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Beyond Japanese Frames:
Reading Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora*

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Reviewed Book

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Hibakusha Revisited

From the first pages of Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora: Redress Movements of Korean Atomic-Bomb Victims in Japan*, I had the sense of being led into a carefully curated archive that had been waiting, almost too patiently, for someone to spend time with it. The book traces Korean hibakusha across three interlocking spaces—Japan, South Korea, and North Korea—and follows the slow, fractured emergence of their redress movements from the early post-war years into the twenty-first century. Takahashi is at once historian, archivist, and listener. She reconstructs political organisations such as *Hiroshima Chohikyo* (Korean Hibakusha organizations) and *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, chronicles medical support initiatives in Hapcheon, and introduces us to a constellation of individuals whose lives have been shaped by nuclear exposure, colonialism, and national division. Her narrative is dense with detail yet rarely feels pedantic; instead, it unfolds with a methodical rhythm that mirrors the "uninterrupted enthusiasm" she ascribes to Korean *hibakusha* themselves (p. 159).

Entering Takahashi's World: When the Archive Breathes

The book begins by situating Korean presence in Hiroshima and Nagasaki within the broader history of Japanese colonial expansion. Takahashi outlines how Koreans came to be in those cities not as incidental residents but through layers of structural compulsion: economic migration under colonial hierarchy, mobilisation for industrial and military labour, and wartime conscription (pp.1-2). She is careful to note regional origins—many from the south-east of the Korean peninsula, clustered in particular neighbourhoods—and to distinguish patterns between Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima is depicted as a site of longer-term settlement, where families formed and a more stable community life emerged. Nagasaki, by contrast, appears more as a node of labour, especially in shipyards and munitions factories, with a higher proportion of single men and more transient arrangements (p.14). This early differentiation later helps her explain why the trajectories of *hibakusha* activism in the two cities diverged so markedly.

After 1945, the Korean survivors' journeys fracture in several directions. Some remain in Japan as *Zainichi* Koreans (ethnic Koreans residing in Japan) entering a legal and social limbo that deepens after the San Francisco Peace Treaty strips them of Japanese nationality. Others return—voluntarily or under pressure—to a devastated Korean peninsula, where they find little infrastructure and almost no recognition for their experiences as atomic bomb victims. A smaller number move, through complex political and humanitarian channels, to North Korea. One of the strengths of the book is that it refuses to treat these paths as parallel but separate stories. Instead, Takahashi constantly loops back across borders, showing how policies in one jurisdiction reverberated in another: how Japanese welfare law defined eligibility for *hibakusha* certificates, how the absence of diplomatic relations with either Seoul or Pyongyang impeded transnational medical supports, and how South Korean anti-communism shaped which *Zainichi* organisations could openly engage with whom (pp.22, 27, 85-88).

Chapter 3, "Bridges over the Korea Strait", is where the narrative truly comes alive. Here Takahashi introduces a network of Christian actors—*Zainichi* Korean pastors, Japanese doctors, and Korean clergy—who together constitute what she calls an "international" but "not quite transnational" solidarity (p.64). The distinction matters. For Takahashi, these actors did not transcend their national identities; on the contrary, their national histories as former colonised Koreans and a former coloniser were precisely what made the solidarity compelling. She follows Gang Mun-hui, a *Zainichi* Korean *hibakusha* whose trip to Hapcheon, a rural county in South Korea where many *hibakusha* had resettled after repatriation, and his encounter with the neglected survivors there transform personal memory into a political and ethical commitment (p.49). Alongside him stands the Japanese Christian doctor Kawamura Torataro, whose sense of postcolonial responsibility leads him to view medical support for Korean *hibakusha* as a matter of moral debt rather than humanitarian charity (pp.52-55). Together with figures such as Pastor Kim Sin-hwan, they help create medical missions and clinics that operate across the Korea Strait.

