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# Can It Be a Gamechanger? Interrogating the Prospects of Decolonization Through Public History in Japan

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**Abstract:** As a historical settler and colonizer in Asia, yet a state not colonized by European countries, Japan and its colonial history seem to have been left out from the debates on public history as a decolonizing process, due to the field having arguably been Eurocentric. This article interrogates the extent to which public history could serve as a vehicle to decolonize the history-making process in Japan and demonstrates the challenges of decolonizing through public history within Japan's national framework due to nationalistic or patriotic silencing and censorship. Such nationalistic public history is rooted in Japan's narratives of victimhood fostered in its course of history, including the 'inferior' position against the West or the experience of the atomic bombs. Moreover, Japan's historical division between the internal and external colonies as well as its nationalistic, defensive attitude towards the history of external colonialism have played significant roles in burying its settler colonial past. To include narratives about the internal and external colonial victims, I argue that both Eurocentric decolonization and academia-centered public history in Japan need to be, in themselves, decolonized so that they provide more nuanced approaches to Japan's colonial past. Furthermore, given that narratives of the colonial past in national history projects can be silenced under nationalistic victimhood, this article suggests that transnational collaborative public history could disconnect historical narratives from nationalistic discourses of victimhood, gathering more sympathy beyond Japan and supporting efforts towards decolonization. The overall article eventually contributes to decolonizing the Eurocentric debates on 'decolonization through public history.'

**Keywords:** decolonization; Japan; nationalistic victimhood; public history; subaltern empire; transnational collaboration

Workers began tearing down a memorial for wartime Korean laborers at a prefectural park here amid criticism that its removal

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would encourage attempts to whitewash Japan's past as a militaristic aggressor.<sup>1</sup> – *The Asahi Shimbun*

At the end of January 2024, a memorial dedicated to Korean wartime laborers in Takasaki, Gunma prefecture (Japan) (Figure 1) was demolished after an intense political dispute over the public representation of wartime forced labor as part of Japan's colonial past. Erected in 2004 on the initiative of a local private group doing its utmost to not forget the history of the Korean victims, the memorial had faced strong condemnation from right-wingers referring to it as "false history" constructed by "anti-Japanese."<sup>2</sup> This erasure of colonial history is just the tip of the iceberg of Japan's nationalistic celebration that has been the most prominent form of public history, in which vocal publics and participants support colonial structures and interpretations. Public history is not necessarily liberal nor progressive or decolonial; it can be very nationalistic or even colonial as well. This opens up a question of whether it is possible to decolonize historical narratives in Japan if such nationalistic public history is the representative form of public participation in the history-making process.

This article demonstrates the challenges of decolonizing through public history within Japan's national framework due to nationalistic or patriotic silencing and censorship. As a historical settler and colonizer in Asia, yet a state not colonized by European countries, Japan and its colonial history seem to have been left out from the debates on public history as a decolonizing process, partly but significantly due to the field having arguably been Eurocentric. Instead of imposing the existing 'decolonization through public history' approach largely developed in European colonial contexts, this article interrogates what forms it could take, what challenges it could face, and suggests transnational collaborative public history as a way to decolonize historical narratives in Japan.

1 Tomoko Takaki, "Memorial for Wartime Korean Laborers Coming Down in Gunma," *The Asahi Shimbun*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15138198>.

2 For further details, see Sven Saaler, "Demolition Men: The Unmaking of a Memorial Commemorating Wartime Forced Laborers in Gunma (Japan)," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 20, no. 16-14 (2022): 1–27.



**Figure 1:** Forest of Gunma, Remembrance, Reflection and Friendship monument, Wikimedia Commons.

The first section introduces Japan's colonial past – from the settler colonialism of Hokkaido in 1869 to Japan's defeat in the Second World War in 1945 – to identify two focal elements for this article's arguments: the historical boundary between internal and external colonies and the narratives of victimhood that Japanese elites have perpetuated up to date. These factors have made the issue of decolonization in Japan extremely complex. The second section presents multiple cases of the nationalistic public history that have worked to silence Japan's colonial past, making attempts at decolonization very problematic. The third section demonstrates that both Eurocentric decolonization and academia-centered public history in Japan need to be, in themselves, decolonized, so that they provide more nuanced approaches to Japan's past. The final section argues for the necessity of changing the nationalistic paradigm of history and suggests that transnational collaborative public history could support efforts towards decolonization.

