

Presentations by Alexis Dudden, Connecticut College and Sarah C. Soh, San Francisco State University, on “Memory and Reconciliation Between Japan and South Korea: A Status Report” at The George Washington University, October 22, 2004

Professors Dudden and Soh spoke at The George Washington University’s Sigur Center as contributors to a speaker series sponsored by the Sigur Center on the general subject of memory and reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific.

Professor Dudden focused on the central theme of the “politics of apology” as it continues to affect the relations between Japan and Korea, as well as the notable dynamic of the U.S. presence as a key factor influencing the reconciliation process. As one example, President Bush’s phrase “axis of evil” to describe North Korea reverberated in Asia, and helped to create a sharper new turn in the politics of regret. The momentum given to the more conservative elements in Japan in the wake of 9/11, coupled with North Korea’s acknowledgement of the abductions of Japanese citizens, has led to a stasis in progress toward reconciliation; South Korea as well has played to the politics of apology with its appeals to the Japanese Prime Minister to avoid visiting Yasukuni Shrine. As it stands, these governments are simply and successfully playing a waiting game—as the individuals most directly affected by the events of the war will all be dead soon.

Professor Soh spoke directly to the issue of Korea’s “comfort women” in the context of the broader social and psychological traumas suffered by the Korean people in the twentieth century: the colonial period of 1910-1945, the subsequent war and division of Korea; and the Kwangju uprising of 1980. The issue of how to reach a fair settlement in the case of the comfort women is complicated by the more general context: the turbulent nature of Korean politics, the people’s pent-up sense of victimization, and the difficulties posed by collective colonial memory. What needs to be understood is the multifaceted nature of the issue of the comfort women—it can be seen as emerging from the structured violence of the colonial era, the state-controlled system of licensed prostitution and the poverty of colonial Koreans. It is necessary to supplement the existing nationalistic discourse—that of Japan’s harsh exploitation of Korea—in order not to disregard the broader context of the system that existed—a patriarchal system that contributed to the silencing of the voices of the comfort women in the postwar years.

About the Speakers: Professor Alexis Dudden is an Associate Professor of History at Connecticut College and is the author of *Discourse and Power: Japan’s Annexation of Korea, 1910*. She is currently conducting research on the politics of apology in the post-1945 era among Japan, Korea, and the United States.

Professor Sarah C. Soh is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at San Francisco State University and is the author of *Women in Korean Politics* and the editor of the second edition of *The Chosen Women in Korean Politics: An Anthropological Study*. She is currently undertaking an ethnographic analysis of the institution of military comfort women for the Japanese Imperial Army before and during the Pacific War and of the evolution and the international contribution of the movement for women’s rights as human rights in South Korea.