In these pages, the book's strengths are unmistakable. Takahashi is at her best when she allows specific lives—Gang's letters, Kawamura's reflections on his own positionality, Kim's theology of *missio dei*—to bear the weight of larger structures. The Christian networks she describes are not idealised; they are shown to be shot through with the tensions of nationalism, denominational rivalry, and the politics of Cold War alliances. Yet Takahashi convincingly argues that these networks provided a space where a particular kind of ethical imagination could take root: one that acknowledged colonial guilt and refused the comfort of a purely abstract humanism (pp.64-66).

Chapter 4 shifts the focus northwards, both geographically and politically. Here the protagonist is *Hiroshima Chohikyo*, an organisation of North Korea-affiliated Korean *hibakusha* based in Japan. Takahashi reconstructs the life and activism of figures such as Lee Sil-geun, who, while operating within the orbit of *Chongryun* (*Chōsen Sōren*: the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) and identifying strongly with the DPRK, also developed a distinctive identity as a "North Korean *hibakusha* living in Japan" (pp.73-76). This positionality leads to a complex repertoire of action: solidarity with Japanese anti-nuclear organisations, participation in international conferences, and repeated but constrained attempts to establish contact with *hibakusha* in North Korea itself (pp.81-84). Takahashi's portrayal is careful not to romanticise. She shows how Cold War alignments limit what can be said and done; there are hints of surveillance, suspicion, and the hardening of ideological boundaries. Yet she also insists that these activists were not mere mouthpieces of Pyongyang. They tried, within narrow channels, to articulate a politics that combined Korean unification, anti-imperialism, and nuclear abolition.

In Chapter 5, Nagasaki becomes a laboratory for a more fragile experiment in internal plurality. *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, whose activities Takahashi narrates in detail, tries to bring together *hibakusha* with different registrations ("Chosen" and "ROK"), different organisational loyalties (*Chongryun* and *Mindan*), and a shared history of forced labour in Japanese shipyards and factories (pp.99–106). The chapter's subtitle—"Unity within Disunity, Disunity within Unity"—is not rhetorical flourish; it captures both the aspiration and the constant unraveling of this project. Takahashi follows leaders such as Park Min-gyu and Seo Jeong-u as they attempt to build alliances across ideological divides, all while facing a local political economy in Nagasaki where Mitsubishi's corporate power leaves little room for Korean claims to visibility and responsibility (pp.108–111). It is a story of partial success, repeated disappointment, and stubborn persistence.

By the time we reach the conclusion, Takahashi has brought us along several intertwined threads: the Christian mediation of medical support to South Korean *hibakusha*, the DPRK-facing activism of *Hiroshima Chohikyo*, the fragile pluralism of *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, and the broader ways in which Korean *hibakusha* have thought about "homeland", "diaspora", and "unification" over decades. Her claim that these actors embodied a distinct orientation towards unification—that for them, the end of nuclear violence and the healing of the divided peninsula were inextricable—feels both earned and suggestive (pp.160–162). It points beyond the specificities of the case towards a larger question about what it means to live in the wake of multiple, overlapping violences.

What the Book Makes Visible and Where the Silences Echo

The most important gift Takahashi's book offers is, to my mind, an altered vantage point. It recentres people who were always there but rarely seen as subjects of history. Korean *hibakusha* have appeared before in scholarship, of course, but often as footnotes, appendices, or "special cases" folded into a narrative whose normative subject was implicitly Japanese. By following Korean survivors as they move between Japan and Korea, between south and north, between the church, the courtroom, and the local office, Takahashi makes it difficult to maintain that framing. Korean *hibakusha* become central to any serious understanding of the human and political consequences of the bombings.

This recentering is not a simple additive gesture—"let us now include Koreans in our existing story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki"—but a reorientation. When Takahashi describes how many Korean *hibakusha* were conscripted to work in Mitsubishi shipyards in Nagasaki other places in Hiroshima, she reminds us that the atomic bombs struck not an abstract "Japan" but a colonial empire whose peripheries had been moved into the centre as labour (pp.7-8). When she shows how post-war Japanese welfare institutions drew boundaries that excluded Koreans abroad, especially those in North Korea, she reveals that the state's so-called 'universal' support for *hibakusha* was always quietly racialised and nationalised (pp.38-41). Through these concrete examples, the comfortable image of Japanese innocence—of a peaceful nation struck by a singular, external catastrophe—is steadily undone.

