

The Persistence of Japanese Empire: The Transnational Network of Historical Denialism

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Abstract

Drawing on archival research, this paper suggests that Japanese historical denialism has grown in the last 30 years, crossing national borders to form a transnational right-wing network that links far-right state and non-state actors in Japan and the US. The transnational right-wing network of historical denialism has been constructed around the issue of “comfort women,” a significant case of Japanese empire’s wartime violence. This research adopts a decolonial feminist analysis to examine the connections between transnational right-wing networks, imperialism, and gender politics. First, we argue that state actors can play an important role in transnational right-wing networks. Second, we address the entanglement between contemporary right-wing mobilization and the legacies of empire. Third, we suggest that transnational right-wing mobilization is centered on gender as it targets the weakest and most vulnerable population. By recognizing the transnational construction of Japanese historical denialism and its intended effects, we call for a sociology of empire that takes seriously Japanese empire, its persistent imperialism, and gender politics as its pillar of theorization.

Keywords: right-wing movements, counter-mobilization, imperialism, “comfort women,” decolonial feminism

Introduction

In the past few decades, sociologists have called for a decolonial sociology to examine the colonial power relations inherent in sociological theory and practice (Bhambra 2014; Connell 2007; Go 2016; Meghji 2021; Mignolo 2012; Santos 2018). Sociological concepts such as “empire” have been revisited and reinvigorated by scholars of the British, French, Spanish, and US empires, particularly from comparative historical perspectives. The concepts of empire and imperialism are often used to refer to past European attempts to dominate other societies and territories, and are increasingly being used to refer to current US efforts to extend its power over the world by military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural deployments. However, sociologists have given little attention to the Japanese empire, which colonized nations in the Asia Pacific and divided the pre-1945 international order with Western powers. Since the end of the Japanese empire after World War II, research on the Japanese empire has been left to modern Asian historians and literature scholars, and is thus primarily regarded as “area studies.” In this paper, we argue that a sociological examination of the Japanese empire and its surprising endurance can help advance the sociology of empire.

This paper examines the persistence of Japanese empire through the case study of the state-sponsored transnational network of what we call “historical denialism.” By historical denialism, we mean a form of disinformation and political propaganda intended at systemic reinterpretation, revision, and ultimately, denial of historical records, particularly those relating to human rights violations, war crimes, slavery, genocides, and other atrocities. Authoritarian governments and right-wing political forces frequently utilize it to obfuscate, destroy, and deny historical data about their own political violence in the past. With the “rightwing drift” of the society following the economic recession in the 1980s, the Japanese government has cultivated historical denialism to affect its citizens by erasing the discussion of Japanese empire’s mass violence and war crimes from educational curricula and public discourse. Furthermore, from the late-1990s, the Japanese government has supported the development and consolidation of a transnational right-wing network

that promotes historical denialism on a global scale, particularly in the United States. The issue of Japanese military sexual slavery during World War II, also known as “comfort women,” has been a significant target of historical denialism for the past two decades.

How does the Japanese government support a transnational right-wing network that promotes historical denialism? How do the deliberate efforts of historical denialism move beyond national and regional borders to target the international audience? What are the intended consequences of such a transnational move? What makes the “comfort women” issue a primary target of historical denialism? What does the emergence of a transnational right-wing network of historical denialism tell us about the persistence of an empire that appeared to have deceased? How does it help us advance the sociology of empire? To address these questions, this paper adopts a decolonial feminist analysis (Lugones 2010) to examine the relationship between transnational right-wing networks, gender politics, and empire.

In the last decade, a growing body of research has focused on the emergence of transnational right-wing networks and their anti-gender mobilization. Right-wing populist and neo-fascist groups have appropriated and utilized the language of “human rights” as well as transnational advocacy networks, originally developed to promote progressive agendas, making global public arenas such as the United Nations and the European Union a battleground for both progressive and conservative mobilization (Bob 2012; Schneiker 2019). Transnational right-wing networks frequently mobilize around masculinist nationalism, white patriotism, and xenophobia in the global context of declining middle- and working-classes following economic crises (Farris 2017). Gender has been at the center of these transnational mobilization efforts, which effectively combine exclusive nationalism with conservative ideas of gender, sexuality, and family in order to attack “gender ideology,” feminism, women’s rights, and LGBT rights (Corredor 2019; Graff et al. 2019; Kovats 2018; Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Payne and Santos 2020).

