THE POLITICS OF WAR MEMORY IN JAPAN 1990-2010:
Progressive Civil Society Groups and Contestation of Memory of the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945)

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I . Introduction

This dissertation engages with the topic of the involvement of progressive civil society actors in the struggle over remembering and addressing the wartime past that occurred during the last two decades (1990-2010) in Japan. The term ‘progressive’ is ascribed to individuals and groups that share a particular view on the country’s imperial past that is based on the condemnation of colonialism and militarism as well as support for the postwar peace state. They also endorse a greater recognition of Japan’s responsibility for suffering inflicted on the neighbouring countries on the official level and popularising knowledge of Japan’s imperial past among the public.

This dissertation explores the subject of how five selected progressive actors participated and contributed to the contestation of memory of the Asia-Pacific War in Japan between 1990 and 2010. On the basis of findings, the thesis seeks to identify what kind of roles the chosen progressive civil society groups played, and how they mattered (if at all) in this process. To this end, the dissertation investigates the following set of questions:

• What is the structure and membership of the chosen groups?
• What are the narratives and aims of the groups?
• What is the scope of activities of the groups?
• How did the groups relate (if at all) to the wider public and power-wielders in the society and to what ends?
• How (if at all) did the groups engage in activism across borders and to what ends?

In other words, this dissertation explores how the selected groups advocated their views and tried to attain their goals.

The progressive actors that were selected for the purpose of this study are:

• Center of Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility (JWRC) (Nihon no sensō sekinin shiryō sentā)
• Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21 (CTJN21) (Kodomo to kyōkasho zenkoku netto 21)
• Violence Against Women in War Network Japan (VAWW NET Japan) together with
Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) (*Sensō to josei e no bōryoku Nihon nettowāku* and *Akutibu myūjiamu: josei no sensō to heiwa shiryōkan*)

- POW Research Network Japan (POWRNJ) (*POW kenkyūkai*)

The reasons for choosing these groups are based on the following four considerations. Firstly, the three first groups have, from the early (JWRC) to the late 1990s (CTJN21 and VAWW NET; WAM (2005)), been actively involved in the struggle over how to remember, commemorate and address Japan’s wartime past and its legacies. Secondly, they have managed to organise large scale events and/or unearth evidence that has driven wider attention to outstanding problems stemming from the legacies of Japan’s wartime past. Thirdly, the groups are involved in activism pertaining to issues which up to the present moment remain largely unresolved, or perhaps more accurately, are perceived as unresolved; namely, the matters of history textbooks, ‘comfort women’ and related problems of compensation and apology. Lastly, even though POWRNJ is much smaller and was created later than JWRC, CTJN21 and VAWW NET, it is similarly concerned with a problem area — namely, Allied POW in Japan and their forced labour — that has been largely neglected and side-lined in the discussions over the country’s wartime past.

The larger reason for conducting research on the chosen topic is that the progressive war memory activists deserve the attention of academic community as their existence is an important sign that the apologia by conservative politicians and grass-root nationalistic rhetoric cannot be treated as being representative of the majority of public opinion. The remarks made by policy-makers that deny or minimise Japan’s responsibility for its wartime past and the grass-root historical revisionist movement have created a distorted image of Japan as a country that cannot come to terms with the difficult legacy of the Asia-Pacific War.

II. The Politics of (War) Memory and Methods of Articulation: How ‘Politics of (War) Memory’ is Performed?

The main theoretical concept around which the thesis is built is the ‘politics of war memory (and commemoration)’ (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 2000: 16) and the approach is to examine how memory agents advocate their causes by using a range of methods. The ‘politics of war memory (and commemoration)’ is defined as a ‘struggle of different groups to give public articulation to, and hence gain recognition for, certain memories and the narratives within which they are structured’. The authors propose distinguishing between three interrelated aspects of this articulation process; namely, agencies, narratives and arenas. In their opinion, this approach to analysing war memory helps to ‘clarify its politics, by specifying which social groups, via what agencies, are the promoters of a particular narrative addressed to which arenas’ (Ashplant et al. 2000: 17).

However, as the three original levels of analysis proposed by Ashplant et al. (2000) in their conceptualisation of the ‘politics of war memory (and commemoration)’ are not sufficient to account for how actors operate in the memory production and contestation processes, an additional analytical level is introduced in this dissertation: ‘the methods of articulation’. This was created around
the notion of advocacy, which captures the essence of the action undertaken with a view to pursuing a particular cause. The dissertation defines advocacy as:

(1) ‘the act of pleading for or against a cause, as well as supporting or recommending a position’ (Hopkins, 1992, 32 quoted in Jenkins, 2003, 308)

(2) which involves addressing various audiences, including policy-makers, public opinion (or particular institutions in society), the mass media and actors in the international community

(3) in an effort to either secure recognition and support for a given cause, or to undermine and prevent actions or ideas that are perceived as harmful or unacceptable to that cause.

