

TAIWAN AND JAPAN: THE GOOD NEIGHBOR FACES HISTORY ISSUES

By Dennis Halpin

The Japanese islands are surrounded by a group of nations—Russia, South Korea, North Korea and China—where historic relations remain frayed, territorial disputes remain unresolved, and residual anger from harsh colonialism and past wars continue to sour relations. While Japan’s relations continue to deteriorate with China and South Korea over historical and territorial issues, the island of Taiwan stands out singularly as Japan’s good neighbor. In 2011, when the Tohoku earthquake struck Japan, followed by the Fukushima nuclear accident, there was an outpouring of public sympathy from Taiwan. Taipei’s provision of approximately [\\$260 million in combined public and private donations](#) was second only to the United States in monetary aid. Close bilateral cultural ties were further enhanced this summer when Taiwan’s world-renowned National Palace Museum [sent a special exhibit](#) of its most priceless treasures to tour Japan. One finds in Taipei a genuine public affection for Japan’s culture and people. Views concerning the pre-World War II colonial period are decidedly different from those expressed in Korea. An older Taiwanese generation used to tell foreign residents that “we didn’t have to lock our doors when the Japanese were here” and “the Japanese built our roads and railroads.” Thus, recent Japanese ultra-nationalist actions which touch certain Taiwanese historic sensitivities are puzzling.

However, feelings in Taiwan concerning the “history issue” now engulfing East Asia appear to be anything but homogenous. Attitudes on history seem partially determined by whether or not one is descended from the estimated two million mainlanders who moved to the island after the communist triumph at the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. While descendants of long-resident Taiwan families have a historic focus on the [reported severe human rights abuses](#) of Kuomintang (KMT) forces when they came over from mainland China, especially the tragic 2/28 incident of 1947, families from

the mainland have passed down stories of atrocities committed there by Imperial Japanese forces. A number of these incidents are directly connected to the history of the Republic of China (ROC) on the mainland, the recognized antecedent of the current government in Taipei.

Thus when Naoki Hyakuta, governor of Japan’s Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), an Abe appointee, [made a public denial of the Nanking Massacre](#) earlier this year, it could be interpreted as challenging an important component of the ROC’s historic legacy—resistance to Japanese imperialism. Mr. Hyakuta was quoted at an election campaign rally as stating “In 1938, Chiang Kai-shek tried to publicize Japan’s responsibility for the Nanking Massacre, but the nations of the world ignored him. Why? Because it never happened.” He further reportedly added that “Atrocities were committed by all sides in wars and that there was no need to teach such things to Japanese children.”

Nanking, at the time of the [1937-38 Massacre](#), in which as many as 300,000 Chinese died, was the capital of the Republic of China with the KMT in power, the same political party which is now the ruling party in Taipei. The mass killings were documented by a community of foreign missionaries, commercial personnel, and journalists, including a Nazi party official, who established a “[safety zone](#)” in the city to rescue thousands of Chinese civilians. And while Chiang Kai-shek, partially because of the 2/28 incident, remains a subject of political debate in democratic Taiwan, his statue still [sits in a memorial hall](#) in downtown Taipei. To assert that this historic figure knowingly deceived the world about the Nanking Massacre was not a neighborly gesture.

Further, Taiwan’s aboriginal population was reportedly treated with far greater severity than others by Japan’s colonial officials. An aboriginal chief was the leader in

the 1930 Wushe Incident, Taiwan's [most famous uprising](#) against Japanese colonial rule. A harsh military crackdown followed. The aboriginal people's estranged feelings were still evident when a 60-member delegation traveled to Tokyo's [Yasukuni war shrine](#) in June 2005. The delegation sought the removal from the shrine of spirit tablets of their ancestors who were forced to fight in Imperial Japan's war. Japanese rightists appeared to noisily prevent the group from entering the temple grounds. And aboriginal rights advocate and Taiwan legislator Kao-Chin Su-Mei addressed a rally last December in front of Tokyo's representative office in Taipei. There she expressed "[disgust](#)" at Japanese Prime Minister Abe's just-completed visit to Yasukuni.

