

Japanese apologies

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The Japanese government turns a blind eye to the country's colonial and second world war misdeeds – so goes the oft-heard criticism that periodically creates tension throughout the Far East. Jane Yamazaki, however, challenges the view that Japan has never apologised for past crimes, and argues instead that the rest of the world has turned a deaf ear on repeated Japanese expressions of regret. In recent decades Tokyo has apologised several times in different ways ranging from merely making excuses to expressing sincere regret. The problem often lies in language, since Japanese can be difficult to translate or leave a lot of room for interpretation. Yamazaki, therefore, not only details the history of Japan's multiple apologies; concentrating on the years between 1984 and 1995, she also analyses their rhetoric and translates different expressions.

From 'hansei' to 'chinsha': how to say 'sorry'

Yamazaki begins her chronology of Japanese apologies with the 1965 normalisation of relations with South Korea, when Foreign Minister Shiina Etsusaburō expressed 'true regret' ('makoto ni ikan') and 'deep remorse' ('fukaku hansei') over an 'unfortunate period in our countries' history'. Japan later used the same term in a joint communiqué when it normalised relations with China in 1972: 'The Japanese side is 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 [fukaku hansei]'. 'Hansei' ('remorse', 'reflection') is actually a weak expression of apology. Even softer was Emperor Hirohito's reference to Japan's treatment of China during the second world war while visiting President Ford in 1975: 'The peoples of both countries...endured a brief, unfortunate ordeal as storms raged in the usually quiet Pacific'. Three years later, when Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping visited Japan, Hirohito referred to

South Korean children taking part in anti-Japanese demonstrations.



the past by merely saying, 'At one time, there were unfortunate events between our countries'.

In 1982 a controversy erupted over alleged revisions of Japanese history in school textbooks. Following what was perceived by many as Japan's less than diplomatic handling of the situation, violent reactions occurred in China and South Korea. The rising tensions induced Japanese politicians to apologise more clearly, though they still used the rather lightweight 'hansei'. In 1985, for example, on the United Nations' 40th anniversary, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro declared, 'Since the end of the war, Japan has profoundly regretted [kibishiku hansei] the unleashing of rampant ultra nationalism and militarism and the war that brought great devastation to the people of many countries around the world and to our country as well'. While regretting past wrongs, Yasuhiro stressed that Japan had suffered, too, a tactic repeated by other politicians.

The stronger 'owabi' ('apology') was first expressed in 1990, by Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki to South Korean President Roh, and has been used regularly since: '...the people of the Korean peninsula experienced unbearable grief and suffering because of actions of our country...[we/I] are humbly remorseful [hansei] on this and wish to note our frank feelings of apology [owabi]'.

Simultaneously, however, Japan stubbornly denied maintaining second world war 'comfort stations' with forced prostitutes, most of them Korean. Cornered by Japanese historians, Cabinet Secretary Katō Kōichi publicly apologised to the 'victims' ('higaisha') in January 1992. Visiting Korea the same month, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi even called Japan the 'aggressor/perpetrator' ('kagaisha').

Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro's August 1993 apology resembled Kaifu's in 1990, but with one addition that other politicians later reiterated several times: that Japan 'will demonstrate a new determination by contributing more than ever before to world peace'. Hosokawa's cabinet included three ministers of the Socialist Party, which had been calling for reconciliation with other Asian peoples and 'sincere Japanese apologies to achieve that goal'. In Korea in November 1993, Hosokawa 'apologised from the heart' ('chinsha') for 'Japan's past colonial rule', calling his country the aggressor/perpetrator ('kagaisha'). The Japanese public approved of his mention of 'aggression' and 'colonial rule', but conservatives bristled. Having gone beyond what fellow party members and his coalition government were willing to admit, Hosokawa was at times forced to backtrack. Nevertheless, the next Prime Minister, Hata Tsutomu, uttered almost the same words in a May 1994 Diet speech.

