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Introduction

Countering historical denialism has long been one of the core challenges of self-reckoning in post-atrocity societies. Some successful examples to this end include Holocaust denial laws in Europe or state apologies issued to indigenous populations in Australia and Canada, safeguarding public memory of known facts and establishing accountability for speech acts denying those facts. They are, however, concerned with addressing individual expressions of denialism, as defined by the state in question, primarily within national contexts. Establishing state accountability of past crimes, and doing so transnationally when two countries in question contest over their memories, is doubly challenging. The problem is compounded by the fact that our conventional approaches to confronting historical denialism are ill-suited to establishing transnational historical accountability. In the realm of memory contestation, one is tempted to view denialism as an egregious offense to a truthful reckoning of the past and thus tries to either forbid it with a legal penalty or induce contrition from dishonest deniers to apologize for it. Such conventional approaches based on a truth-seeking or justice-oriented framework, however, do not adequately deliver a desired outcome in some scenarios, especially when transnational historical accountability is at stake. The current intransigence between the Japanese and Korean narratives regarding the *comfort women* issue is a case in point. In Japan, the rightist narratives in official and public spheres that are bent on denying the issue of comfort women, discrediting it as anti-Japan propaganda by Korean society or a fabricated ploy by liberal domestic media and academics, are increasing in size and volume.¹ These growing narratives propagated by far-right conservatives, media personalities, and politicians effectively retract the Japanese government's gestures of rapprochement in the 1990s, dampening the prospect of the general public remembering the past and, if at all possible, seeking genuine reconciliation between the two societies.

This article argues that the prevailing revisionist trend in Japan bears a mark of "negationism," a neologism first coined by Henry Rousso in his analysis of Holocaust denials in France.² Negationism can be construed as constitutive of denialism, but they differ in a crucial way. Negationism is societally more pervasive as it is a "veritable cultural epidemic sustained by lies and deceptions [of denialism]."³ Essentially, negationism obscures known facts and evidence by flipping the burden of proof from deniers to victims and charges the victims to demonstrate that "they [the victims] are not lying."⁴ Negationists demand the victims show a specific intent of past crimes and corroborating evidence; absent such proof, that negationists see themselves exonerated. Consequential impacts of negationist denialism are particularly troublesome. Unlike revisionists, negationists *re-construct* social relations and institute, what

¹ Tomomi Yamaguchi, "Kanmin Ittai No 'Rekishi-Sen' No Yukue [Future Directions of 'History War' Waged By Public-Private Actors]," in *Umi Wo Wataru "Ianfu" Mondai* [Comfort Women Issue That Travels Across the Sea], ed. Tomomi Yamaguchi et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2016), 97–136; Nathaniel M. Smith, "Fights on the Right: Social Citizenship, Ethnicity, and Postwar Cohorts of the Japanese Activist Right," *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no. 2 (2018), 235–257.

² Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*; Henry Rousso, "The Political and Cultural Roots of Negationism in France," *South Central Review* 23, no. 1 (2006), 67–88.

Henry Theriault calls “domination relation,” in which the deniers enjoy their predominance in society.⁵ The current usage of the term “revisionism,” to label Japanese conservatives, overlooks this fundamental restructuring of social relations that the rightists purport to project. Unlike an authentic form of historical revisionism that brings new evidence to reinterpret or reevaluate unquestioned assumptions through careful documentation and argumentation, which is subject to correction upon scientific verification or falsification, negationists employ pseudoscientific claims of evidence that are of a self-serving, teleological nature that goes beyond the boundaries of revisionism. In the end, negationists deflect the guilt of wrongdoing from past memories and, in so doing, they efface any charge of responsibility from public consciousness. What ensues is much like Eviatar Zerubavel’s portrayal of a “social structure of silence”⁶—one that is sustained by the deniers denying their denial by the society suppressing to tell otherwise, and by the people refraining from asking to break the silence. Such is the *epidemic* of negationism.

To address this challenge, this article posits that a narrative approach, rather than the conventional truth- and justice-oriented approaches, could provide an alternative to counter the pervasive and entrenched nature of negationist denialism and eventually, rectify falsified memories of the past. Specifically, it suggests the *functional decoupling* of one’s sense of guilt and responsibility, such that societal responsibility of moral reckoning can start anew, in lieu of legal or political responsibility to deal with past guilt. Thus, the article aims to explore post-atrocity responsibility as a discursive construct of identity that brings the “nuances and complexity” of history to the larger public,⁷ which is a more practical approach to dismantling the dominant structure of public memory that is fraught with negationism.

Denialism, Revisionism, and Negationism

In using the term *negationism* to discuss the comfort women issue, some conceptual clarifications in relation to other framings—denialism and historical revisionism—are in order. These three frames of reference are closely intertwined, hence the question of conflation and the potential for redundancy. For instance, in the Japanese context, denial of the comfort women issue is often associated with historical revisionism.⁸ Historical revisionists have long rejected the masochistic image of postwar Japanese history and instead, framed the Asia-Pacific war as a pan-Asiatic emancipatory struggle from Western imperial aggression. From this standpoint, the comfort women issue is only one of the latest, and arguably the most politically charged, flashpoints in the *longue durée* of the revisionist struggle. It is dubbed as a “history war” by rightists.⁹ To address these phenomena, left-leaning academics and the media, inside and outside of Japan, tend to use framings of revisionism and denialism interchangeably, to the point where revisionists are

⁵ Henry C. Theriault, “Genocide, Denial, and Domination: Armenian-Turkish Relations from Conflict Resolution to Just Transformation,” *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies* 1, no. 2 (2009), 82–96.

⁶ Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ Mark R. Frost and Edward Vickers, “Introduction: The ‘Comfort Women’ as Public History—Scholarship, Advocacy and the Commemorative Impulse,” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19, no. 5 (2021), 17.

⁸ Sven Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society* (Tokyo: Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien, 2005); Yoshifumi Tawara, “Comfort Women, Textbooks, and the Rise of ‘New Right’ Revisionism,” in *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State’s Assault on Historical Truth*, ed. Rumiko Nishino et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 151–165; Shogo Suzuki, “Japanese Revisionists and the ‘Korea Threat’: Insights from Ontological Security,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019), 303–321.

⁹ See Motokazu Nogawa, “‘Rekishi Sen’ No Tanjou to Tenkai [The Birth and Development of ‘History War’],” in *Umi Wo Wataru “Ianfū” Mondai [Comfort Women Issue That Travels Across the Sea]*, ed. Tomomi Yamaguchi et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2016), 1–39.

construed synonymously as deniers, and vice versa.¹⁰ This conflation is not wrong, considering similar end results of what the revisionist and denier efforts could accomplish. However, the prevalence and dominance of historical revisionist rhetoric, bent on denying the comfort women issue in Japan today requires a more precise frame. The pervasive and intentional nature of denials on a societal scale warrants a name of its own.