A second layer of visibility concerns political subjectivity. Takahashi is attentive to the ways Korean *hibakusha* acted upon their circumstances, often in conditions where "acting" meant small, contentious steps rather than grand gestures. The Medical Support Committee, for instance, is not romanticised as pure altruism; it is described as a messy, contingent coalition, sustained by a mixture of ethical commitment, transnational Christian networks, and the hard work of fundraising and negotiating with reluctant states (pp.54, 57-58, 62-65). The narrative makes clear that agency is not the opposite of constraint but something that emerges through and against it. When Gang Mun-hui, after years of navigating Japanese bureaucracy as a *Zainichi* Korean *hibakusha*, decides to devote his life to improving conditions for other Korean survivors, we can see his activism as both a product of structural injustice and a refusal to be fully determined by it (pp.49-51). This double vision is one of the book's subtle achievements.

Takahashi's multiscalar approach is another of her strengths. She refuses to keep the story either at the level of local experience or abstract structure. Instead, she moves between the street and the summit: from the details of a medical examination in Hapcheon, to the deliberations of the Japanese Diet, the stance of the South Korean foreign ministry, and speeches made by Korean *hibakusha* representatives at international anti-nuclear conferences (pp.81–83, 159–165). This movement allows us to see how decisions in Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang bore directly on whether a particular Korean survivor could get a *hibakusha* certificate, or whether a medical mission could cross a border.

Finally, the book's archival and methodological contributions should not be underestimated. Takahashi has gathered and interpreted materials that were scattered across churches, local organisations, municipal offices, and personal collections. She draws on Korean and Japanese sources, on organisational newsletters and pamphlets that might otherwise have vanished without trace, and on interviews conducted over many years. The sections on *Nagasaki Chohikyo's* research into forced labour, culminating in the publication of *Genbaku to Chōsenjin*, for example, are not simply citations of an existing text but a reconstruction of how that text came to be produced in antagonistic local conditions (pp.103–104). For future scholars, this labour will be invaluable.

What Slips Through the Net

Precisely because the book accomplishes so much, its limitations stand out not as simple flaws but as missed opportunities for an even more ambitious conversation. Reading as a Korean woman working in nuclear security and international politics, I felt these gaps quite sharply.

The first and most obvious is the lack of sustained reflection on the politics of the term *hibakusha*. Takahashi uses the term expansively and inclusively, applying it to Korean survivors with no hesitation. In one sense, this is a politically generous gesture: it insists that Koreans should be recognised within the same moral and institutional category as Japanese *hibakusha*. Yet there is also something disquieting about how this move is made. When we call a Korean forced labourer who survived the Nagasaki bombing a "*hibakusha*", we are using a Japanese lexical tool to name an experience that was produced by Japanese imperialism. For Japanese activists and scholars, this may feel like an act of solidarity. For Korean observers, it can feel like yet another layer of incorporation into a Japanese frame. I am not suggesting that Takahashi should have abandoned the term; I am suggesting that, given the critical acuity of her work elsewhere, her relative silence on this conceptual question feels louder than it otherwise might.

A second area where the book feels thin, given its other strengths, is in its treatment of the Cold War. Takahashi clearly understands the Cold War as a structural context; she shows how anti-communism in South Korea and the alignment of *Zainichi* organisations with North or South shaped what was possible in terms of activism (pp.59, 100-101). But the Cold War also functioned as an epistemic and emotional regime: it provided languages of legitimate anger, justified certain forms of solidarity and stigmatised others, and made some harms visible while rendering others unspeakable. In Chapter 4, we learn that North Korea-affiliated *hibakusha* framed their activism in terms of anti-imperialism and Korean unification, and that these frames resonated in some international contexts but provoked suspicion in others (pp.73-83). Yet we are not invited to think more systematically about how these ideological languages shaped the very structure of claims for justice. For someone trained to see nuclear politics as deeply enmeshed in security discourse, the absence of this level of analysis is keenly felt.