This paper contributes to this conversation in three key ways. First, extant scholarship has largely focused on non-state actors, such as right-wing NGOs (Blakely 2010; Schneiker 2019), religious groups (Payne and Santos 2020), conservative media (Bob 2013), and their (often indirect) links to far-right and populist parties or politicians (Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; Onis and Kutlay 2020). We argue that state actors play an equally important role in transnational right-wing networks given their capacity to mobilize authority, resources, and networks on a global scale. Second, existing discussions have mainly focused on intra-European, Euro-American, and inter-American ties, connections, and networks, with the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia being mentioned less than occasionally (see Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; Blakely 2010). We address the empirical gap by looking at East Asia to properly map out the fully global scope of transnational right-wing networks. Finally, we look at the understudied entanglement between contemporary right-wing mobilization and the legacies of empire. By uncovering the Japanese government-sponsored right-wing mobilization on a global scale, we suggest that the transnational right-wing movement can be a manifestation of a supposedly deceased empire and its enduring political power.

Data and Methods

This paper draws on archival data, organizational documents, and secondary literature from 1990 to 2021 to trace and lay bare the transnational network of historical denialism. We focus on the linkages and connections between various state and non-state actors, as well as the movements of ideas, people, and resources, in the development and consolidation of historical denialism network.

We concentrate on the years 1990 through 2021. First, in 1990, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was founded, which was the first to highlight the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery (“comfort women”). Since Kim Hak-soon, the first Korean survivor to publicly testify about her experience as a Japanese military comfort woman

during World War II, the “comfort women” issue has become a bilateral diplomatic issue between South Korea and Japan, as well as a global issue for women’s rights and transitional justice (Lee 2021). Second, we have observed the Japanese society’s “rightwing drift” during the last three decades. The conservative Liberal Democratic Party’s long-term postwar political hegemony has aided the emergence of far-right forces organized around the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery. Third, the Japanese government’s systemic efforts to revise and rewrite the history of imperialism and its wartime violence against women have gone global since the late 2000s. It culminated in an article published in 2021 by Harvard Law Professor J. Mark Ramseyer, which epitomizes the international scholarly attempt to deny the historical existence of military sexual slavery.

Major Findings

We argue that three critical turning points have developed and solidified the transnational network of Japanese historical denialism in the past three decades.

First, 1997 was a watershed moment in the development of historical denialism, when the Japanese government began its “rightwing drift” and started to pay attention to the “comfort women” issue. As previously stated, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter the Korean Council) was founded in October 1990, followed by Korean survivor Kim Hak-soon’s first public testimony in August 1991. In 1992, the Korean Council worked to bring the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery to the attention of the UN, which resulted in the first UN report on the subject (1992). As a result of this, the Japanese government acknowledged for the first time in 1993 that the Japanese military was involved in sexual slavery during the war (“The Kono Statement”). Meanwhile, the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) established the Council for Review of History in order to propose “new perspectives” for interpreting postwar history, leading to the establishment of the Liberal View of History Study Group (1995) and the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (1996, hereafter Textbook Reform Society).

In 1997, two prominent far-right organizations, the National Conference to Protect Japan and the Society for the Protection of Japan, united to establish the Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi*), the largest and most powerful far-right, ultra-conservative, and ultra-nationalist lobby group in Japan (Mizohata 2016; Shibuichi 2017). Former prime ministers (including Shinzo Abe), tens of former and current ministers, parliamentarians, and other power elites are among the Japan Conference’s key members, establishing the Japan Conference as a state-sponsored club of close confidants to the LDP-led government. The Japan Conference began to organize its counter-movement against transnational feminist efforts on the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery (e.g., another UN report [McDougall report] in 1998, the 2000 Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal, which declared sexual violence in armed conflict a “war crime”). Textbook Reform Society began efforts in 1997 against the inclusion of “comfort women” issues in Japanese middle school textbooks, instead proposing a revisionist “new history textbook.” With the assistance of the Japan Conference, Japan’s Ministry of Education and Science approved it for use in public and private middle schools across the country in 2001 (Nelson 2002; Nozaki 2002).