Revisionism and Denialism

Revisionism entails two sides in historical inquiry. Firstly, an act of constant *re-visioning* is an integral part of what historians do in their (re)interpretation of hitherto known facts or stories. While purely objective motives may not be driving the revisioning process, revisionism in its authentic form, is built on having assumed a body of incontrovertible evidence. To illustrate this point, Deborah Lipstadt refers to William Appleman Williams, a historian of American foreign policy, as a revisionist example in contrast with pure denialism.¹¹ Williams' "revisionist" accounts cast a critical analysis on American imperialist expansionism during the Cold War and Vietnam War. His thesis and subsequent followers were later called the Wisconsin School in American historiography. Furthermore, Minoru Iwasaki and Steffi Richter contrast the revisionist debate in Japan with the Fischer debate, which was raised by a German historian Fritz Fischer in the 1960s, who suggested that Germany was responsible for instigating both world wars, not just World War Two.¹² These, and more profiles of exemplary revisionists, abound in history. As Ronald Grigor Suny puts it: "Historical revisionists...are subversives."¹³ And their accounts are not without criticisms, and inevitably invite fierce refutations from other historians. Notwithstanding such contestation, however, their historical inquiry, revisionist or otherwise, rests on a shared devotion to building and refining explanations of the past based on irrefutable prior evidence.

Another face of revisionism is more vexing. It provides a convenient cover for denying, falsifying, or whitewashing the past. Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman call this "pseudohistory,"¹⁴ in which the past is rewritten with an *a priori* agenda to deny the events themselves, rather than refining detailed knowledge about those events. With such pseudohistory, the authors further argue that "historiography becomes hagiography, science becomes ideology, history becomes myth, and revision becomes denial."¹⁵ Revisionist arguments in this sense serve as "a perfect foil for the deniers," just as Harry Elmer Barnes' initial World War One revisionist accounts provided a breeding ground for subsequent American Holocaust denials.¹⁶ To unsuspecting eyes of the larger public, the difference between the two facets of revisionism, or its slippery slope of the spectrum, is too slight to be distinguishable. In the Japanese context, historical revisionism is not new; historical revisionists have long sought to cast off the "masochistic view of history," which they perceive as foisted by the Tokyo Trial and a hindrance to chart a "bright" and "clean" history of "a strong state."¹⁷ Yet, their transition to denialism lies in relativizing the harms done to the

¹⁰ See Hirofumi Hayashi, "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' System and Its Perception in History," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617, no. 1 (2008), 123–132; Alexis Dudden, *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Rumiko Nishino et al. eds., *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹ Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Plume, 1993).

¹² Minoru Iwasaki and Steffi Richter, "The Topology of Post-1990s Historical Revisionism," *Positions: Asia Critique* 16, no. 3 (Winter 2008), 507–538.

¹³ Ronald Grigor Suny, "Truth in Telling: Reconciling Realities in the Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2009), 931.

¹⁴ Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman, *Denying History: Who Says The Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁶ Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 34.

¹⁷ Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion*, 15.

victims and trivializing the perpetrators' intent behind the harms. They do so by recasting the past with a form of new knowledge in the name of liberal commitment to a free and enlightened search for discovery and fairness to diverse viewpoints. As elaborated below, Japanese history textbooks became the foremost conduit through which such presentation of historical narratives was carried out, marking a shift from *mere* revisionism to more explicit denialism. A claim of inculcating a sense of pride in the culture and tradition of Japan was a veil to advance revisionist agendas. Herein lies an inherent challenge to historical revisionism: a claim to *add* a piece of knowledge becomes a pretext to deny another, more established, piece of prior knowledge—a laudable goal with a sly motive.

On the contrary, the term *denialism* is less ambiguous than revisionism. Academic literature on how denialism works is often reductionist in nature, in that it deconstructs denialism's functions, platforms, rationale, and argumentation tactics to maneuver truth. Studies on denialism can be traced back to Sigmund Freud in the 1920s, in his analysis of psychological motives for the defense of ego, followed by Theodor Adorno and Stanley Milgram's studies on individual defiance to authority or power structure. These early studies focus on the agentic orientation of denialism. Subsequent studies follow a similar agentic focus and elaborate on the individual and psychological mechanisms of denials¹⁸ and social fabrics of denials wherein people learn to ignore known truths.¹⁹ Another group of studies expands on tactical and strategic motives behind denialist discourses, especially in post-atrocity societies. In this group, Israel Charney provides a seminal account that classifies typological elements of denialism by introducing nine psychological templates of denialist rhetoric.²⁰ Alex J. Bellamy then adds structural dimensions explaining perpetrators' strategies of "fabricating" information or perception to avoid accountability and, in turn, establish their immunity or legitimacy.²¹ More recently, Jennifer M. Dixon provides a systemic view of denialism at the confluence of structure and agency, illustrating that international realpolitik influences the likelihood of change in those narratives while domestic contestation shapes the content of those changing narratives.²² Furthermore, the concept of denialism has appeared most voluminously in the case studies of the Holocaust denials and the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide, two of the major mass killings of the 20th century, and the remembrance struggles thereafter, with the former being the first publicly acknowledged genocide and the latter being the most persistently contested.²³

In sum, existing studies of denialism have elucidated how and why denialism unfolds. They unravel three basic formulae of how deniers advance their claims, namely, by a) selectively filtering facts and evidence to mischaracterize past events, b) asserting the legitimacy of their claims by disparaging victims' narratives or casting doubt on common perceptions, and c) displacing their own responsibility of past actions onto victims or circumstances beyond their control. Implicit in these studies is a presumption that denial is fundamentally an aberration of the mainstream truth and, if given proper recourse, open to updates and correction; that is, denial, however malignant it may be, is a problem that is remediable, while deniers, however misguided, can be rectified.

Yet, certain denials are not so amenable to change. A case in point is negationist denialism in the transnational context, wherein deniers essentially seek to re-construct

¹⁸ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

¹⁹ Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room*.

²⁰ Israel W. Charney, "A Classification of Denials of the Holocaust and Other Genocides," *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 1 (2003), 31–32.

²¹ Alex J. Bellamy, "Getting Away with Mass Murder," *Journal of Genocide Research* 14, no. 1 (2012), 29–53.

²² Jennifer M. Dixon, *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

²³ See Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 1986); Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence Against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

social relations and regain—in the eye of the beholder—their perceived primacy and dominance over any contenders. Theriault aptly captures such relational dynamics involved in denial by arguing that “denial changes the relationship of victims, perpetrators, and others to truth.”²⁴ In denying, he argues, the perpetrators transpose the “domination relation”²⁵ from the past onto the present and, in effect, preserve the hierarchical power (im)balances that engendered the destruction in the first place. In Japan, what persists is not only the denial of the comfort women issue but also the deniers’ relentless pursuit to *dominate* the erstwhile victims—the foremost example of which are the former comfort women and their advocates—and keep such domination relations in place in the present context. For example, the Rightists’ triumphant proclamation, since around 2012, that they have totally won the history war domestically, is a testament to this purported power balance. In their history war, one which was waged against so-called anti-Japan forces to defend the nation’s honor over history issues, rightists maintain that they *won* by silencing oppositions through saturating a public sphere with their own denialist discourse.²⁶ On the surface, denial involves a contest over the veracity of historical facts or memories. At a much deeper level, acts of denial reflect the deniers’ neo-imperial attempts at engineering new social relations within which they retain, in their mind, their supremacy over the former colonial subjects. This kind of denial, seeking to reclaim dominant social relations transnationally as well as trans-historically, requires further reckoning.