## 1 Complexities of Decolonizing Japan's History

In the course of history, Japan developed an 'Eastern catch-up' imperialism, consisting of dual components (settler/internal and colonial/external territories), which only 'ended' with its "instant decolonization" due to Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War in August 1945.<sup>3</sup> Following the rise of

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Conrad, "The Dialectics of Remembrance: Memories of Empire in Cold War Japan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 1 (2014): 4–33.

imperialism in the nineteenth century, Japan emerged as a country in the East "seeking to catch up with Western powers, [in which] nation-making and empire-building were inextricably fused from the beginning."<sup>4</sup> The Empire of Japan (generally 1868–1947) is often described as a "latecomer" empire or with the term "mimetic" imperialism when compared to that of the British or French.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Eiji Oguma, Japan's expansion was what should be called "Colored Imperialism."<sup>6</sup> The Japanese empire expanded its territory through both "internal" and "external" colonialism. It was a colonialism "to reinvent itself as a nation-empire on par with the West," with their own concerns about national security due to being surrounded by other empires.<sup>7</sup> Pan-Asianism, an ideology manifested in Japan's ambitious empire-building process, was able to legitimize both the anticolonial struggles against Western imperialism as well as Japan's claim for hegemony in Asia.<sup>8</sup>

During Japan's expansion, the empire became divided into two administrative and political categories: Japan proper (*naichi*) and the external territories (*gaichi*).<sup>9</sup> Whilst Japan proper was the colonial core outwardly, it also had a hierarchy within it between the settler and the settled. *Naikoku shokuminchi* or *kokunai shokuminchi* refers to "colonies within the country."<sup>10</sup> It means that Japan proper (*naichi*) also included internal colonies (*naikoku shokuminchi*). External territories (*gaichi*) were the targeted margins of external colonialism, territories which were put into an unequal system, being deprived of their rights to their own government as well as their Japanese political life.<sup>11</sup>

In competition for regional hegemony with the Russian Empire and the Chinese Qing dynasty, Japanese political

<sup>4</sup> Jun Uchida, Toyomi Asano, and Conrad Hirano, "Japan and Its Margins," in *The New Cambridge History of Japan Volume 3*, ed. Laura Hein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 87–137.

<sup>5</sup> Eiji Oguma, *The Boundaries of "the Japanese" Vol 2: Korea, Taiwan, and the Ainu 1868–1945*, trans. Leonie R. Stickland (Balwyn North: Trans Pacific Press, 2017), 430; Robert Eskildsen, "Of Civilization and Savages: The Mimetic Imperialism of Japan's 1874 Expedition to Taiwan," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (2002): 388–418.

<sup>6</sup> Oguma, *The Boundaries*, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Uchida, Asano, and Hirano, "Japan and Its Margins," 88.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher W. A. Szpilman and Sven Saaler, "Pan-Asianism as an Ideal of Asian Identity and Solidarity, 1850–Present," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 17-1 (2011): 1–28.

<sup>9</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "The Nature of Empire: Forest Ecology, Colonialism and Survival Politics in Japan's Imperial Order," *Japanese Studies* 33, no. 3 (2013): 225–242.

<sup>10</sup> For further details about the different nuances between *naikoku shokuminchi* and *kokunai shokuminchi*, see Hajime Imanishi, "Teikoku Nihon to Kokunai Shokuminchi [The Japanese empire and Kokunai Shokuminchi]," *Ritsumeikan Gengo Bunka Kenkyu* 19, no. 1 (2007): 17–27.

<sup>11</sup> Morris-Suzuki, "The Nature of Empire," 227.

leaders, the Meiji oligarchs in particular, initiated the forceful integration of the northern territories belonging to the Indigenous Ainu people in 1869 (renamed as Hokkaido) and the southern Ryukyu Islands in 1879 (retitled as Okinawa), which became Japan's internal colonies.<sup>12</sup> The sequence of victories of the Japanese empire in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) allowed Japan to annex Taiwan, which became the first official external colony in 1895. Japan then obtained southern Sakhalin and the Kwantung Leased Territory (as a concession from Russia) in 1905, and formally colonized Korea in 1910.<sup>13</sup> Presenting itself as the liberator from Western colonialism, Japan also ruled Manchukuo (the puppet state, 1932–1945) and militarily occupied many other areas under the ambition of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere (1940–1945).<sup>14</sup>