Second, 2007 marked another turning point in Japan’s right-wing state and non-state actors’ recognition of the necessity to address historical denialism on a global scale in response to growing global awareness of the “comfort women” issue. In July 2007, the US House of Representatives passed Resolution 12, urging the Japanese government to issue a full apology and accept full responsibility for the survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery, as well as include curriculum about them in Japanese schools. Similar resolutions were passed in the Netherlands, Canada, the European Union, and South Korea in the following months. The first “comfort women” memorial

was constructed at Palisades Park, New Jersey in October 2010 to commemorate the approval of Resolution 12 in the US House of Representatives, thanks to the work of the progressive Korean American grassroots movements.

In reaction, Japanese counter-mobilization of historical denialism established the groundwork for transnational organizing by bringing together domestic far-right forces and forming advocacy groups aimed at an international audience. Around this time, Shinzo Abe, a prominent member of the Japan Conference, came to power in 2006 and began the “right-wing drift,” exploiting the “comfort women” issue (and the government’s denial of their existence) as a source of conservative and nationalist legitimacy. As a result of this political climate, Japanese right-wing groups began to establish with the goal of expressly targeting an “international” audience. Koichi Mera, a Harvard PhD and a Japanese American from Southern California, created the right-wing Study Group of Japan’s Rebirth in 2006 (Yamaguchi 2020). Hideyaki Kase, a right-wing revisionist journalist and commentator who served on the Japan Conference board, formed the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact in 2008, with the goal of propagating Japanese denialist discourse in English (Hall 2016). Nadeshiko Action, a far-right women’s group, was founded in 2011 with a focus on UN lobbying (Kim-Wachutka 2019).

Third, the year 2013 marked the beginning of a full-fledged transnational counter-mobilization by Japanese historical denialism, particularly in relation to the establishment of “comfort women” memorials around the world. The Statue of Peace (also known as the Peace Monument) was established in Central Park, Glendale in California, in July 2013, as a duplicate of the original Statue of Peace, which was unveiled in Seoul in 2011. Progressive Korean American and Japanese American organizations were key players. Since then, memorials commemorating Japanese military “comfort women” have been installed in public areas across the globe, including in South Korea, Japan, China, Australia, Germany, and the United States. The Statue of Peace has become a symbol of transnational feminist solidarity for decolonial justice (Kim 2020; Son 2018; Ushiyama 2021), as well as a key site for transnational mobilization that attracts global attention.

The historical denialists began to develop transnational networks for counter-mobilization in response to the growing global presence of “comfort women” memorial statues. The Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT) was founded in 2014 in Los Angeles by prominent members of the aforementioned far-right groups based in Japan and the United States, namely, Study Group of Japan’s Rebirth, Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, Nadeshiko Action, and Textbook Reform Society, to organize global campaigns for historical denialism. GAHT’s member organizations held rallies and other public activities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City opposing the establishment of “comfort women” memorials, as well as sending pamphlets to the US Congress presenting “comfort women” survivors as “prostitutes” (in a derogatory meaning). In 2015, leaders of GAHT spoke out at a public meeting of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, claiming that “the number of victims, forced mobilization, and sexual slavery are all lies,” “the testimony of survivor Lee Yong-soo is a lie,” “Japanese children in the US are bullied because of the memorial,” and “comfort women were prostitutes, not sex slaves.” In addition, GAHT filed a lawsuit in federal court in the US and then in state court in California, requesting that the Statue of Peace in Glendale be removed.

In defense of Japan’s national interests and international image (Morris-Suzuki 2017), not only non-state actors but also Japanese state actors were directly involved in lobbying efforts to dismantle the “comfort women” memorials. The Japanese government began pressing to have the memorials removed after many monuments were established and survivors attended the unveiling ceremonies and testified. In 2015, the Japanese Consulate General in San Francisco put pressure on the Japanese diasporic community to oppose the memorial’s placement, promising financial payments to the city if the memorial was removed (Koyama 2017; Lee 2020). Furthermore, in

February 2017, the Japanese government filed a 16-page amicus brief in support of GAHT's lawsuit to remove the Statue of Peace from Glendale with the US Supreme Court (KBS News, Mar 7 2017). The Japanese government has also increased its diplomatic communications budget by about 450 million dollars in order to engage in "strategic external communications" aimed at increasing "international community's historical awareness of Japan" in order to "protect Japanese sovereignty and national interests" (Morris-Suzuki 2017, 139). For example, publications espousing historical denialism have been given to hundreds of politicians, journalists, and academics in the United States, and advertising urging people to sign online petitions opposing the Statues of Peace have appeared in weekly newspapers in the US (Korea Daily San Francisco, Jan 5 2016).