This controversial December 26, 2013 shrine visit also put the spotlight on another historic legacy issue—[Taiwan's Comfort Women](#), a historical legacy over which the Taiwanese and Koreans do share anger against the Japanese. Women and girls from Taiwan formed a separate group of "enforced sex slaves," to quote former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, from their sisters who were taken from the Chinese mainland. A November 15, 1945 report drafted by Australian and United States military intelligence officers, and "[published by command of General MacArthur](#)," confirms Imperial Japanese military involvement in the trafficking of Taiwanese Comfort Women. Based on interviews with captured Japanese nationals in Burma (Myanmar), who had been procurers for "comfort stations," the report notes as follows: "Headquarters, Korean Army, gave him a letter addressed to all military headquarters of the Japanese Army, requesting them to furnish any assistance he might require, transport, rations, medical attention, etc... Prisoner of war and his wife, with their 22 girls, embarked at Fusan on 10 July 1942 in a group of 703 girls, all Korean... They sailed on a 400 ton passenger ship in a convoy of seven ships... They called at Formosa, where 22 girls bound for Singapore were taken on board."

Soon after Abe's 2013 Yasukuni visit, Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou made a deeply symbolic, if more quiet

gesture than the vocal condemnations from both Beijing and Seoul. On January 18, 2014 he visited one of Taiwan's surviving Comfort Women in southern Taiwan. While standing next to the 93-year-old woman, President Ma [reportedly declared](#) that "Japan has yet to apologize to Taiwanese comfort women, and it is inappropriate for the Japanese prime minister to visit the shrine." The President took a further step on the historically symbolic date of April 17, the 119th anniversary of the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki when Qing Dynasty China ceded Taiwan to Meiji Japan following the Sino-Japanese War. In a meeting at the Presidential Office with two of Taiwan's surviving Comfort Women, [President Ma stated](#), "facing up to history is the correct attitude." Following the presidential meeting, Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Anna Kao said that it has been the ROC government's long-standing position that Japan should assume responsibility over the Comfort Women issue. "The government will continue to assist Taiwanese comfort women in [demanding justice and restoration](#) of their dignity from the Japanese government," she said.

The Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation estimates that 2,000 Taiwanese women were taken to "comfort stations"; five of them survive. This NGO opened an exhibit in Taipei in May showcasing photos of and by Comfort Women. Executive Director Kang Shu-hua also [announced fundraising plans](#) aimed at the construction of a Comfort Women museum in Taipei. Ms. Kang traveled to the United States in mid-September to attend a conference at Hofstra University in New York concerning war atrocities and sex trafficking in East Asia. The conference provided a venue for the screening of a 73-minute film titled "[Song of the Reed](#)," produced by the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation, which highlights the stories of five Taiwanese Comfort Women survivors.

The *Central News Agency* (CNA) of Taiwan [reported in July](#), on the 77th anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937, that President Ma expressed his support for the proposed Comfort Women museum in Taipei and also indicated that the Executive Yuan and Ministry of

National Defense will “organize a series of events” in 2015 to coincide with the 70th anniversary of “the Republic of China’s victory in the war against Japan.”

While Taiwan has also had its own territorial dispute with Japan involving the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, this has not precluded Taipei and Tokyo from reaching an accommodation on natural resource issues. [A fisheries agreement](#), signed by Taipei and Tokyo in April of 2013, allows for an equitable distribution of marine products, including those around the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, while placing sovereignty claims aside. Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou had [previously put forward](#) the East China Sea Peace Initiative in August 2012, suggesting a means for parties to territorial disputes in the East China Sea “to replace confrontation with dialogue” and “shelve territorial disputes through negotiations.” If Tokyo and Taipei could cooperate together just as constructively in addressing outstanding history issues it could set a precedent for all of East Asia in handling the contentious question of an unresolved past.

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