When the Empire of Japan was defeated in the Second World War, it lost all the external territories acquired after the annexation of Taiwan in 1895. As a result, Japan “liquidated itself without going through the process of decolonization,” which has had long-term consequences on how the past would be remembered.<sup>15</sup> It contributed to the collective oblivion of Japan's imperial past, reducing the experience of being a colonizer into the history of the “war already ended.”<sup>16</sup> Collective oblivion was accompanied by the construction of public silencing. Under the US-led Allied occupation of Japan (September 1945–April 1952), the Japanese settlers returning from formerly ruled regions were prohibited to get in touch with old colonies.<sup>17</sup> These

returnees (*hikiagesha*) were seen as postwar Japan's shame and faced discrimination. They had to remain silent about the colonial past. This silencing was reinforced during the Cold War. The fact that the Republic of Korea and Japan both belonged to the Capitalist Bloc against the Communist Bloc, encouraged citizens to repress memories of colonial aggression.<sup>18</sup>

Narratives of victimhood, in particular regarding the experience of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have played another significant role in preventing any critical account of Japan's colonial past. When Japan's ongoing vulnerability to nuclear danger was unveiled by “fallout from the Bikini hydrogen bomb experiments and the exposure of the crew and catch of a Japanese tuna trawler, the Lucky Dragon 5, to its ‘ash of death’ in 1954,” it expanded Japan's anti-nuclear peace movement.<sup>19</sup> Under such anti-nuclear pacifism, Japan's nationalized victimhood – cabinet ministers have routinely emphasized Japan as the “only country in the world to have suffered an atomic bomb” – was detached from its wartime military past.<sup>20</sup> Despite some other victim groups having challenged Japan's claim for “unique victimhood,” the “nation as victim” concept has been perpetuated until today, undermining the history of Japan as a colonial aggressor.<sup>21</sup> Silencing the colonial past, supported by Japan's nationalized victimhood, has not only led to the lack of Japanese critical assessment of the imperial past but also concealed the settler colonial history with its ‘internal’ victims.

Some changes started to emerge in the representation of settler colonial history in the last two decades. Japan's Indigenous ethnic minority groups started to gain unprecedented attention for their rights after the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007.<sup>22</sup> In the following year, the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors of Japan agreed to recognize the Ainu as an Indigenous People. In April 2019 when the Ainu Policies Promotion Act was enacted, replacing 1997 Ainu Cultural Promotion Act, the Ainu finally became officially recognized as Japan's Indigenous people, yet the Act did not include any provision

12 For the overall Japan's colonial history, see Lorenzo Veracini, “The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1868–1945,” in *Colonialism: A Global History* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2023), 147–61; Uchida, Asano, and Hirano, “Japan and Its Margins”; Mark R. Peattie, “The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 6*, ed. Peter Duus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 215–70.

13 The status of Sakhalin (Karafuto) historically changed over time, see for example, Hiroyuki Shiode, “Nation or Colony? The Political Belonging of the Japanese in Karafuto,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 12, no. 1 (2009): 101–19.

14 It has been controversial whether these areas should be considered “Japanese colonies” since it has a risk of ambiguating the nature of “colonialism.” For such arguments, see Fumi Yoshii, “Nihonshi to Shokuminchi Kenkyu [Japanese History and Colonial Studies],” in *Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten*, ed. Shokuminchi Kenkyukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), 212–15.

15 Leo Ching, “Give Me Japan and Nothing Else!: Postcoloniality, Identity, and the Traces of Colonialism,” in *Japan After Japan*, ed. Tomiko Yoda et al. (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006), 148.

16 Ryuta Itagaki, Hideaki Tobe, and Satoshi Mizutani, “The History and Prospects of Japanese Colonial Studies: with a Focus on the Historiography of Modern Korea,” *Shakai Kagaku* 40, no. 2 (2010): 27–59.

17 Nagao Nishikawa, “The ‘Neo’-Colonialism,” *Ritsumeikan Gengo Bunka Kenkyu* 19, no. 1 (2007): 213–27.

18 *Ibid.*, 215.

19 James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 36–37.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Ran Zwigenberg, “Entangled Memories: Israel, Japan and the Emergence of Global Memory Culture,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 32-4 (2015): 1–17.