In August 1995, as the 50th anniversary of the second world war's end approached, the Socialist Murayama Tomiichi led a coalition government that included his long-time enemy, the conservative LDP. A known pacifist and advocate of non-alignment, neutrality and a closer relationship with Asian nations, Murayama apologised no differently than Kaifu, Miyazawa or Hosokawa had, yet the world took him much more seriously. Ironically, his stature as an apology advocate undermined his own government's recognition of his apology: after a long debate and vociferous right wing pressure, the resulting Diet resolution was so watered down that the word 'apology' didn't even appear. This reinforced the outside world's impression that Japan had never apologised at all. Later prime ministers, all of them conservative, restated Murayama's apology almost verbatim.

The politics of apology: Why say sorry?

Other nations also hate to apologise for wrongdoings, the author writes, and cites as an example the long overdue American apology to Japanese-Americans for their internment during the second world war. She finds American and British apologies are typically selective and ignore broader cases such as slavery, the use of napalm in Vietnam or the British Opium War. Indeed, when France passed a law, in February 2005, requiring history education in schools and universities to emphasise the 'positive role' of the French colonial presence on other continents, it spurred harsh criticism by the French left and vehement protests in the countries concerned, above all in Algeria and the Antilles.

As for Japan, Yamazaki admits that its apologies are sometimes expressed only in a general way concerning warfare, aggression, war atrocities or colonial rule, but she also provides several examples of apology for specific violent events or practices, such as the Nanking massacre, biochemical warfare, sexual slavery, and mistreatment of allied soldiers and civilians. Japan's reasons for apologising, according to Yamazaki, are several: to repair relations with Asian countries; to stimulate national self-reflection and a learning process leading to a new, improved identity; to affirm moral principles. She also cites the historian Yoshida Yutaka, who sees apologies and other conciliatory strategies as motivated by the Japanese ambition to assert leadership in Asia. But the domestic call for self-reflection is also motivated by opposition parties or new administrations who wish to criticise previous ones – most clearly demonstrated by Prime Minister Hosokawa in 1993.

Japanese left-wing groups, unlike conservatives, are vehemently antimilitaristic and see the second world war as an instance of Japanese imperialism. Advocating closer ties with China, Korea and other Asian countries, they consistently demand a more remorseful stance and

compensation for victims of Japanese aggression. The different political attitudes – conservative versus left-wing – are also reflected in the choice of expressions: 'comfort women' versus 'sex slaves', 'Nanking incident' versus 'Nanking massacre', 'China Incident' versus 'China War'. Yamazaki sees the conservative aversion to apology as an expression of a masochistic view of history and also of a fear that apologising would imply the Emperor's responsibility, if not culpability. But she neglects to sufficiently address conservatives' fear that admission of guilt would invite demands for compensation.

Appearing unrepentant

The author believes that the South Korean government was ready to accept Japan's 1965 apology – its 'hansei' on the occasion of normalising relations – but that the Korean public was not. The Chinese government's situation was similar, she says, but it later changed its attitude. Unfortunately, Yamazaki's study ends with the year 1995, after which the Chinese repeatedly campaigned to blame Japan for its alleged lack of sensibility.

Other Asian countries believe Japan shouldn't feel guilty or apologise at all. Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Burma and Indonesia have taken a neutral attitude, holding that Japan should concentrate on present and future problems instead of wasting time and energy on historiographical reflection. They support the position of Japanese apologists, who claim that the second world war was fought for the liberation of Asia from white domination. Taiwan's reticence, meanwhile, probably reflects its ambivalence toward its former coloniser (1895-1945), close economic partner and ally in its campaign for recognition as the legitimate government of China, at least until Taipei lost that fight in 1972.

Though the author herself admits that some Japanese apologies have been insufficient, her evidence that they have been expressed is convincing. But the period covered by Yamazaki's study ended over ten years ago. Since that time, regardless of any apologies expressed, Prime Minister Koizumi's numerous visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and the Ministry of Education's approval of controversial textbooks, (in 2001 and 2005), that present a 'new view' of national history, have renewed a perception of Japan as unrepentant. Still, Yamazaki's book is a valuable response to the question of how Japan has dealt with its own history and of how the world has, or has not, responded. ◀

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Prime Minister Koizumi still visits the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.