the film because of its length, was that he believed the reason history education is so important to the *Nippon Kaigi* and the LDP is because it's the last piece in this whole remilitarization puzzle.

He sees it as being like a computer system. The operating system is the Constitution; the hardware is the military itself, the SDF [Self Defence Force]. We already have a pretty incredible military in Japan, right? So, all you need to do is change the operating system - amend the Constitution. But you still need soldiers, people willing to die for the country. How do you do that?

You have to create myth. In the US, our myth is that we fight for freedom. We never fight for oil, we always fight for freedom, liberating other countries and bringing democracy. In Japan, the myth is we have always been peaceful. Any war we have fought has been for peace. And in fact, we are the liberators of Asia - we pushed out the white colonizers in Asia. So, if you have that myth, more people will be willing, with a good conscience, to fight for Japan. It's hard to get people to join the military when they think that Japan has done

horrible things.

MF: Right.

EV: I see.

MD: So, why does *Nippon Kaigi* and the LDP put so much effort into erasing Japan's dark war history? Because they don't like the optics of it.

And when the right-wingers in my film were saying the US was the main battleground for this comfort women issue, it was interesting to me why they cared so much about changing the minds of Americans. I mean they make revisionist-denialist websites in the US in English, sometimes posing as reputable academic centres like the 'Princeton Institute of Asian Studies' - there's no such thing. It's entirely fake!

EV: That's amazing! You might have thought that Princeton University would sue...

MD: Yeah. At first, I was thinking, maybe those rightists think that if they can change the minds of Americans then they can flip world history. But over time I've started to think that it's because you have Japanese citizens, Japanese students, in the US. *Nippon Kaigi* and the LDP want consistency in their story. They've already won the comfort women battle in Japan; their narrative is the mainstream narrative. Now, if Japanese students who speak English go abroad or want to find information on the comfort women issue in English, these right-wing English websites are there.

For these rightists, the battle over the comfort women is about making Japanese people keep believing their myth that the government has always done the right thing - it's about keeping the myth that will make people willing to die for their country.

This article is a part of **The Special Issue: The ‘Comfort Women’ as Public History**. See [the Table of Contents](#).

We created [a zip file](#) for download containing all articles in this special issue for your convenience.

Please also see the supplementary issue to this special issue, **Academic Integrity at Stake: the Ramseyer Article**, edited by Alexis Dudden.

Miki Dezaki studied for an MA on the Graduate Program in Global Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo. He previously worked for the Japan Exchange Teaching Program for five years in Yamanashi and Okinawa before becoming a Buddhist monk in Thailand for one year. He is also known as "Medamasensei" on Youtube, where he has made comedy videos and videos on social issues in Japan. His most notable video is "Racism in Japan," which led to numerous online attacks by Japanese neo-nationalists who attempted to deny the existence of racism and discrimination against Zainichi Koreans (Koreans with permanent residency in Japan) and Burakumin (historical outcasts still discriminated today). *Shusenjo* was his directorial debut.

Mark Ravinder Frost is Associate Professor of Public History at University College London. He was previously Head of the History Department at Essex University, and previously worked at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore and the University of Hong Kong. He was educated at the University of Oxford, where he graduated with First Class Honours, and he completed his doctorate at the University of Cambridge in 2002. He is the author of *Singapore: A Biography* (2009; 2012) which in 2010 won the Asia Pacific Publishers Association Gold Medal and was selected as a CHOICE 'Outstanding Academic Title', as well as co-editor of the edited collection *Remembering World War II in Asia* (2019).

Edward Vickers is Professor of Comparative Education at Kyushu University, Japan, and

(from April 2021) inaugural holder of the UNESCO Chair on Education for Peace, Social Justice and Global Citizenship. He researches the history and politics of education, and the politics of heritage, across contemporary East Asia. His books include *Remembering Asia's World War Two* (2019, co-edited with Mark Frost and Daniel Schumacher); *Education and Society in Post-Mao China* (2017, with Zeng Xiaodong), and (as a co-ordinating lead author) the 2017 UNESCO report, *Rethinking Schooling for the 21st Century*. He is Director of Kyushu University's interdisciplinary Taiwan Studies Program, and Secretary-General of the Comparative Education Society of Asia.

Notes

¹ This conference was made possible by funding kindly provided by the Resona Asia-Oceania Foundation, Kyushu University's 'Progress 100' scheme, and the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation.

² Okano Yayo. 'Prime Minister Abe's Constitutional Campaign and the Assault on Individual Rights,' *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (2018), Vol. 16, Issue 5, No. 3, Article ID: 5119.

³ Add bg

⁴ Add details

⁵ *The Cove* is a 2009 American-made documentary film directed by Louis Psihoyos about dolphin hunting in Taiji, in Japan's Wakayama Prefecture.

⁶ Edward Vickers (2012). "西遊記の如意棒"手に強固な決意と勇気を ('Having the firmness of purpose and courage to grasp the Monkey King's Magical Wish-granting Staff'), in 外交 (*Diplomacy*), Vol. 15, September 2012: special feature commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations, pp. 82-88.