22 Damien Short et al., *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: A Contemporary Evaluation* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2021).

for repatriation.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the Japanese government refused to recognize Ryukyuan/Okinawan people as Indigenous groups and still does not acknowledge their rights to land and natural resources which constitute the “ancestral territories.”<sup>24</sup> The Government of Japan is still building a new US military base in the northern part of Okinawa main island as well as the Japanese Self Defense Force facilities in remote small islands of the Ryukyus.<sup>25</sup> Japan’s history of settler colonialism has been veiled under the name of national security, which makes decolonization of the colonial past even more challenging. The historical division between the internal and external colonies as well as Japan’s nationalistic, defensive attitude towards the history of external colonialism rooted in victimhood have played specific roles in burying its settler colonial past.

## 2 Nationalistic Burial of Colonial Past in the Public Sphere

With the end of the Cold War, histories and suppressed memories of Japan’s colonial past started to emerge.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, many atrocities and aggressions committed by Japan in its colonies were revealed, including the existence of ‘comfort women’ or the Nanking Massacre in 1937. Japanese scholars as well as civic movements at the grassroots level started to deal with the Japanese empire’s atrocities during colonialism.<sup>27</sup> As Dane Kennedy points out, oral histories and social history have contributed to revealing the previously silenced colonial pasts.<sup>28</sup> In *Issues in Japanese Colonial Studies (Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten)* published in 2018, Puja Kim points out that oral history has revealed the ethnic discrimination that some of the Korean

women who worked in Japanese munitions factories suffered.<sup>29</sup> Toru Hosoya stresses how a social history approach has now commonly been used for the studies of returnees (*hikiagesha*).<sup>30</sup> With a particular focus on the methodology of memory studies, Erii Iikura goes further and argues that it is time to critically question the conventional methodology of academic history.<sup>31</sup> These approaches have a high affinity with the development of a new public history.

Despite such developments, the public reception of academic works on colonial history has been limited. This is partly due to active silencing and attacks from nationalistic groups. Kim Hak-sun first broke the silence about the ‘comfort women’ in 1991, followed by the 1993 statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, which acknowledged that Japan’s military had forced women to act as sex workers across Asia. Some Japanese history textbooks started to mention the existence of ‘comfort women,’ which led to a strong backlash by nationalistic groups, who argued that postwar Japanese history education had become too “masochistic” and should instead support national pride.<sup>32</sup> Such a reaction also reflects the persistent strength of the ideology of Japanese victimhood. This backlash in the 1990s and 2000s (known as the Japanese history textbook controversy) led to any descriptions of Japanese colonial aggression being removed from some government-screened history textbooks.<sup>33</sup>

Behind the whitewash, historical revisionism simultaneously proceeded in the national political sphere as well. In 1993, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) established a committee to review history so that they could replace the historical narrative of “a war of aggression” to “a war of Asian liberation,” aiming to dispel the “masochistic” history enforced by the Tokyo War Crimes Trial.<sup>34</sup> Known for his extremely nationalistic politics, Shinzo Abe, former Prime Minister (2006–2007, 2012–2020) and his party LDP contributed to accelerating such

23 Cultural Survival, ACSILs, AOCHR and Nirai Kanai nu Kai, “Observations on the State of Indigenous Rights in Japan,” (Cambridge: Cultural Survival, 2022), 2.

24 All Okinawa Council for Human Rights and I Am, “Human Rights Situation in Japan With Specific Focus on Human Rights in Okinawa,” *Universal Periodic Review (4th cycle) 42 Session* (2023): AOCHR 1–6.

25 *Ibid.*, 2–3.

26 Inspired by postcolonial studies including Edward W. Said, there was also a major shift in the focus of Japanese Colonial Studies from imperialism to post-imperialism in the 1990s. For further details, see Noritake Sunaga and Hideyoshi Yagashiro, “Hajimeni [Introduction],” in *Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten*, ed. Shokuminchi Kenkyukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), vii–x.

27 Itagaki, Tobe and Mizutani, “The History and Prospects of Japanese Colonial Studies,” 38.

28 Dane Kennedy, *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97–98.

29 Puja Kim, “Gender, Sexuality,” in *Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten*, ed. Shokuminchi Kenkyukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), 100–03.

30 Toru Hosoya, “Hito no idou [Mobility of people],” in *Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten*, ed. Shokuminchi Kenkyukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), 124.

31 Erii Iikura, “Kioku [Memory],” in *Nihon Shokuminchi Kenkyu no Ronten*, ed. Shokuminchi Kenkyukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), 249.