Negationism

Negationist denialism provides a lens to elucidate the pervasive and entrenched nature of societal denials. The negationist lens helps to highlight why denialist narrative accounts are impervious to outside pressures for updates and correction and how they perpetuate perceived dominant social relations in the present day. A study by Mario Ranalletti provides one such application to discuss Argentinians’ societal aversion to dealing with the past.²⁷

The term *negationism* was first used by French historian Rousso in his 1987 book on the French history and memory of the Vichy regime. While Holocaust denial has metastasized throughout the world, its early adherents came from France, as Rousso illustrated through the depiction of French society’s reluctance to deal with Vichy’s collaborationist memories with the Nazis. Negationism was a term deliberately chosen to describe widespread social aversion to reckoning with past memories, a phenomenon that he believed was not possible to capture by calling it revisionist. By using the term negationism, he meant instead that there was “a system of thought, an ideology, and not a scientific or even critical approach to the subject,” hence the “cultural epidemic” in his view.²⁸

Rousso traces early negationist views back to *Nuremberg ou la Terre Promise* (*Nuremberg or the Promised Land*) published in 1948 by Maurice Bardèche, a neofascist who defended the Vichy collaboration with the Nazis. But Rousso attributes Paul Rassinier as the first influential figure of negationist theory in France. A former school teacher, a communist, and then a socialist who was active in the French Resistance during World War Two, Rassinier was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and interned in Buchenwald and Dora-Mittelbau concentration camps for the remainder of the war. He published the recounting of his camp life in *Le Passage de la Ligne* (*Crossing the Line*) in 1948 and *Le Mensonge d’Ulysse* (*The Lie of Ulysses*) in 1950, in which he dismissed other camp survivors’ testimonies about the gas chambers as untrustworthy. Rassinier’s thoughts culminated in a compilation of his works in 1977, *Debunking the Genocide Myth*, which became one of the foundational texts for Holocaust deniers,

²⁴ Theriault, *Genocide, Denial, and Domination*, 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ Nogawa, “*Rekishi Sen*” *No Tanjou to Tenkai*, 30.

²⁷ Mario Ranalletti, “Denial of the Reality of State Terrorism in Argentina as Narrative of the Recent Past: A New Case of ‘Negationism?’” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5, no. 2 (2010), 160–173.

²⁸ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 151.

including his protégé Robert Faurisson and subsequent deniers such as Ernst Zündel in Germany and David Irving in Britain, among others.²⁹

Two elements of the French roots of negationism are especially pertinent in explaining the widespread entrenched denial. They are concerned with negationists' maneuvering evidence to deflect their guilt. First, as Rousso discusses, negationists employ an inverse charge of proof and evidence.³⁰ The onus of proving truth shifts to victims in such a way that it is the victims who must demonstrate the veracity of their evidence. This imposes an undue burden on victims; they would have to prove that they have indeed suffered and are not lying about their suffering, or else their accounts would not be taken as constituting a truth in accordance with a negationist standard. In *Crossing the Line* and *the Lie of Ulysses*, Rassinier did this by disparaging testimonies of the camp survivors who had witnessed the Nazi killings as gossip and instead, charged those inmates as responsible for proving they were not lying.³¹ This inversion of proof and evidence, displacing the burden to the victims to prove their history, is the essence of the negationist assault on truth; that is, the absolution of their guilt through the re-positioning of facts and evidence. In this way, negationists could assert that they are simply insisting on allegedly missing facts without appearing to negate facts (which, in fact, is carried out by negating a body of known, established facts).

A second trait is that negationists dwell on a specific kind of evidence and its selective usage. They hold on to one fragment of evidence from the plethora of historical documents and knowledge to prove their points and simultaneously discredit the entirety of the phenomena. Rassinier, for example, made his claim that only about one and a half million Jews died, by relying on a single source—an article by a Soviet Jewish journalist David Bergelson that appeared in a Yiddish newspaper in Moscow in 1942. This article was later quoted in a German newspaper in Buenos Aires in 1953, affirming, according to Rassinier, that the majority of the Jews in Ukraine were saved “thanks to the Red Army, we are to assume.”³² While the Holocaust deniers' rhetorical techniques have evolved since Rassinier—which include, among others, projecting moral equivalencies, the selective filtering of logic and evidence, and misquoting mainstream scholarship³³—negationists draw their final conclusions from select few pieces of evidence. Just as they demand that victims present complete evidence to prove they are not lying, negationists tend to treat a small segment of data as constituting the totality of past phenomena. Any minor flaws, such as inconsistent gaps in victims' testimonies, are deemed sufficient to discredit rival evidence *in toto*, leading to the shelving of their guilt, the dismissal of victims' narratives piecemeal, and eventually the slow and gradual erasure of public memory.

Structure of Silence

Negationism thus foments a structure of societal silence. Rousso discusses the French context in this regard. Given the negationist discourse that absolved the guilt of the Vichy collaboration with the Nazis and then exonerated the consequential responsibility of French society, the public, especially the young, became increasingly confined in their ability to “reread” history and distinguish between an authentic, revisionist reinterpretation of said history and a simple negation of an established body of facts and truths.³⁴ This French phenomenon is replicable today. It is in fact a recipe for what Zerubavel calls a “conspiracy of silence,” an openly normalized silence of historical knowledge, which involves an entire social system that avoids mentioning a truth and refrains from asking about it at the same time.³⁵ It is the suppression of

²⁹ Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 31–33.

³⁰ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*; Rousso, *The Political and Cultural Roots*.

³¹ Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 51; Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 153.

³² Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 35–36.

³³ Shermer and Grobman, *Denying History*, 103.

³⁴ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 155.

³⁵ Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room*.

truths that is sustained through people not telling or asking. It is in this vacuum of public knowledge where negationist provocation can easily set in as a convenient narrative for the masses. Negationism is, after all, a social phenomenon where “we are denying our denial.”³⁶

All three forms of past reckoning—revisionism, denialism, and negationism—are related but not synonymous. The figure below captures negationism as representing a smaller space that thrives on the margins of revisionism, coupled with more systemic dispersion of denialism. While negationism is cloaked beneath the other two circles, the pervasive entrenchment of denials is what gives rise to the negationist *epidemic*. Myriad rhetorical tactics notwithstanding, negationist discourses carry lasting, detrimental impacts—one has to *start from defending* known facts or established truths, rather than building on top of them.

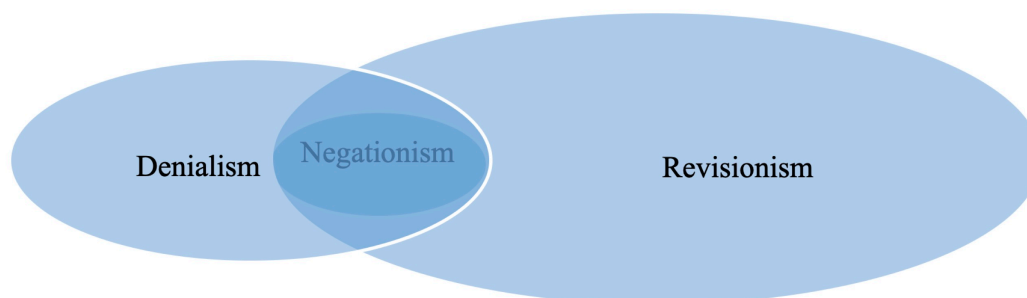


Figure 1. Relationship between three forms of past reckoning

Japanese Forms of Negationism

The term *comfort women* is widely used by scholars and the public to refer to women coerced to serve Japanese soldiers in a system of what was called “comfort stations” across the Asia-Pacific region during World War Two. This notion of “comfort” reflects a patriarchal euphemism as the women’s experiences in those conditions attested otherwise.³⁷ Comfort women were mainly from the Korean peninsula or Taiwan under Japanese colonial occupation, as well as other territories occupied by Japanese imperial forces. These women were drafted—by deception or force—into the comfort stations, which were essentially military brothels, established by the Japanese military to provide sexual services to its soldiers. The precise number of comfort women may never be known, yet the higher end of the estimate widely cited in Korean society is 200,000, while the lower end ranges from 80,000 to 100,000.³⁸ It is said that many women were younger than twenty. The women were often taken to remote areas, not knowing their whereabouts until, or even after, they arrived at the stations. There are various reports about the forced sexual servitude across these comfort stations, and some testimonies indicate that the women were forced to serve, on average, about ten to fifteen Japanese soldiers per day, and in some cases, “sixty men in a single day.”³⁹

Since the comfort women issue came to public attention in 1991, scholars have reached a common consensus via three decades of advocacy, collected testimonies, and a culmination of research and legal analyses that the comfort women system used by the Japanese military

³⁶ Ibid., 50–53.