A related limitation is the book's focus on organised activism at the expense of non-organised responses to harm. Takahashi herself notes that many Korean *hibakusha* chose not to step forward, fearing discrimination in employment or marriage, or simply exhausted by the bureaucratic and emotional labour of seeking recognition (p. 100). These people appear in the book as a sort of negative space, a silent majority against which the activists' courage is highlighted. But silence is itself historically meaningful. A refusal to join an organisation can be a political act, a strategy of self-preservation, or an expression of distrust rooted in earlier betrayals by states and institutions. Here again, Takahashi's own material could support a more layered reading.

Thirdly, there is the question of comparative perspective. The book gestures briefly, in the conclusion, towards the notion of "global *hibakusha*" and acknowledges that people affected by nuclear testing, accidents, and facilities elsewhere might be considered alongside the Koreans she studies (p.163). But this remains a gesture. There is no sustained comparison with Marshall Islanders, Kazakh villagers, or Ukrainians around Chernobyl, for example. Of course, no single book can do everything. Yet because Takahashi's work so effectively provincialises the familiar Hiroshima–Nagasaki frame, it places itself in an ideal position to open such conversations. The fact that it stops just short of doing so feels like a minor sadness rather than a major flaw—but it is there.

Precisely because Takahashi's archival and narrative reconstruction of Korean hibakusha activism is so rich and convincing, certain analytical silences become more visible. A further limitation concerns the analytical treatment of gender and state power. The medical missions led by Kawamura (pp.52–54) are analysed in terms of postcolonial ethics, but the gendered labour of Korean women who staffed clinics or provided daily care remains invisible. This is striking given the rich feminist scholarship on nuclear disasters—from Lisa Yoneyama's analysis of Hiroshima survivors to Kate Brown's work on Chernobyl—that demonstrates how radiation harm is experienced and managed along gendered lines.[1] Korean feminist historians have developed sophisticated frameworks for analysing wartime sexual violence and women's political mobilisation; applying these tools to Korean *hibakusha* would significantly deepen our understanding.[2]

This focus on survivor agency is one of the book's major analytical

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1 Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kate Brown, *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

2 Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

strengths, allowing Korean hibakusha to emerge as historical actors rather than passive victims. On state power, while Takahashi rightly foregrounds Korean hibakusha agency, the states most responsible for their exposure—the United States and Japan—remain curiously underanalysed. The US atomic bombings and Japan's colonial labour conscription are acknowledged as historical context (pp.19–27), but are not interrogated as ongoing political and legal problems. For example, Chapter 2 discusses the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty's stripping of Korean nationality (p. 38) without examining how this legal architecture was designed to limit compensation liability. Similarly, the book traces bureaucratic obstacles to medical certification (pp.74–76) but stops short of analysing these as deliberate policy choices that shifted responsibility from perpetrator states to victim communities. The analytical focus, while powerfully foregrounding survivor agency, leaves less room for sustained scrutiny of the states whose military, colonial, and bureaucratic decisions shaped the conditions of exposure. This is not a narrative flaw so much as an analytical imbalance, one that future work might productively redress. A more sustained analysis of state decisions—including archival evidence of policy deliberations, if available—would strengthen the book's critical intervention.

Both absences point to a similar pattern: it is precisely where Takahashi excels at illuminating Korean hibakusha's creativity and resilience that the structural forces shaping their conditions—gendered care labour and state legal architectures— retreat into background context.

Where the Conversation Might Go Next

Despite these criticisms, I do not read *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* as a book to be "corrected" by later scholarship so much as a foundation on which a broader, more plural conversation can now rest. For Korean scholars in particular, this book fills a critical gap. Until now, Korean experiences of nuclear harm have been fragmented across disparate literatures: comfort women studies addressed wartime colonial violence; democratisation scholarship examined post-authoritarian movements; security studies focused on North Korea's nuclear programme. Takahashi is among the first to show how these threads—colonialism, diaspora, Cold War division, and nuclear exposure—are inseparable in Korean lives. Her careful reconstruction of *Zainichi* Korean organisations, medical networks across the Korea Strait, and North Korea-affiliated activism provides empirical ground that Korean scholars have long needed but lacked access to, particularly regarding Japanese archival sources and *Zainichi* community histories. This foundation opens several concrete research directions.