32 Mitsuko Hirai, “Nihon no Chugakkou Kyokasho ni okeru Shokuminchi Shihai kijyutsu wo megutte [Regarding the Descriptions of Colonial Rule in Japanese Junior High School Textbooks],” in *Shokuminchika Datsu-shokuminchika no Hikakushi*, ed. Noriko Oyamada et al. (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2023), 504–9.

33 Kazuya Fukuoka, “Japanese History Textbook Controversy as a Crossroads?: Joint History Research, Politicization of Textbook Adoption Process, and Apology Fatigue in Japan,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30, no. 3: 313–34.

34 Tomomi Yamaguchi and Masami Saito, *Shukyo Uha to Feminizumu [Religious Right and Feminism]* (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2023), Kindle edition.

revisionism in the Japanese political sphere.<sup>35</sup> There has been a structure of mutual support between conservative politicians and right-wing citizens, making Japan's colonial history politically and ideologically very contested.

Translations of academic works into public spaces such as museums have also been challenged by nationalist attacks. The Osaka International Peace Center (a local publicly-funded museum in Western Japan), for instance, had to close in 2014 after a nationalist assault that intended to correct its “masochistic” history.<sup>36</sup> The Center was forced to change its exhibition from one displaying Japanese aggression and atrocities to one that whitewashed Japan's colonial history. As Hisaki Kenmochi points out, due to the political attacks from conservatives, there is a significant lack of museums in Japan that exhibit contemporary history at large, as they would have to include Japan's atrocities before and during the war.<sup>37</sup> There are some exceptions that cover Japanese war crimes such as the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) or the Kyoto Museum for World Peace (Ritsumeikan University), yet it requires bravery from visitors to even enter these museums as those sites and visitors are sometimes monitored by right-wing citizens.<sup>38</sup> In stark contrast, the Yushukan Museum, an extremely nationalistic war-history museum that glorifies Japan's imperial and militaristic past, exists in the heart of Tokyo.

Among the targets of nationalistic attacks, the case of settler colonialism is no exception. Building upon the 2009 Council for Ainu Policy Promotion's proposal of a “Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony,” the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park opened to the public in July 2020.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Abe and LDP were also interested in patriotic “moral education,” see Mark R. Mullins, “Neonationalism, Religion, and Patriotic Education in Post-disaster Japan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 20-5, (2016): 1–12; They also aimed proper care for “the enshrined Showa martyrs by renationalizing Yasukuni Shrine,” which has been an extremely contested and controversial historical place for its function as a symbol of Japan's militaristic past.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Seaton, “The Nationalist Assault on Japan's Local Peace Museums: The Conversion of Peace Osaka,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 30-3 (2015): 1–20.

<sup>37</sup> Hisaki Kenmochi, “The Prospects for Public History in East Asia: History Textbooks, Museums, Cinema and TV,” in *Overcoming Conflict: History Teaching—Peacebuilding—Reconciliation*, eds. Florian Helfer et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), 199–216, 208.

<sup>38</sup> Kenmochi, “The Prospects,” 209; Mina Watanabe and Norma Field, “Reopening the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, Fifty-Four Years Later: As Recorded in the Documentary Video, Breaking the History of Silence,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 19, no. 4-1 (2021): 1–6.

<sup>39</sup> “About Upopoy,” Upopoy website, <https://ainu-upopoy.jp/en/about/>; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Performing Ethnic Harmony: The Japanese Government's Plans for a New Ainu Law,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 16, no. 21-2 (2018): 1–17.



**Figure 2:** The Friedensstatue (statue of peace) in Berlin, Germany, Wikimedia Commons. Credit: C.Suthorn/cc-by-sa-4.0/commons.wikimedia.org.

Upopoy has faced denials of Ainu cultural practices and its curators have been harassed. Such attacks appear to mirror the attitude of Mio Sugita, a far-right LDP politician known for her extremely conservative views. She has delivered hate speeches against Ainu people since 2016, while staying in the party and benefiting from many right-wing public supporters.<sup>40</sup>

The nationalistic burial of the country's colonial past even goes beyond the borders of Japan. For instance, Korean activists erected ‘comfort women’ statues around the world, which have faced active Japanese government retaliation (Figure 2).<sup>41</sup> The statues have been one of the many battlefields of the ‘History Wars.’ The term was first used in a 2014 right-wing newspaper insisting that “China, South Korea, and the Japanese left are unfairly attacking Japan on issues of historical consciousness, such as the ‘comfort women’ issue, conscripted worker, and the Nanking Incident, in order to undermine Japan (and its national pride), for which we must fight against.”<sup>42</sup> Nationalistic public history has particularly manifested itself in the recent controversy over the article “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War,” written by J. Mark Ramseyer, a Harvard Law School professor of Japanese Legal Studies. The article claims that the “comfort women” were “not coerced into sexual servitude, but rather

<sup>40</sup> “LDP lawmaker Mio Sugita under fire again over Ainu comments,” *The Japan Times*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/11/17/japan/politics/ldp-sugita-under-fire/>.