³⁷ See Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁸ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31.

³⁹ Ibid., 139.

constituted a “wartime regime of sexual slavery.”⁴⁰ In fact, according to contemporary legal standards established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the Special Court of Sierra Leone, and other courts and tribunals, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the nature of sexual servitude imposed upon those women without freedom of agency and consent would legally qualify as sexual enslavement, punishable under modern international criminal laws.⁴¹

Despite a series of rapprochement attempts by the Japanese government in the 1990s, and the 2015 joint agreement with South Korea, the contestation over a sexual slavery label to characterize the Japanese military’s industrial management of the comfort stations, or to describe the women’s experiences, has only widened the rift between the denier and the denied camps, without any prospect for a mutually satisfying resolution. Detailed background of the issue and its unfolding developments have been extensively discussed elsewhere.⁴² To highlight the pervasive and entrenched denial of the comfort women issue at the societal level, it is necessary to highlight crucial transitions from Japan’s traditional revisionism to a more open and explicit negationist denialism.

Revisionist Foil

Historical revisionism in Japan has been long-standing since the 1960s; their main contention has centered on the question of how to, or even whether to, confront the guilt of wartime wrongdoings and consequential responsibility. History textbooks serving as the primary locus of clash between historical facts, revisionist narratives, and state censorship taken as “official” narratives were also not new, as the textbook controversies in the 1980s attracted wider public attention and citizens’ involvement.⁴³ And yet it was the emergence of the Society for the Creation of New History Textbooks (*Atrasshii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru-kai*, hereafter *Tsukuru-kai*), founded in 1996, that marked the negationist incipience. On the one hand, the *Tsukuru-kai* was an extension of ongoing revisionist struggles from the preceding era. On the other hand, the *Tsukuru-kai*’s roles in later fomenting negationist denialism crucially diverged from prior revisionism into two important respects.

First, while the *Tsukuru-kai*’s aims and agenda were not exclusively focused on the comfort women issue (the group promoted broader historical narratives reaching back to ancient history to claim the superiority of the Japanese race over the West), the comfort women issue turned out to be the immediate backdrop against which the *Tsukuru-kai* emerged.⁴⁴ The early 1990s proved to be particularly irksome for revisionists of different stripes: there were the live testimonies of the former comfort women appearing in public from 1991, followed by a dozen lawsuits against the Japanese government; Prime Minister Miyazawa’s “apology

⁴⁰ Nishino et al., *Denying the Comfort Women*, 1.

⁴¹ Melanie O’Brien, “‘Don’t Kill Them, Let’s Choose Them as Wives’: The Development of the Crimes of Forced Marriage, Sexual Slavery and Enforced Prostitution in International Criminal Law,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 3 (2016), 386–406; Alexandra Adams, “Sexual Slavery: Do We Need This Crime in Addition to Enslavement?,” *Criminal Law Forum* 29, no. 2 (2018), 279–323.

⁴² See Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*; Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay, “The Comfort Women Controversy: Not Over Yet,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2016), 255–269; Naoko Kumagai, *The Comfort Women: Historical, Political, Legal and Moral Perspectives* (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2016); Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Revisionism, Ultrnationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no. 2 (2018), 193–212; Pyong Gap Min, *Korean “Comfort Women”: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

⁴³ See, for example, Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion*; Claudia Schneider, “The Japanese History Textbook Controversy in East Asian Perspective,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (2008), 107–122; Yoshiko Nozaki, *War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan, 1945–2007: The Japanese History Textbook Controversy and Ienaga Saburo’s Court Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Iwasaki and Richter, *The Topology of Post-1990s Historical Revisionism*.

⁴⁴ Kan Kimura, *Nikkan Rekishi Ninshiki Mondai Towa Nanika: Rekishi Kyōkasho, “Ianfu,” Popyurizumu* [Japan-Korea History Recognition Issues: History Textbooks, “Comfort Women,” Populism] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2014).

diplomacy" during his visit to South Korea in 1992;⁴⁵ the landmark statement by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno in 1993 acknowledging the state involvement in managing the comfort women system; Prime Minister Murayama's 50th anniversary statement, in 1995, expressing sentiments of apology over the Japanese colonial rule and the war of aggression. A tide of such gestures with state-level penitence and rapprochement were visibly reflected in school textbooks. In 1992, one out of twenty high school history textbooks referred to comfort women, but in 1993, just as public knowledge of comfort women was increasing, nine high school textbook publishers newly included discussions of comfort women. In 1996, all seven publishers of junior high school textbooks included the term "comfort women" along with contextual background. The *Tsukuru-kai* made a public debut in December 1996 precisely to counter this trend, announcing their petition to the government to remove "fabricated" references from Japanese history textbooks. To erase the Japanese military comfort women issue was the group's first official order of business.⁴⁶

Second, with the *Tsukuru-kai*, conservative politics in Japan found an outlet to the broader civil society audience, while the *Tsukuru-kai* found prominent political allies in The Japanese Diet. Together, they created mutually concatenating, symbiotic relationships. To name a few, the late Nakagawa Shōichi and Abe Shinzō, key lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, inaugurated a new association called the Young Diet Member Group for Considering Japan's Future and History Textbooks (*Nihon no Zento to Rekishi Kyōkasho wo Kangaeru Wakate Giin no Kai*) in 1997. Another group called the Exchange Forum of Nippon Kaigi and Parliamentarians (*Nippon Kaigi Kokkai Giin Kondankai*), which was formed in 1997 and led by Asō Taro, lended political credence to historical revisionist agendas. Furthermore, the *Society for Atarashii Kyōiku Kihonhō o Motomeru Kai* (Demand for a New Basic Law of Education) emerged in the late 1990s as a public consultative body to the government and submitted its report in 2000 demanding 6-point revisions to the Basic Law of Education, closely mirroring the *Tsukuru-kai* principles. Furthermore, pop culture effectively amplified the coalescence of conservative politics and historical revisionism. Yoshinori Kobayashi, one of the eight co-founding members of the *Tsukuru-kai* and also a popular manga-comic author, who had run his manga series titled *A New Manifesto of Arrogance* (*Shin gōmanism sengen*) in the biweekly magazine *Sapio* since 1992, provided an accessible channel to the public that was previously unavailable to other conservative or revisionist platforms. To be sure, the *Tsukuru-kai* was not the first, and certainly not the last, of the revisionist efforts but provided a crucial cathartic moment for right-wing conservatives, at a time when they felt their self-image of the nation was in moral decay and under assault by anti-Japan forces. Early invocations of the revisionist rhetoric in 1996 by Nobukatsu Fujioka, one of the key co-founders of the *Tsukuru-kai*, are telling:

The role of Japanese history textbooks is to teach historical facts to Japanese children, who will shoulder the country's future. But instead, the textbooks have fallen prey to foreign propaganda that negates our nation's very existence, whence the fabrication of the "forcible recruitment of military comfort women" thesis, which has now appeared simultaneously in all junior high school texts. [The military comfort women issue] is being disseminated by anti-Japanese forces inside and outside Japan in order to deliver a decisive blow that will spiritually cripple the Japanese state. In short, this is a grand conspiracy abetted by outside forces to *destroy* Japan... From a pedagogical standpoint, and in the context of compulsory education, it is a fundamental mistake to teach junior high school students a subject that links the problem of sex with violence... Around

⁴⁵ Ibid., 157–164.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion*; Kimura, *Nikkan Rekishi Ninshiki Mondai Towa Nanika*.

the world, Japanese are increasingly being blamed and looked down upon *because of* the “military comfort women” problem.⁴⁷

The *Tsukuru-kai*'s proposed textbooks for junior high schools were eventually approved by the Ministry of Education in 2001, with the tacit support of the aforementioned Young Diet Member Group. The *Tsukuru-kai* aimed to gain a market share of 10%, but to the group's dismay, the result was dismal. Subsequently, met with robust resistance from citizens' movements and a public outcry, only a few schools adopted a handful of copies of the *Tsukuru-kai* textbooks in 2002, resulting in a market share of a mere 0.039%.⁴⁸ However, ramifications of the controversy were more detrimental than the actual adoption rate. *Nihon Shoseki*, one of the seven textbook publishers, was the one to openly refute censorship, refuse any changes to the comfort women reference in its textbook, and instead expanded its 2002 edition with a far more detailed account of the Japanese military actions than the previous 1997 edition. This caused the ire of the *Tsukuru-kai* and its support networks, including the conservative daily newspaper *Sankei Shimbun*, mobilizing a deluge of complaints against *Nihon Shoseki*'s stance. Amidst this tension, the textbook selection process by schools and the local selection boards exercised self-censorship and opted for less controversial textbooks.⁴⁹ The market share of *Nihon Shoseki* textbooks declined sharply from 12.9% in the 1998–2002 period to 5.9% in the 2002–2006 period.⁵⁰ By the 2006 editions, only three publishers retained, albeit briefly, the term “comfort women” in their textbooks. By the 2012 editions, both the term and any descriptive account of the issue had disappeared from all the seven junior high school history textbooks.⁵¹

As such, memories of the comfort women issue were effaced from textbooks, not by explicitly denying the issue, but by simply withdrawing references to it. Denial in this sense is made through an act of omission rather than that of commission. For negationism to take roots in Japanese society, the *Tsukuru-kai* controversies gave the much-needed foil—a void in public memory, which was then filled by the negationist narratives, all in the name of imparting new knowledge to young minds.

Entrenched Structure of Silence

From the fight over history textbooks, a shift in public perception, more broadly, has transpired. With the official government's position that the comfort women issue has been addressed, effectively relieving Japan from responsibility for its resolution,⁵² there is simply no official outlet where one can access the full scope of knowledge and information about the issue. Here, Roussou's “Vichy syndrome”—the difficulty of collective memory in reconciling with its past—is eerily at work in Japan. Instead of the established historical knowledge, selective memories, replete with denialist logic, saturate the public domain, the standard templates of which can be summarized as follows:

- Those women were not sex slaves because they were prostitutes. Prostitutes were paid, and therefore they were not slaves.
- Prostitution was not a problem at the time, and therefore comfort women were not a problem. The “issue” of the

⁴⁷ Emphasis added and cited in Tawara, *Comfort Women, Textbooks*, 154–155.

⁴⁸ Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion*, 65–66.

⁴⁹ Tawara, *Comfort Women, Textbooks*, 157–158.

⁵⁰ Saaler, *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion*, 66.

⁵¹ Women's Active Museum, *Nihongun “Ianfu” Mondai Subete No Gimon Ni Kotaemasu* [Answering Questions About the Japanese Military Comfort Women] (Tokyo: Goudou Shuppan, 2013), 66. Book is available on the following website, <https://www.godo-shuppan.co.jp/book/b474611.html>.

⁵² “Japan's Efforts on the Issue of Comfort Women,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan* (webpage, n.d.), accessed April 17, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/page22e_000883.html.

comfort women was exaggerated based on erroneous information, and thus, the "issue" of the comfort women was fabricated.

- There is no concrete evidence of coercive recruitment. Therefore, any allegations that they were "enslaved" are faulty. If there is no proof, then there is no intent.
- After all, it was the Korean private brokers or middlemen, not the Japanese, who brought these women into the brothels.⁵³

These are canonical templates of the denialist narratives arguing that the so-called politicized comfort women issue does not exist, yet these narratives are proliferating in the public sphere.⁵⁴ The literature contesting the sexual slavery charge between the two camps, the denial, and the counter-denial side, is vast but can be categorized into two key dimensions, namely in terms of the criminality of the system and the agency in women's varied experiences. The table below encapsulates the main contentions. While the differences inside each camp (box 1-2, or box 3-4) are marginal, the contention between the two camps (box 1-2 vis-à-vis 3-4) is deeply entrenched.

Table 1. Contentions in the comfort women issue

		The denial side	The counter-denial side
Focused on the criminality of the system	<i>Claim:</i>	<i>If no evidence, then no intent, and no crime</i>	<i>Circumstantial evidence and context-based intent abound</i>
	<i>Logic:</i>	<i>Only forcible abduction as a constitutive element of coercion</i> ①	<i>Infringing customary and international law, then and now</i> ③
Focused on the experience of the agency	<i>Claim:</i>	<i>Contract, salaries, advertisement, benefits indicate a voluntary will</i>	<i>No freedom of consent due to structural deprivation of agency</i>
	<i>Logic:</i>	<i>Coercion is only when physically forced and directly imposed</i> ②	<i>Survivor testimonials as credible evidence showing as such</i> ④

The denial side, in box 1 of Table 1, insists on the lack of evidence that would establish direct linkages between the guilt of wrongdoing and legal accountability.⁵⁵ For these deniers, the victims would have to present tangible evidence to clearly prove the government's specific intent that they were forcibly kidnapped, against their will or without their knowledge, into sexual enslavement. Such a narrower, restrictive sense of coercion underscores the basis of arguments in box 2 as well. But one would simply not find this kind of clear documentary proof in history, as evinced in difficulties of various post-atrocity court proceedings or policy debates to try to prove an atrocity crime. Instead, the denial side uses fragmented records, such as job advertisements in local newspapers or the government's protocols on remuneration or guidelines on benefits, as the signs of voluntary recruitment of, and services by, the women.⁵⁶ One of the most recent (in)famous manifestation of this logic appeared in a paper by Mark Ramseyer, whose arguments are contingent on the *impossibility* of proving the Japanese authority's specific intent. On the contrary, the counter-denial side, in box 3, contends that a

⁵³ See Koichi Mera, *Comfort Women Not "Sex Slaves": Rectifying the Myriad of Perspectives* (self-pub.: Xlibris, 2015); Tsutomu Nishioka, *The Comfort Women Issue*, Combined Edition (Tokyo: Japan Policy Institute, 2016).

⁵⁴ Yamaguchi, *Kanmin Ittai No "Rekishi-Sen" No Yukue*.