First, on gender and care labour: Building on Takahashi's organisational histories, scholars could examine how Korean women navigated radiation stigma, managed intergenerational health anxieties, and sustained daily care work in contexts where medical infrastructure was minimal. Church networks (pp.64-66) and medical missions (pp.52-55) are obvious sites for such inquiry, but so too are family correspondences, oral histories of return migrants, and records from women's organisations in Hapcheon and other hibakusha communities.

Second, on comparative nuclear geographies: Takahashi's framework—nuclear harm intersecting with colonialism and Cold War division—is directly applicable beyond Korean cases. Kazakh communities affected by Semipalatinsk testing, Marshall Islanders displaced by US nuclear experiments, and Indigenous peoples near uranium mines all experienced nuclear violence through colonial structures. Systematic comparison would provincialise the Hiroshima-Nagasaki paradigm and reveal patterns in how states externalise nuclear risk onto marginalised populations.

Third, on state accountability: Future research could trace policy deliberations that produced legal exclusions—not just the 1952 San Francisco Treaty but subsequent Japanese welfare law amendments, bilateral negotiations (or their absence) between Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang, and US Cold War strategies that shaped compensation frameworks. Such analysis would shift focus from victim resilience to perpetrator responsibility.

Fourth, on silence and non-participation: Takahashi notes that many Korean hibakusha chose not to engage with redress movements (p. 100). Ethnographic or oral history research could explore these decisions not as absences but as strategic responses to institutional betrayal, revealing alternative forms of survival and meaning-making that organised activism cannot capture.

Conclusion

Taken together, this book establishes Korean hibakusha not as marginal figures, but as actors whose lives and movements expose the entanglement of colonialism, Cold War geopolitics, and post-war regimes of recognition. Only after following Takahashi's narrative across Japan, South Korea, and North Korea did I find myself returning to a word that anchors the entire book: hibakusha. Takahashi adopts it as her basic category, stretching it from those who survived Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to encompass wider circles of people affected by radiation. I stay with her term in this review, because it is the language through which her actors speak and organise. Yet as a Korean reader and nuclear policy scholar, I feel a certain friction. The term is inescapably Japanese in origin and institutional history. It emerged within a post-war memory regime that foregrounded Japanese suffering while often placing Japan's role as a colonial and imperial aggressor into the background. When we use hibakusha to describe Koreans who were conscripted as forced labourers, or to think about people irradiated in Bikini, Semipalatinsk, Chernobyl, Fukushima, or Yongbyon, we are borrowing a word that carries the gravitational pull of that regime. It can, unintentionally, make the Japanese experience feel normatively central and others derivative. To me, this is not an argument to abandon the term, but a reason to handle it with care—which Takahashi's own material, perhaps more than her explicit framing, quietly demands. This unease about language is not merely semantic; it points toward a deeper analytical question about where responsibility is located, and where it quietly recedes.

Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* makes two essential contributions. First, it demonstrates that nuclear harm cannot be understood apart from colonial histories and Cold War divisions—a claim with implications far beyond Korean cases. Second, it provincialises the Japanese-centred hibakusha category, showing that Koreans do not fit neatly into existing frameworks but rather unsettle them from within. These interventions make the book indispensable for scholars working at the intersections of nuclear history, Asian studies, diaspora studies, and postcolonial theory. The book should be read by historians of modern Korea and Japan seeking to understand how nuclear violence operated through colonial and Cold War structures; by security scholars who too often treat "North Korea's nuclear programme" as disconnected from lived experiences of radiation; by scholars of transnational activism interested in how solidarity operates across borders without transcending national identities; and by anyone working on comparative nuclear geographies who needs a detailed case study of how nuclear harm, colonialism, and division become inseparable. What remains to be done is substantial: gendered analyses of care and stigma, systematic comparison with other nuclear-affected communities, archival research into state policy decisions, and attention to those who remained silent. But Takahashi has given us the ground to stand on. *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* is not an endpoint but an opening—one that demands we take seriously the plurality of nuclear harm, the politics of naming, and the unfinished work of accountability. For that, scholars across disciplines are in her debt.