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Review by David Hundt, Deakin University

As the title suggests, there are two main themes in this article: the deterioration in bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea, and the possible role of Japanese civil society organisations (CSOs) in alleviating the problem. Two case studies – on comfort women and history textbooks – support this claim. A commonality in the cases is that CSOs attempted to elicit an unambiguous apology and acknowledgement from the Japanese government for the misdeeds of the Imperial Army during World War II, but these efforts failed. Moreover, civil society’s actions helped to trigger a nationalist response from Japan’s right-wing politicians, including the current Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. The author concludes that CSOs have at best a limited influence over “postwar issues” (96). CSOs did not achieve their goals of contributing to proper recognition of Japan’s wartime misdeeds, and did not help reduce tensions with South Korea. The author ends the article by proposing that transnational civil society – concerted cooperation between CSOs at the global and regional level – has the potential to overcome some of the weaknesses that Japanese CSOs have demonstrated.

I learned a lot from this article. In my opinion the most valuable part is its detailed account of how a partial consensus emerged in Japan on the necessity of facing up to the wartime past and ‘postwar issues,’ and also why that consensus broke down both before and after the return to power of Abe in 2012. Of the two themes flagged in the title, this is the one that emerges as the strongest. Less well established in the role (or lack thereof) played by CSOs in this process. My remaining comments thus focus on avenues for further research into civil society’s role in public policymaking, especially in relation to foreign policy.

First, definitions matter. Ja-hyun Chun cites Larry Diamond in his depiction of civil society as “voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous of the state” (94).1 In Japan, she claims, there is growing “recognition of the role of civil society” (95), and “signs of a weakening state-centric tendency and a stronger pluralist mood” (96). Nonetheless, conceptions of civil society based on the Western experience are

“inadequate for Japan” (94): most Japanese CSOs are small and under-resourced, and few are able to play a meaningful role in public policymaking. This underscores Robert Pekkanen’s claim that Japan is typified by a “dual civil society”. The author therefore describes the influence of CSOs as “limited” (88, 90, 91, 94, 104) “ineffective” (91) and “restricted” (94).

Chun’s criticisms of civil society are understandable, but Japan’s experience may not be as unique as the author believes. CSOs can include all organisations in a given society, other than the state. What Diamond refers to as ‘economic’ CSOs, also known as lobby groups, often have a comparatively influential role in policymaking. By contrast, ‘civic’ or ‘issue oriented’ CSOs, which often focus on issues such as social justice, equity, and empowerment tend to be sidelined. There is evidence to support this sectoral variation in Japan too: agricultural and sports groups have been found to be comparatively prominent in Japanese policymaking networks, while ‘new’ CSOs, or ‘citizens’ groups’ (shimin dantai), have not. Most studies of civil society in Japan adopt a similarly broad understanding. Comparative research into civil society should be sensitive to how and why CSOs tend to differ in influence.

Second, the article expands the debate about the role of civil society in established democracies such as Japan. At their best, CSOs in mature democracies can help to consolidate and maintain democracy by holding governments accountable and minimising corruption. They may also have an impact in the realm of foreign policy. Keiko Hirata, for instance, found that Japanese non-governmental organisations blocked a development loan that would have funded the building of a dam in India, dissuaded the Japanese government from providing pesticide to Cambodia that would have caused substantial environmental damage, and successfully lobbied the government to support the international ban on land mines.

It is more common, however, for CSOs to focus on local issues and concerns. Chun chides CSOs in Japan on precisely these grounds (91, 94). It is tempting to depict civil society in heroic terms, but most CSOs tend to operate within fairly restricted realms. It is difficult, therefore, to disagree with the author when she claims that Japanese CSOs are too weak, and “controlled by market forces and the government”. They also have “few opportunities to participate in policymaking at the national level” (91); and it is difficult for them to remain independent (95). The problem of autonomy is not confined to Japan: according to one estimate in

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the late 1990s, governments in the U.S. provided substantial funding to civil society organisations, outstripping private funding by a ratio of two to one.8 That CSOs have a somewhat compromised role should not come as a great surprise, and instead more research could usefully focus on how CSOs manage the politics than necessarily accompany their forays in public-policymaking.

A third and related point is that CSOs are inherently political actors, even if they do not see themselves as such. They sometimes partake in “independent political activity,”9 although more often their goals are defined in localised terms such as preventing environmental degradation. Societies such as Japan that are characterised as ‘corporatist’ tend to restrict the space available to CSOs.10 Civil society in Japan is rarely ‘pure’ and completely independent of the state; nor are CSOs likely to be viable in the long term if they are frequently engaged in conflict with the state. CSOs operate “sometimes in confrontation but often also in cooperation with the powerful state and market institutions.”11

Bringing politics into analysis of CSOs also highlights the fact that some elements of civil society do not subscribe to progressive goals. The author recounts the role of right-wing and decidedly non-progressive organisations such as Tsukurakai (Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform) in the history textbooks debate, and their close coordination with likeminded politicians. Given the imbalances in terms of political support and material resources, it is not surprising to learn that progressive CSOs failed in their campaign to seek redress for the comfort women and to ensure a more accurate depiction of the war in history textbooks. The failures of progressive Japanese CSOs that the author has analysed stand in contrast to one great success in the post-war period: the protection of the ‘Peace Constitution’, despite the protestations of the nationalist right. The constitutional amendments passed in 2015, which expand Japan’s capacity to use military force, will serve as a test of the strength of civil society and the pacifist majority among the Japanese public.

Finally, the author proposes that transnational civil society is a potential solution to overcoming the types of weaknesses that are identified in the case studies. CSOs, however, face increasing constraints in many parts of the world. These groups seek to exercise some degree of “organized oversight of governance,”12 but few governments of either democratic or non-democratic character are willing to submit themselves to the scrutiny of CSOs. On the one hand, autocratic regimes in societies such as Russia and China are demanding that foreign CSOs register formally and submit to stringent oversight. On the other, even some democratic states such as India have resorted to heavy-handed tactics to minimise the impact of civil society. There are often legal restrictions on the ability of CSOs to receive overseas funding, or to participate in ‘sensitive issues’

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9 Carothers, “Civil Society,” 19, emphasis added.


such as human rights.\textsuperscript{13} The findings of the article under review are consistent with this somewhat pessimistic outlook for civil society in Japan. It is certainly useful to consider what Japanese CSOs can learn from their counterparts in South Korea, and also perhaps organisations in the United States such as MoveOn. Transnational networks, however, are unlikely to be a panacea in and of themselves, and their utility will largely depend on the capacity of CSOs to operate successfully within their own borders.

Despite the understandable pessimism that discussion about contemporary civil society can attract, it is worth remembering that the appeal of civil society in developed societies lies in the potential of CSOs to offer a ‘means of social renewal’ at a time when voters are increasingly disenchanted with traditional political parties.\textsuperscript{14} CSOs tend to emerge when there is a perceived failure on the part of the state to provide the social goods that people require. In Japan, ‘state failure’ – for instance in the form of a prolonged recession, mismanagement of the health system, and slow, ineffective and insensitive responses to natural disasters – has created a demand for innovative solutions from civil society. Unless and until the state is able to regain the confidence of the public, there will be a demand for the types of services that CSOs are well equipped to provide.

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\textsuperscript{13} Roth, “The Great Civil Society Choke-Out.”

\textsuperscript{14} Carothers. “Civil Society,” 19.