⁵⁵ Box 1 in the table; also see Nishioka, *The Comfort Women Issue*; Mera, *Comfort Women Not "Sex Slaves."*

⁵⁶ Box 2, see Ikuhiko Hata, *Ianfu to Senjou No Sei* [Comfort Women and Sex in Battle Zone] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1999).

plethora of archival sources exist to substantiate the circumstantial evidence of state-run comfort stations, coupled with international and domestic legal obligations binding to Japan at the time, such as the 1910 White Slave Traffic Act, the 1925 International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, or the 1907 Penal Code of Japan.⁵⁷ Proponents of this side also emphasize, as in box 4, the structural deprivation of the women's individual agency as the basis of enslavement and treat survivor testimonials as a credible source of evidence to make the case.⁵⁸

Notwithstanding some variations in language, those denials in box 1–2 are consistent with negationism, in essence. By flipping the burden of proof to the women, negationists' narratives operate within a distinct epistemological sphere that is unassailable and irrevocable; they are able to maintain a veneer of innocence until proven otherwise by the women who would need to present evidence demonstrating specific intent of the past crimes. Negationist narrative structures may be inaccurate in recounting factual details and even irrational in understanding the context, but crucially, they are *not illogical* in the minds of the stakeholders. As a story, it stands, and as such, the likes of the Ramseyer controversy are fated to end with no clear end. The negationist worldview is a partisan portrayal of the phenomena that is fully complete and, with a discrete teleological design, makes sense to some of the unsuspecting, larger public. This further solidifies boundaries of group identities between the deniers and the denied into static black-and-white categories without a common ground to bind their differences. It leads to the diminution of a discursive space, with little to no tolerance to explore the in-between, for an ontological truth is enshrined on both ends. In this entrenched binary, the use of the term sex slaves, or we may call it an *S-word* here, is a litmus test by which one is branded as belonging to either camp. Whereas the term "mass atrocity" has gained more traction in recent years as a practical alternative to the *G-word* in genocide studies, there is no such equivalent term in the current memory contestation over the comfort women issue. Therefore, when one deviates from, or introduces nuances to, the standardized usage of how the S-word should be applied, the person is subject to stiff rebukes, from both camps. One can see this binary contestation over Yuha Park's book *Comfort Women of the Empire*⁵⁹ and the emergence of Korea's New Right prominently expressed in Lee Young-Hoon's *Anti-Japan Tribalism*.⁶⁰ Theirs are notable examples where a slight deviation from the mainstream usage, or non-usage, of the S-word is met with a harsh public reproach. Likewise, Sarah Soh's non-blanket application of the *S-word* to describe the diversity of the women's experiences was categorically criticized by Pyong Gap Min.⁶¹ The lack of unequivocal determination of the S-word in Kumagai's discussion of the comfort women system was unsatisfactory to some liberals.⁶² The sex slave contestation is thus undergoing "heritagization,"⁶³ a deep entrenchment of predisposed identities and narratives, enabling negationism to thrive in such a space of self-sustaining polarization while leaving the majority of the public, especially young people, unable to enter the fray.

Thus, negationism begets negationism, causing an *epidemic* of self-reinforcing narrative that is impervious to self-correction or external pressure. What denial does to the parties involved, both the deniers and the denied alike, is to create dichotomous identities that are neither reconcilable nor reparable. Whereas we tend to see a denialist discourse as a deviation from the

⁵⁷ Box 3, see Hirofumi Hayashi, *Nihongun "Ianfu" Mondai no Kakushin* [At the Core of the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" Issue] (Tokyo: Kadensha, 2015); Rumiko Nishino, "Forcible Mobilization: What Survivor Testimonies Tell Us," in *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth*, ed. Rumiko Nishino et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 39–63.

⁵⁸ Box 4, see also Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*; Soh, *The Comfort Women*.

⁵⁹ Yuha Park, *Teikoku No Ianfu* [Comfort Women of the Empire] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun, 2014).

⁶⁰ Young-hoon Lee, ed., *Han-Nichi Shuzoku Shugi* [Anti-Japan Tribalism] (Bungei Shunju, 2019).

⁶¹ See Soh, *The Comfort Women*; c.f. Min, *Korean "Comfort Women."*

⁶² See Kumagai, *The Comfort Women*, 32–34

⁶³ Frost and Vickers, *Introduction: The Comfort Women as Public History*.

orthodox, for negationists, as Rousso warns, the negation of certain memories is a *sine qua non* of the "renaissance," or the "rebirth," of their far-right existence.⁶⁴ It is tautological but still deserves a mention: negationism makes one a negationist, and once a negationist, they need negationism to keep their place in their espoused dominant relations in history and remain who they profess to be. From this identity perspective, the entrenched binary between the denier and the denied is too obstinate to untangle. Hence, we need to go beyond the limits of today's conventions to address transnational historical accountability.

Inadequacy of Conventional Approaches

The conventional approaches to countering denialism have been primarily centered on two orientations: a truth and apology-based approach and a justice-based approach. The former seeks to demand contrition from the deniers to rectify falsified historical narratives, while the latter dispenses justice for the wrongful denials. However, these conventional counter-denial mechanisms are generally inept at achieving desirable results for a transnational reckoning of the contested past. Especially in Japan-Korea relations, and in the comfort women issue in particular, neither criminalizing denialist discourses nor obtaining official apologies have worked over the past three decades.

The challenge of countering negationism comes not from the efficacy, or lack thereof, of truth-based or justice-based methods but from the fact that a negationist paradigm stems from distinct epistemology. The truth and apology-oriented approach presumes a common reference of the worldview, while the justice-oriented approach presupposes a common definition of the crime. Neither of them apply to negationism. To provide a comprehensive account of both truth- and justice-based mechanisms, Martha Minow illustrates various pathways to deal with the past, including trials, truth commissions, reparatory mechanisms, amnesty, or even leadership lustration.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, these devices are, unfortunately, functional only insofar as stakeholders mutually accept their social meanings and operate within the common parameters. Likewise, Stanley Cohen proposes ten practical paths to acknowledge truths; yet, his post-conflict, reconciliatory methods are premised on the notion that deviation from "a" truth can be rectified.⁶⁶ To complicate the matter, Stephen Winter explores the foundation of political apology at the state level, but he concedes that it is usually confined within domestic audiences, as exemplified in Canada, Australia, and South Africa.⁶⁷ Other scholarly writings provide detailed criteria, qualifications, or steps to follow in tendering official political apologies.⁶⁸ But still, those discussions presuppose that the state in question already acknowledges the guilt and assumes some degree of contrition *before* making an apology. Others discuss precedents of outlawing denialism with criminal repercussions, such as the Holocaust denial laws, but those cases of criminalizing hate speech or anti-Semitic incitements are usually confined within the national jurisdiction.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Rousso, *The Political and Cultural Roots*.

⁶⁵ Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 227–240.

⁶⁷ Stephen Winter, "Theorizing the Political Apology," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2015), 261–281.

⁶⁸ See Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Mark Gibney and Erik Roxstrom, "The Status of State Apologies," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001), 911–939; Matt James, "Wrestling with the Past: Apologies, Quasi-Apologies, and Non-Apologies in Canada," in *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*, ed. Mark Gibney et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 137–153; Jennifer M. Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁶⁹ Michael R. Marrus, "Official Apologies and the Quest for Historical Justice," *Journal of Human Rights* 6, no. 1 (2007), 75–105; Roger W. Smith, "Legislating Against Genocide Denial: Criminalizing Denial or Preventing Free Speech?," *University of St. Thomas Journal of Law and Public Policy* 4, no. 2 (2010), 128–137; Yifat Gutman, "Memory Laws: An Escalation in Minority Exclusion or a Testimony to the Limits of State Power?," *Law & Society Review* 50, no. 3 (2016), 575–607; Caroline Fournet and Clotilde Pégiorier, "Combating Genocide Denial via Law," in *Holocaust and Genocide Denial: A Contextual Perspective*, ed. Paul Behrens et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 211–219.