<sup>41</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Introduction: Confronting the Ghosts of War in East Asia,” in *East Asia beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Violence*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki et al. (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–3; Rin Ushiyama, “‘Comfort women must fall?’ Japanese Governmental Responses to ‘Comfort Women’ Statues around the World,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6, (2021): 1255–71.

<sup>42</sup> Yamaguchi and Saito, *Shukyo Uha*, Kindle edition.

were contractual actors who negotiated the terms of their own employment according to the game theory model of ‘credible commitments.’<sup>43</sup> The fact that the article was written by an authoritative university professor was convenient for the nationalists to reinforce their discourse. Whilst Ramseyer’s article was strongly criticized by historians and economists, including prominent Japanese scholar Yoshiaki Yoshimi, for its misuse and distortion of historical evidence, the claim resonates with ‘comfort women’ deniers.<sup>44</sup> The right-wingers, particularly anonymous *netto uyoku* (very vocal cyber right-wingers), strongly supported Ramseyer, seeing him as a hero of the Japanese cause on the one hand and continuously harassed and attacked scholars on X (Twitter) who were against Ramseyer’s claim on the other.<sup>45</sup>

Developing participatory practices – usually undertaken to contribute to decolonization as seen in other articles of this special issue – is therefore a difficult process in Japan. Participatory public history is compromised by the fact that the public scene is dominated by nationalistic right-wingers such as *netto uyoku*, who are extremely vocal online.<sup>46</sup> Any public history of colonial history can be represented as part of the political agenda of the ‘Japanese left’ or labelled ‘ideologically skewed’ through the lens of right-wingers. Public threats make any participatory public history of Japan’s colonial past extremely difficult to support. While the field of public history has tended to emphasize the advantages of working for and with the public in history production, the case of Japan and its strong nationalistic public presence shows that participation itself is not always a straightforward solution.

43 Summarized by concerned scholars, Amy Stanley et al., “Scholarly and Public Responses to ‘Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War’: The Current State of the Problem, A Report by Concerned Scholars,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 21, no. 11-3, (2023): 1–15.

44 Yoshiaki Yoshimi, “Response to ‘Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War’ by J. Mark Ramseyer,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 76, (2023): 1–8; The journal which published Ramseyer’s article also expressed ‘concern’ about the article, see “Expression on Concern: ‘Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War,’” *International Review of Law and Economics* 65, (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.irle.2020.105971>.

45 Paula R. Curtis, “Taking the Fight for Japan’s History Online: The Ramseyer Controversy and Social Media,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 19, no. 22-3 (2021): 1–10.

46 See for instance, Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Xenophobia in Action: Ultrationalism, Hate Speech, and the Internet in Japan,” *Radical History Review* 117, (2013): 98–118.

### 3 Rethinking ‘Decolonization Through Public History’

The subject of this special issue, the process of decolonization through public history, raises questions in Japan. While representing the Japanese colonial past in public space remains a challenging act, the overall decolonization of the production of public history, for instance in museums and archives, appears problematic.<sup>47</sup> Mariko Murata points out that the term ‘decolonization’ is rarely employed in Japan in discussions about museums. The concept of ‘decolonizing museums,’ frequently used in European and North American countries, has largely been used in opposition to white settlers and white supremacy.<sup>48</sup> With such a connotation, it is challenging to apply the concept in Japan to question the “whiteness of *wajin* (the dominant majority of Japanese persons)” since ‘the Japanese’ as a whole are racially categorized as Asian or non-white.<sup>49</sup> The term decolonization needs to be decolonized from its Eurocentric connotations so that it could provide a more nuanced approach to Japan’s dual colonial past. Decolonization should remain open to distinctive decolonial languages and methodologies as an overarching concept, rather than narrowing its focus down to white settlers.