The rationale behind introducing advocacy to a discussion on the politics of (war) memory rests on the conviction that this measure enables us to devote sufficient attention to how various memory agents promote their respective causes. Illuminating this particular issue is, in turn, perceived as instrumental in fully understanding the position and role played by actors in contestation of the past. In other words, addressing such methods helps us to systematically investigate how memory agents act on behalf of their convictions. Lastly, researching engagement in advocacy activities is a starting point to understanding and evaluating the outcomes or gains of the actors’ efforts. Recapitulating, incorporating an analysis of advocacy into the project allows us to deepen our understanding of ‘politics’ in the politics of (war) memory and to capture the strategic elements involved in memory contestation.

### III. The Actors

The purpose of this part is to introduce the chosen civil society actors. This dissertation shows that the groups differ significantly from each other in terms of membership numbers (both type and numbers), organisational structure and available resources. Whereas CTJN21 has several thousand members across the country, POWRNJ has just 50. Regarding the internal structure, the groups range from well-organised collaborations of committed activists with a clear political agenda (e.g. VAWW NET) to a group consisting largely of concerned citizens/shimin researchers (POWRNJ). The financial and human resources that the groups have at their disposal are limited.

Secondly, the dissertation demonstrates that the groups emerged in a different socio-political climate. JWRC was created in the early 1990s when the re-appearance of long-neglected episodes of the Asia-Pacific War, such as the ‘comfort women’ issue, sparked a further re-examination of Japan’s perceptions on the country’s wartime past, and resulted in a number of apologies by the Japanese government. CTJN21 and VAWW NET, in turn, were established in the midst of the historical revisionists’ offensive against the ‘masochistic view of history’. Additionally, the growth of a transnational movement on women’s rights was an important factor facilitating the creation of VAWW NET.

Thirdly, this dissertation demonstrates that these groups operate within a wider narrative framework that underlines Japan’s role in the Asia-Pacific War as victimizer and puts emphasis on the suffering experienced by Asian and Western nationals during the conflict. It is also shown that the progressive discourse on the ‘comfort women’ issue has become a powerful sectional narrative in Japan. In turn, the narrative on the
wartime experiences of Allied POW is less known, although the recent (2009-2010) official apologies to the American POW contributed to a revival of interest in this particular episode of the war. The aims of the actors include the securing of an apology and redress for the elderly victims, promoting reconciliation, and ensuring that knowledge and awareness of the victimization inflicted by imperial Japan on other nations will be passed on to society and the younger generations.

IV. How Do You Make Your Voice Heard? Clarifying Historical Record and Reaching out to the Public

This part of dissertation explores the measures and channels through which the targeted groups transmitted information and their views to the wider public. Additionally, the efforts to uncover historical evidence pertaining to Japan’s wartime past conducted by all groups with the exception of CTJN21 are presented in detail. Without questioning the overall positive contribution of their research activities and their broadening of the scope of knowledge on the country’s colonisation and war in Asia-Pacific, the dissertation draws attention to the problem of the ‘politicisation’ of the history controversies. In short, it is argued that the political core of the conflicts over the past, such as the ‘comfort women’ issue, to an extent undermines the significance and potential of documentary evidence to settle disputes. Moreover, the lack of political will to pass a law that would grant access to classified documents further inhibits efforts to clarify historical record.

The dissertation also presents the publishing and educational activities conducted by these actors with a view to both spreading information among their members and familiarizing the public with the issue of the ‘comfort women’, history textbooks and POW. The educational events carried out ranged from large-scale undertakings, such as the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal (2000) and campaigns against the Tsukurukai schoolbooks (2001, 2005, 2009), to small-scale seminars and lectures concerning the forced labour of Allied soldiers.

As the relationship between civil society actors and their audiences is not only shaped by the efforts of the former, but also the perceptions and beliefs of the latter, the views of the Japanese public regarding the country’s wartime record are examined to see what promises and limitations the people’s history consciousness holds for progressive war memory activists. Public attitudes show diminishing support for revision of the compensation/apology policies, although the prevailing progressive-leaning outlook on the Asia-Pacific War ensures that revisionist views of Japan’s wartime past still remain in a minority. While the potential to garner public support for the redress movement is limited, the arguments of progressive actors opposing the nationalist discourses justifying colonisation and aggression against Asia will continue to resonate with the majority of the public.