In short, the *conventionalists*, steeped in the truth- or justice-based mechanisms, are interested in having the deniers, or the accused in cases of prosecution, subscribe to the same epistemological standards of guilt and responsibility. The conventionalists try to merge disparate parties' worldviews into a shared design of the moral universe. Herein lies the shortcomings of conventional approaches. There underlies a deeply ingrained and prevalent assumption about the *inevitability* of one's guilt leading to some sort of responsibility in our truth- and justice-based reckoning of the past. However, this presumption is inadequate with negationism. Negationists upend the very standards of guilt and responsibility by trifling with proof and evidence. As shown earlier, by negating the ascription of guilt in the first place, negationists in Japan reject any corresponding notion of responsibility and a guilt-stricken sense of humiliation that comes with guilt. The inverse logic in negationism thus creates the discrete universe of moral obligations, an ideational construct that is immune to outside pressures of the conventional paradigms. In Japan, we see this in the revisionists; by avoiding the ascription to a humiliating past, they retain dominance in their perceived place in history, impervious to outside criticisms or juridical notions of impartiality in dealing with the past.

Furthermore, no precedent of persuading the minds or converting the hearts of negationists is readily available in addressing transnational historical accountability. Previous attempts at establishing truth or justice have been well-meaning, such as the Asian Women's Fund from 1995–2007⁷⁰ or the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in 2000,⁷¹ but neither of them have resulted in meaningful outcomes today, perpetuating the polarization between the deniers and the denied. This kind of Japanese experience—having tried to redress but to no avail—poses a particularly vexing challenge. Left without other options, foreseeable prospects for Japan would keep the state “[a]pologizing without apologizing, taking responsibility without taking responsibility.”⁷²

An Alternative Post-Atrocity Narrative Framework

To overcome the denier-denied entrenchment fraught with negationism with no immediate prospect for a tangible end, this article suggests a *post-atrocity narrative* framework to navigate the past and present guilt and responsibility of the stakeholders. Since negationism is ideational, this post-atrocity narrative is equally ideational in the sense that it shapes a kind of identity—in the form of discursive practice at present—that specifically addresses both the past guilt and future responsibility at once, but by decoupling them. This post-atrocity narrative framework reconciles the competing demands of facing up to guilt from past memories and having to take responsibility for it, by treating them separately while not isolating them from each other. Such is the functional decoupling of guilt and responsibility in dealing with the past.

Although philosophical discussions on guilt and responsibility are too numerous to cover here, drawing key inspirations is merited. While the term “guilt” is generally a legal or technical concept referring to a specific “illegal” status in a juridical sense, the term “responsibility” entails one's subjective feelings or judgment, as sort of a social and moral reflection of guilt.⁷³ Extensive debates continue among philosophers about how one could subjectively process the guilt of wrongdoing committed by another individual or a collective entity, and enact collective responsibility accordingly. Karl Jaspers addressed such a conundrum when the Germans were grappling with the guilt of the Nazi past during the Nuremberg Trial, which was published in *The Question of German Guilt* in 1947. Jaspers acknowledged, on the one hand, that German society, as a whole, bore some degree of collective guilt, but on the other, his appraisal was neither a blanket

⁷⁰ Naoko Kumagai, “Asia Women's Fund Revisited,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 21, no. 2 (2014), 117–148.

⁷¹ Christine M. Chinkin, “Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery,” *American Journal of International Law* 95, no. 2 (2001), 335–341.

⁷² Jean-Marc Coicaud and Jibecke Jönsson, “Elements of a Road Map for a Politics of Apology,” in *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*, ed. Mark Gibney et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 85.

⁷³ Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 16–18.

apology nor a wholesale condemnation as he differentiated four types of guilt and their corresponding degrees of responsibility.⁷⁴ Subsequent debates disagreed on the scope of collective responsibility depending on the demarcating boundary of an individual. H. D. Lewis and his followers took a highly atomistic view seeing that one bears responsibility only to the extent that one took part and acted,⁷⁵ while Peter A. French and others saw that a collective entity could be a moral agent capable of assuming moral culpability for its acts.⁷⁶ The issue at hand is particularly germane to transnational historical accountability, where members from two collectivities negotiate their responsibilities, moral and legal, across three temporal existences—the past, present, and future. On this point, Armen T. Marsoobian makes a categorical assessment that it is feasible for one to inherit a moral task of repairing for crimes committed by one’s ancestors against another collectivity.⁷⁷ His reasoning, first, distinguishes backward-looking moral responsibilities (for example, responsibility for acts committed in the past) from forward-looking ones (for example, responsibility for acts omitted at present or in the future) and then connects them on the basis of the *continuity* of one’s ethnic identity and the nation’s social institutions.

This article follows the orientations employed by Marsoobian and Jaspers in distinguishing types of guilt and degrees of responsibility, because such distinction, by way of decoupling, essentially helps responsibility to be reframed as what David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl call the capacity to *respond* in one’s milieu.⁷⁸ Where Marsoobian uses the past-present distinction to conceptualize the intergenerational inheritance of moral responsibility, this article keeps it separate for a functional purpose. In a post-atrocity society, where even such inheritance is contested, it is more realistic and pragmatic to keep it separate. This approach functionally decouples the past guilt (that is, guilt for acts committed) of past generations from the present responsibility (that is, responsibility for acts omitted at present or in the future) of present generations. This decoupling also presumes that, *despite* the continued identity and institutions of the collectivity (a point of departure from Marsoobian), responsibility from the past to the present is not ascribed automatically. It helps stakeholders reckon with the question of how to practice the *capacity to respond* at present and onward, rather than to remain fixated on questions of repair and reparation of the damages done.

Concretely speaking, this can be done by exploring a narrative template wherein the integrity of the present identity is dissociated from the criminality of the past guilt. As one example, such a narrative form was aptly expressed in the phrase—“*I am responsible but not guilty*”—by Fatma Göçek, who is of Turkish origin and yet engages in her reckoning of the Armenian genocide. Though the same remark was abused by Adolf Eichmann in his defense during his trial⁷⁹ or similarly by the Argentinian admiral Emilio Massera,⁸⁰ the decoupling of the present and future responsibilities from the past guilt, when used constructively, is useful in imagining a post-atrocity identity and critical to disentangling the entrenched binary of negationist denialism. Another example of functional decoupling can be observed in the German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a term that has no clear translation in English but roughly means *coming to terms with the past*. Bernhard Schlink explains this concept as “mastering the past,”

⁷⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

⁷⁵ H. D. Lewis, “Collective Responsibility,” *Philosophy* 23, no. 84 (1948), 3–18.

⁷⁶ Peter A. French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁷⁷ Armen T. Marsoobian, “Acknowledging Intergenerational Moral Responsibility in the Aftermath of Genocide,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 4, no. 2 (2009), 211–220.

⁷⁸ David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl, “Narrating Historical Injustice: Political Responsibility and the Politics of Memory,” *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017), 914.

⁷⁹ Keith David Watenpaugh, review of *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence Against the Armenians, 1789–2009*, by Fatma Müge Göçek; “*They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*”: A History of the Armenian Genocide, by Ronald Grigor Suny, *American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (2017), 480.