However, the colonial structure of history production is another problem that similarly appears in Japan. While there have been recent developments such as the digitization of publicly accessible history content and the employment of Indigenous curators, little has been done in Japan to critically appraise the colonial status of archives.<sup>50</sup> As Yuko Osakada demonstrates, there are ideological and practical distances between the National Ainu Museum (NAM, Figure 3) in Upopoy and the Indigenous Ainu themselves; the

47 See for instance, Mariko Murata, “Decolonizing Museums through Exhibits/Exhibitions: Methods to Deconstruct the ‘Colonial Technology,’” *Kansai Daigaku Shakaigakubu Kiyou* 53, no. 1 (2021): 141–67.

48 *Ibid.*, 156; Elisa Shoenberger, “What Does it Mean to Decolonise a Museum?,” *Museum Next*, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

49 Mark A. Levin, “The Wajin’s Whiteness: Law and Race Privilege in Japan,” trans. Ichiro Ozaki, *Horitsu Jiho* 80, no. 2 (2008): 80–91; For further details about the history of race/ethnicity in Japan and the myth of Japan’s homogeneity, see Yuko Kawai, “Japanese as Both a ‘Race’ and a ‘Non-Race: The Politics of *Jinshu* and *Minzoku* and the Depoliticization of Japaneseness,” in *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia Vol. II*, eds. Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 368–88.

50 As a comparison, see Krista McCracken’s article in this special issue about the decolonization of archival practices in Canada. See also Krista McCracken, “Challenging Colonial Spaces: Reconciliation and Decolonizing Work in Canadian Archives,” *Canadian Historical Review* 100, no. 2, (2019): 182–201.



Figure 3: The National Ainu Museum, Wikimedia Commons.

former insists they respect the involvement of the Ainu in creating exhibitions, while the latter criticizes the museum for its lack of proactive participation of Ainu people in developing the exhibitions.<sup>51</sup> Although the NAM attempted to reproduce the participatory creation of the National Museum of the American Indian in the US as a model, it collaborated with the Ainu people on a very limited ‘consultation’ basis, fostering these tensions.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, as Mai Ishihara points out, the arguments and practices of ethical research coproduction are hardly developed in Japan, causing friction between Indigenous people and academic scholars.<sup>53</sup> Ishihara highlights comments from the Ainu community insisting that merely sitting at a same table does not mean researchers and the Ainu can have an equal conversation.<sup>54</sup> Despite acknowledging the Ainu as Indigenous people, the tendency of professional researchers to suppress Indigenous voices remains strong. Practices of coproduction need to be better discussed and developed to reconsider the relations between public history sites and ethnic minority groups.<sup>55</sup> These examples reflect the general hierarchical structure between

51 Yuko Osakada, “The Development of Collaborative Exhibitions with Indigenous Peoples: A Comparative Analysis Between the National Ainu Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Kyokai Kenkyu* 12, (2022): 93–106.

52 *Ibid.*, 104.

53 Mai Ishihara, “Akademikku Sabarutan no Koe to ‘Kenkyu’: Gakumon ni okeru decolonization (datsu-shokuminchika) he mukete [Voices of Academic Subaltern and ‘Research’: Towards Decolonization in Academia],” *Hokkaido Minzokugaku* 17, (2021): 17–32.

54 *Ibid.*, 17–18; See also, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd edition (London: Zed Books, 2021).

55 Murata, “Decolonizing Museums,” 161.

Japanese academia, public institutions, and public groups. As frequently discussed in the field of public history, we urgently need to reappraise the state of shared authority in the Japanese context.<sup>56</sup> That being said, given the various layers of challenges including the culture of historical oblivion, nationalistic/patriotic silencing and attacks, and defensive victimhood, what forms of public history could be developed in Japan to decolonize historical narratives, overcoming Eurocentric forms of decolonization?