Due to the importance of the mass media as a channel for communicating information to wider audiences, the relationship between Japanese news outlets and the groups under investigation is examined in some detail. The dissertation argues that interactions (or lack thereof) between the actors and the media were influenced by ideological divisions between the latter along the nationalist/conservative/liberal spectrum, the continuous existence of the taboo surrounding reporting on the imperial family, as well as other
institutional characteristics relating to the role of the media in political processes and news gathering routines. Whereas divisions among the news outlets determine which major newspapers may be accessible to the actors and (at least in theory) what kind of coverage may be expected (sympathetic to or delegitimizing a particular subject), the sensitivity of a given issue (e.g. war responsibility of Hirohito) or involvement of senior political figures (e.g. the NHK (2001/2005) and Asō Mining affairs (2006/2008)) may either preclude reporting or hush it up, thus preventing information from being passed on to the wider public.

Overall, while the groups undertook efforts to engage the attention of the media (or even used them, as in placing paid advertisements in major newspapers during the textbook campaigns by CTJN21) and at times succeeded, difficulties with reaching the mainstream media as well as diminishing or lack of interest on the side of journalists was also evident.

V. How Do You Make Your Voice Heard? Targeting National and Local Government

This part of dissertation focuses on the examination of how (if at all) the groups under investigation have engaged the ‘wielders of power’ over the problem of addressing Japan’s wartime past. The main aim is to elucidate how the groups have sought to make their voices heard in the political process of war memory production.

Firstly, the dissertation demonstrates that the groups presented differing levels of engagement in political advocacy, with JWRC, CTJN21 and VAWW NET being more involved in contestation/cooperation with policy-makers than POWRNJ, where the main focus area remains research. Secondly, the groups used a combination of indirect and direct measures to address policy-makers. The differences between the groups and LDP in the understanding of war-related issues meant that the former occupied the position of ‘competitor’ in relation to the government. From this position JWRC, VAWW NET/WAM and CTJN21 undertook efforts to counter the conservative discourse on war-related issues through ‘outsider’ measures. However, in the case of the Center and ‘comfort women’ activists there were significant instances of attempts to establish a more positive relationship with concerned policy-makers to whom they could gain access. Thirdly, the groups engaged in advocacy activities on both national and local levels. Whereas in the domestic arena the focus of JWRC and VAWW NET was mostly on the national level of decision making, CTJN21 tried to counter the consequences of the governmental decisions at the local level through encouraging grass-root advocacy.

Despite the limitations of the different forms of political engagement adopted by the groups, the dissertation’s findings suggest that JWRC, CTJN21 and VAWW NET Japan through their activism positioned themselves, to the limits of their abilities and perceptions, among the political actors involved in the process of the contestation of war memory in Japan. Nevertheless, it is also pointed out that, despite years of efforts by both activists and concerned policy-makers, there has been no substantial change either in reference to the redress for former ‘comfort women’ or fact-finding legislation, even though drafts of the appropriate laws were submitted regularly for deliberations during the last decade (Senji seiteki kyōsei higaisha mondai no kaiketsu no sokushin ni kan suru...
Significantly, the change of government and elevation of DPJ to power (2009), as for now, do not seem to have changed the existing state of affairs, although the new administration did express remorse for the colonisation of Korea and delivered an apology to former U.S. POW. In sum, this dissertation suggests that the inability of these groups to muster sufficient support among wider sectors of policy-makers has been one of factors that prevented the bills from becoming a reality. Conversely, as demonstrated by the campaigns against the Tsukurukai textbooks, grass-root efforts targeting institutions at the level of the local government contributed to the overall success of the progressive activists in blocking the adoption of the revisionist teaching material. At the same time, however, the dissertation raises questions about the viability of the approach in situations where solutions to a given issue ultimately require action by the Diet or/and national government. Additionally, building pressure on the central administration from below requires ‘universal appeal’ around which a broader movement can coalesce.

VI. How Do You Make Your Voice Heard? Transnational Networking and Cooperation with International Institutions

This dissertation also demonstrates that, as well as pursuing their respective causes on the domestic scene, the groups under investigation engaged in transnational activism by building international networks and cooperating with the UN bodies.