⁸⁰ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 242.

wherein the term “master” here suggests bringing the past into a present form without burdening the present, but continuing to do so until it is thoroughly done.⁸¹

In practical terms, two historical precedents can be used as a lesson for functional decoupling. One is the friendship treaty that was forged between France and Germany in 1963, also known as the Élysée Treaty. This treaty provided the backbone of post-war reconciliation between the two countries, as Franco-German relations underwent a drastic change from hereditary archenemies in the modern age to two of the closest allies in contemporary European integration. The treaty provisions defined a framework of closer bilateral cooperation in specific areas, namely, defense, foreign policy, youth education, and cultural exchange. They further instituted modalities of cooperation through biannual summits of the heads of state and regular official consultations between ministerial and other high-level officials. German society was still reeling from the war at the time, showing little guilt from wartime destruction inside and outside the country, while dismissing the notion of collective guilt by distancing themselves from the Nazi crimes.⁸² The language of the treaty, its brief preamble in particular, allowed the scope of bilateral responsibility to be framed purely on the basis of national interests, without having to address questions of guilt.

Another historical precedent is the 1998 Joint Declaration by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi for “a new Japan-Republic of Korea partnership toward the twenty-first century.”⁸³ The Joint Declaration was the first official document between the two governments in which the Japanese Prime Minister offered “his deep remorse and heartfelt apology” (borrowing the same language from the 1995 Murayama statement) and directly addressed “the people of the Republic of Korea” (departing from the Murayama statement). Although today’s political stalemate makes it seem as though the Joint Declaration is defunct, and despite the fact that the Korean parliament did try to nullify the declaration in 2001, neither government has formally rescinded it. The declaration is still in effect to this day and provides a blueprint for future, continued bilateral cooperation. In one scenario, the Japanese government could declare its intent to *reaffirm* the spirit of the declaration that was negotiated and agreed in 1998. Such a declaration of intent would not equate to rolling back negotiations to the pre-1998 era or reviving the guilt issues of the past; in fact, such reaffirmation could be reframed, as was done in the Élysée Treaty, in the language of national interests to pursue mutual and equal benefits, facilitated by regular high-level consultation. By allowing the Japanese government to simply reaffirm, rather than revisit, the declaration, the guilt questions that were settled in 1998 could be shelved and negotiators could claim, “we are responsible, regardless of guilt now or then.”⁸⁴ The decoupling should only be a stopgap measure; when the time comes, future iterations of negotiation could discuss issues of any unsettled guilt and responsibility at a later time. Most importantly, the nature of such reaffirmation is to decouple the past guilt of past generations from the present responsibility of present generations. It helps to uphold the past guilt as defined and settled in 1998 without burdening the present, and to engage in the present responsibility anew without being constrained by the past.

The value of the decoupling approach serves two functional purposes. First, it nullifies the negationists’ logic of inversion by removing the burdens of victims to prove their history. The decoupling makes it so that our responsibility, as a society, no longer depends on victims’ authenticity. Secondly, the decoupling dismantles the negationists’ espoused dominant social relations by introducing a novel form of responsibility presently unconstrained by past guilt. In doing so, this novel approach does not try to change negationism, let alone try to eliminate it;

⁸¹ Bernhard Schlink, *Guilt About the Past* (Toronto: Anansi, 2010), 43–44.

⁸² Valérie Rosoux, “The Administration of Post-War Memory in the Franco-German and Franco-Algerian Negotiations,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32 (2019), 227–244.

⁸³ “Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-First Century,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, October 8, 1998, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.

⁸⁴ A potential hypothetical comment which could be made in the future. Emphasis added.

instead, the approach seeks to make negationism less relevant. It is designed to subsume negationism by greater complexity and contextualization to such an extent that a negationist account becomes but only one piece, and a small one, of public memory and common knowledge about the past.

Three assumptions guide this framework. First, much like Susan Benesch’s strategy to “inoculate” the larger audiences’ capacity to be immune from hate speech,⁸⁵ the decoupling approach assumes that negationism will always exist one way or the other and therefore it is far more pragmatic to expand the larger public’s capacity to submerge it. Second, as Lipstadt turns toward educating the general public as a more promising approach to undercutting the malice of denialism,⁸⁶ it is the larger public who can dissipate the influence of negationism, which is more pragmatic than directly castigating or correcting the negationists. Third, as shown by Bernard Mayer’s framing of “conflict engagement” *not* to exacerbate conflict parties’ mutually exclusive relations,⁸⁷ this narrative-based approach posits that untangling the negationist entrenchment involves finding a way to live with the negationists, albeit only functionally, to mitigate their impacts. At a time when memory contestation is wholly entrenched, with ever more polarizing binary identities, the decoupling of guilt and responsibility helps stakeholders to remain engaged, albeit in “a state of nonresolution.”⁸⁸ The simple reaffirmation of the 1998 Joint Declaration could be one such example of living with the state of non-resolution while constructively engaged in the core of difficult issues. However, the state of non-resolution should not be confused with a lack of resolution; it is rather a space to leave open a pragmatic prospect for a more honest reckoning in the future. Paradoxically, sustained engagement with negationism—instead of the conventionalists’ punitive or corrective approaches—increases the possibilities for a more nuanced societal reckoning because the present and future generations would be able to enter into their own personal relationship with the past.

Functional decoupling is no less excruciating than truth- and justice-based mechanisms. This form of reckoning, as Jaspers reminds his post-war German audiences, will demand more truthfulness in dealing with the past, but at least without the burden of a predisposed, guilt-stricken binary of narratives and identities. Nonetheless, it may inflame many conventionalists because a simple acknowledgment that negationism may linger on would be unacceptable for some truth-seekers, or a mere implication that negationist expressions are let loose in the public sphere would be an affront to justice-seekers. Yet, this novel exploration is warranted, given that the conventional approaches have not worked well to contain the incipience and evolution of negationism in Japan. In one sense, the functional decoupling is ironic; even if one *succeeds* in decoupling, one is still removed from meeting a judicial obligation of guilt compensation. But irony can be a satirical form of “counter narratives” that reveal the limits of conventional narratives.⁸⁹ The irony of the decoupling is one way to lay bare the inadequacy of truth and justice orientations as well as the notions of responsibility derived from them. The functional decoupling is only an expedient means for societal responsibility of moral reckoning to emerge in the future.

Conclusion

This article views negationism as a phenomenon of societal silence in dealing with the past, with such silence sustained by lies and distortions of denialism, and sees negationists as intentionally reconstructing their identity by sanctioning a dominant memory and narrative of the national past immune from the conventional guilty charge. The functional decoupling of guilt and responsibility provides an alternative approach. This approach is novel to the extent

⁸⁵ Susan Benesch, “Countering Dangerous Speech: New Ideas for Genocide Prevention,” Working Paper (Washington, DC: Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2013).

⁸⁶ Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 221–222.

⁸⁷ Bernard Mayer, *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁸⁹ Temin and Dahl, *Narrating Historical Injustice*, 911.

that it has not been operationalized in Japan. And the novelty is, by definition, unconventional, which is, by nature, uncomfortable for many whose paradigms are predicated on traditional mechanisms. This post-atrocity narrative form would be distasteful to those who demand justice and reparation or those who seek to exact penitence from Japan. Nevertheless, at present, the theoretical and pragmatic merits in devising such an alternative form of post-atrocity responsibility far outweigh criticisms derived from conventional paradigms that have not worked well.

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