## 4 Looking for Collaboration Beyond Japan

Decolonizing history in Japan means to disconnect historical narratives from nationalistic discourses of victimhood and to include victims of Japan’s both internal and external colonialism. Instead of importing the idea of ‘decolonizing through public history,’ largely developed in Western colonial contexts, this article suggests developing transnational collaborative public history. To change the paradigm of nationalistic victimhood – which has prevented a form of decolonization that would include narratives about the victims of external colonialism and the inclusion of internal victims’ Indigenous narratives – public history could follow Jie-Hyun Lim’s argument. Lim suggests the abandonment of “victimhood nationalism,” which he describes as a conceptual tool to “explicate competing national memories over the historical position of victims in coming to terms with the past. Once put into the dichotomy of victimizer and victims in national terms, the victimhood becomes hereditary and thus consolidates the national solidarity beyond generations.”<sup>57</sup>

It is crucial to understand that, as Lim argues, nationalism is not fundamentally “national.” National peculiarity “can be brought into relief only by comparison with ‘Others.’ Victimhood nationalism is no exception because victims without perpetrators are unthinkable.”<sup>58</sup> In the time of the globalization of memory, there is a competition over who suffered the most in the world.<sup>59</sup> Historically, the spread of victimhood nationalism in Japan could be traced back to

56 Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Thomas Cauvin, “History and Shared Authority,” *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method* (2022), DOI: 10.5040/9781350927926.10.

57 Jie-Hyun Lim, “Victimhood Nationalism and History Reconciliation in East Asia,” *History Compass* 8, no. 1 (2009): 1–10.

58 Lim, “Victimhood Nationalism,” 1.

59 Jie-Hyun Lim, *Global Easts: Remembering, Imagining, Mobilizing* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2022), 27.

imperial Japan's slogan "leave Asia, join Europe" in the late-nineteenth century. This reflected Japan's underlying feeling of inferiority towards the West, being an empire which scholars have defined as "Colored" or "Subaltern" Imperialism.<sup>60</sup> Nationalists object to what they call the "masochistic" history of Japanese colonialism and imperialism because in their view it ignores Japanese victimhood. This argument is both contagious and transcends time.

When considering the "Colored Imperialism," as Oguma elaborates, "East" or "colored" as well as "West" or "white," were matters of perception rather than geographical or substantive concepts, which thus categorizes Russia, for instance, as another case of "Colored Imperialism" due to its "inferior" position against the "West" and the domination over its peripheral areas.<sup>61</sup> While there were only a few "Colored Imperialism(s)" from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, there have been many cases of non-Western imperialism since the worldwide spread of nation-states in the late twentieth century, justifying "their aggression while extolling their history of victimisation by 'the West,'" such as Israeli settler colonialism.<sup>62</sup> The concept of "victimhood nationalism" could thus allow us to closely examine the mechanism of on-going "subaltern empire(s)" as well.<sup>63</sup> Hence, again, it is crucial to decolonize the notion of decolonization itself as it has internalized the nuance of challenging white supremacy and is not very applicable to cases like Japan; this decolonization of decolonization would make the concept more versatile to non-white colonial or imperial histories. Such a more overarching decolonization could provide insights to develop decolonial methodologies or languages for categorically non-white, "colored" imperialism and colonialism – both historical and on-going – in Japan, Russia, or Israel.

Lim concludes by suggesting the abandonment of victimhood nationalism for the sake of everyone's future and establishment of memory solidarity beyond the current contestation of history.<sup>64</sup> Developing transnational and collaborative public history could thus contribute to easing decolonization of historical narratives. Here, the most important thing is not the nationality of collaborators but prioritizing the past/present voices that should be heard and facing the reality of colonial pasts and their influences today. In this case, the actors can transnationally be gathered from anywhere, including those who radically oppose any colonialism or imperialism. Acknowledging, researching, and communicating about Japan's colonial past is – in this transnational and collaborative approach – part of a broader reconsideration of imperialism.

If narratives of the colonial past in national history projects can be silenced under victimhood nationalism, a broader transnational and international approach and context may gather more sympathy. A transnational collaboration could thus take the form, for instance, of a radical public history project with participants and collaborators assembled under the name of anti-subaltern-empire. Such a project could include representatives from the Ainu community, as well as archivists working on decolonizing collections from other settler countries. Transnational projects could also include digital participation from Japanese and Korean individuals working on the WAM's digital archive of the 'comfort women' historical sources. The project could be online; it could even be anonymous. Although, for now, this article can only serve as a call for such transnational collaborative projects, it contributes to decolonizing the Eurocentric 'decolonization through public history' approach.

<sup>60</sup> Oguma, *The Boundaries*, xiii; Jordan Sand, "Subaltern Imperialists: The New Historiography of the Japanese Empire," *The Past and Present* 225, (2014): 273–88.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 471–72.

<sup>63</sup> I borrowed the term "subaltern empire" from Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Jie-Hyun Lim, *Victimhood Nationalism*, trans. Katsumi Sawada (Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Shinposha, 2022), Kindle edition.