Transnational networking created spaces for information exchange and enabled the carrying out of large scale initiatives, the outcomes of which were used by activists in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, in case of the ‘comfort women’ movement, members of a transnational network (the Asian Solidarity Conference on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery) provided assistance to the Japanese groups in building support for the redress legislation. The activism at the UN forum contributed to the securing of support for the former ‘comfort women’ by an important international institution. As a consequence, recommendations made by the UN bodies became a source of pressure from above on the Japanese government. However, the dissertation also argues that extent to which transnational advocacy contributed to the advancement of the respective agendas of the groups is not a straightforward matter.

It is pointed out that, in spite of the UN support for the ‘comfort women’ cause, the lack of leverage against the Japanese government has enabled the latter to largely disregard the pressure. Additionally, the general unwillingness of the governments to support individual compensation claims against the states, has helped to buttress the standpoint of the Japanese government. This, coupled with the difficulty of mustering sufficient support among Japanese policy-makers to pass the existing ‘comfort women’ bill seriously limits the prospects of securing an apology and compensation for survivors. At the same time, this dissertation argues that one should not forget that transnational ‘comfort women’ activism contributed to building an awareness of the issue globally and preserving (particular) memory of the system through the efforts to establish museums.

Furthermore, this dissertation presents activities...
of the Forum for Historical Consciousness and Peace in East Asia, which brings together civil society actors from the People’s Republic of China, South Korea and Japan. In regards to the work of the Forum, *History that Opens the Future* (a trilateral supplementary teaching material for schools) is discussed as an instrument in the struggle to fight neo-nationalist tendencies in education in Japan and promote reconciliation with the country’s neighbours. However, due to the book’s sales rates and limited presence in the classroom, it is argued that the main importance of the trilateral study material may rest in its ‘symbolic’ rather than ‘practical’ value. Furthermore, the dissertation discusses both opportunities and downsides connected with the presence of non-governmental actors in the history dialogue. Despite the fact that non-governmental history projects have a capacity to become (relatively) de-politicized spaces for debate and sources of ideas for policy-makers as well as wider society, they are not free from pitfalls and need to overcome significant obstacles to establish themselves as credible alternatives.

**VII. Conclusion: What Roles the Groups Played and How They Mattered in the Contestation of War Memory in Japan?**

In the concluding section, this dissertation categorises and systematises knowledge on activities by introducing and ascribing particular ‘roles’ to specific methods used by the progressive actors. In this manner it creates a classification of multiplicity of functions that civil society actors may take upon themselves in the process of war memory production and contestation. Significantly, the dissertation demonstrates that during the chosen time frame of the thesis, some of the selected actors expanded their roles, whereas others scaled down their range of activities.

The dissertation identifies the following roles fulfilled by the researched groups during the designated time frame of the project:

- researcher of historical evidence
- information provider to the public
- challenger to the government
- information provider to the legislators
- policy-sponsor
- facilitator of grass-root reconciliation
- mediator of transnational action
- (co-) orchestrator of international pressure

The role of ‘researcher of historical evidence’ is concerned with unearthing documentary materials and gathering testimonies pertaining to the past events. The ‘information provider to the public’ is understood to be an actor who undertakes efforts to disseminate particular findings or discourses in the society through self-generated channels (publications, organisation of knowledge sharing/study events, exhibitions etc.) and/or the mass media. The role of ‘challenger to the government’ involves contesting war memory and responsibility-related claims presented by the LDP-led administrations. In turn, the category of ‘information provider to policy-makers’ highlights the cooperative dimension of the relationship between the selected actors and legislators, where the former supply evidence in order to shape the perceptions of the latter on particular matters. The ‘policy-sponsor’ role involves deliberate efforts to bring legislative change through measures such as information provision and alliance building (at the level of the Diet). The function of the ‘facilitator of
grass-root political engagement’ is the promotion of civic participation in political processes at the local level. The role of ‘mediator of transnational action’ involves, firstly, efforts to adapt to the domestic environment practises or outcomes that emerge as a result of a transnational campaign, and secondly, carrying out in the national setting tasks that stem from the international networking initiatives. The ‘(co-) orchestrator of international pressure’ acts to obtain the support of international institutions (or foreign governments) for a particular issue, the backing for which subsequently becomes a source of pressure on other party, e.g. domestic authorities. The ‘facilitator of (grass-root) reconciliation’ engages in the activities that contribute to the development of a dialogue between the citizens of the countries that were in conflict in the past. Such actions are aimed to promote mutual understanding and build a peaceful co-existence.