The UN, foreign city governments, civil society, and the media were all targets of historical denialism's transnational mobilization, as was the scholarly community. Shiro Takahashi, a professor at Meisei University and one of Japan Conference's far-right intellectual leaders, formed the Historical Awareness Research Committee (HARC) in 2016. HARC intends to influence the international community by collecting and publishing "evidences" of historical denialism (especially on the "comfort women" issue and the Nanjing massacre) in foreign languages. In 2018, the International Research Institute of Controversial Histories (IRICH), a pseudo-academic association of far-right Japanese scholars (many of whom also belong to Textbook Reform Society), was founded with the goal of glorifying Japanese imperial history, including the denial of the history of "comfort women." Meanwhile, the Japanese government sponsors and cultivates pro-Japanese intellectuals through a variety of indirect and direct research programs (Kingston 2019). Mark Ramseyer, the Mitsubishi Professor of Japanese Legal Studies at Harvard and the 2018 recipient of the Order of the Rising Sun from the Japanese Emperor, published a controversial article in an international scholarly journal in 2021 defending the denial of the histories and testimonies of "comfort women." For its inaccurate citational practices, misrepresentations of Japanese sources, and fabrication of historical evidences, the work was accused of major academic integrity violations by multiple researchers in the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Members of far-right organizations such as HARC and IRICH, however, have written several statements and editorials in support of Ramseyer's article, demonstrating the global network of historical denialism.

Discussion

Drawing on archival research, this paper suggests that Japanese historical denialism has grown in the last 30 years, crossing national borders to form a transnational right-wing network that links far-right state and non-state actors in Japan and the US. The transnational right-wing network of historical denialism has been constructed around the issue of "comfort women," a significant case of Japanese empire's wartime violence. This research contributes to our knowledge of the connections between transnational right-wing networks, gender politics, and imperialism.

First, we argued that state actors can play an important role in transnational right-wing networks. We investigated how the Japanese government has fostered, promoted, and nurtured a group of historical denialists, both directly and indirectly. The Japan Conference, a state-sponsored club of close confidants to the LDP-led Japanese government, has provided material and symbolic support to different right-wing groups, domestic and international, allowing them to counter-mobilize against the global "comfort women" movement. Since 2013, the Japanese state's intervention has become much more explicit against the establishment of "comfort women" memorial statues as the Japanese Embassies in the US and elsewhere began lobbying efforts against them. Furthermore, the Japanese government has nurtured a group of US-based experts to produce historical denialist propaganda to gain legitimacy.

Second, we addressed the entanglement between contemporary right-wing mobilization and the legacies of empire. The Japanese state has increased its efforts to propagate historical denialism

on a global scale to safeguard its national pride and international image. The state promotion of historical denialism shows that Japanese imperialism and its political legacies carry on even after the empire's official demise. Japanese imperialism is alive and well among a group of far-right and ultra-nationalist political, corporate, and media elites in Japan, as well as their growing number of adherents both inside and outside the country. Its transnational move, which is aimed primarily at a US audience, may indicate the fundamental link between the deceased Japanese empire and the contemporary US empire.

Third, we suggested that transnational right-wing mobilization is centered on gender as it targets the weakest and most vulnerable population. Transnational right-wing movements in other regions of the world use conservative notions of gender, sexuality, and family as a form of biopolitics to produce conservative populations. Transnational right-wing mobilization of historical denialism, on the other hand, exercises a gendered form of necropolitics to erase the social and historical existence of "comfort women" survivors, whose numbers have been dramatically declining in recent years.

By recognizing the transnational construction of Japanese historical denialism and its intended effects, we call for a sociology of empire that takes seriously Japanese empire, its persistent imperialism, and gender politics as its pillar of theorization.

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