This dissertation concludes that JWRC acted as a researcher of historical evidence as well as information provider to both the public and policy-makers. Furthermore, it was a challenger to the government, while at the same time co-operating with legislators to bring about policy solutions; and lastly, it aided efforts to build pressure on the Japanese government from the supra-national level (in the 1990s). CTJN21 in turn focused on information provision to the public and facilitating grass-root political involvement, challenging governmental claims on the textbook issue, and mediating the introduction into the Japanese domestic environment the outcome of its co-operation with Chinese and South Korean partners, e.g. the supplementary teaching material titled History that Opens the Future. Lastly, the group’s involvement in the work of the Forum for History Consciousness and Peace in East Asia designates it as the facilitator of (grass-root) reconciliation. The work of the ‘comfort women’ activists from VAWW NET and WAM covered the widest spectrum of engagement with these roles; namely, as researcher of historical evidence, information provider to the public and legislators, challenger to the government and policy-sponsor, as well as ‘co-orchestrator of international pressure’ (2000s) and mediator of the transnational campaign in Japan. Finally, POWRNJ acted mainly as a researcher of historical evidence, information provider to public, and facilitator of (grass-root) reconciliation. Only on one occasion did the group communicate information directly to the policy-makers.

The findings concerning the relationship between the chosen groups and policy-makers add insights to the scholarly debates on civil society in Japan. Some of the recent studies on Japanese civil society argue that the latter suffers from the lack of ‘advocates’ (Pekkanen, 2006) and warn that civic activism is becoming increasingly depoliticised (Ogawa, 2009). The findings of this dissertation problematize these arguments, however, as they show a vibrant section of civil society that is engaged in a highly politicised process of contesting the memory of the country’s wartime past. Furthermore, through analysis of the methods used by the selected groups and the roles that they perform, the thesis also shows – in line with the publication of Chan (2008) – that it is indeed possible to speak about ‘advocacy’ in the setting of contemporary Japanese civil society. Overall, the thesis calls attention to the presence of groups in civil society that developed and have operated outside of the reach of the Japanese ‘activist’ state (Pharr, 2003) and independently of its efforts to shape the depoliticised shimin consciousness. As such, it complicates the notion of Japanese civil society as ‘a largely apolitical communitarian space populated by disciplined and self-responsible shimin’ (Avenell, 2010, 257). While it may be true that, in recent years, this particular form of engagement has come to dominate the landscape
of civic activism, the contestation of war memory in Japan constitutes an example of contentious politics marked by the strong involvement of civil society groups on both sides of the struggle that should not be overlooked.

Lastly, the dissertation clarifies how the groups mattered to the contestation of war memory in Japan over the designated timeframe. In summary, they were the defenders of the slowly changing (deteriorating) status quo in the field of acknowledging and addressing the legacies stemming from the country’s imperial past. They made efforts to protect the achievements of the early 1990s and worked to counter the historical revisionist discourse, originating both from the level of national politics and the grass-roots. After the watershed events of the early and mid-1990s – which included the official inquiries into the ‘comfort women’ issue, the governmental admissions of culpability and the apologies for the wartime past, as well as increased recognition of the necessity to address the legacies of the war among the general public – there was a vigorous backlash against these changes. Under these circumstances, the selected groups found themselves on the defensive, acting against these developments. Despite the range of measures deployed to counter these changes, and the groups’ contribution to fostering awareness of the unresolved war-related issues in the timeframe of the study, they were unable to succeed in bringing back some of the attainments that were lost (e.g. reinstitution of ‘comfort women’ into textbooks) or to achieve a transformation of the redress policies. This lack of absolute gains in some areas should not, however, divert our attention from their significance that could be more readily acknowledged if the following question is considered: what would have happened in the absence of these groups? (paraphrasing Kolb, 2007, 275).

This dissertation argues that approaching from this perspective the question of how the groups mattered enables us to more fully recognise their contribution to broadening and popularising knowledge of Japan’s wartime past among the domestic and international public; containing the advance of historical revisionism into the classroom; preserving the memories of particular historical events from being forgotten; and sustaining the war-related matters on the agenda of certain sectors of policy-makers.

References

Notes
1 The definition is partly based on the one presented by Yoshida Takashi (2007, 52) in his distinction between ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ camps: progressives have joined in strong support of Japan’s so-called Peace Constitution and are united in their rejection of the values of Japan’s wartime militarism and colonialism. In contrast, conservatives have advocated revision of the Constitution and defended Japanese wartime colonial and military experiences.