



Performing the meanings of money in the trials of war orphans against Japan

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Abstract

Utilitarian accounts of monetary disputes hinge on too limited an understanding of the nature of money. This limitation is particularly salient when it is applied to studying the disputes regarding compensation in historical grievance litigations. This article, based on in-depth interviews with 40 “war orphans,” Japanese citizens who were left behind in China after Japan’s surrender in 1945, shows how parties primarily disagree on the question of “What for?” and not “How much?” We argue that the disputes centered around the meaning of the money offered by the Japanese government. We identify three types of “money acts” through which money is demanded and justified, labeled and categorized, divided and distributed. The lingering resentment felt by the war orphans can only be made sense of by attending to the meaning dimension of this legal-cum-political dispute that lasted for a decade.

Keywords Reparation · Historical grievances · Money act · Performance · Japanese war orphans

Introduction

Claims for reparations have become increasingly common as victims of past injustices and their descendants appeal to legal and political channels to seek redress for historical grievances (Nobles 2008; Dromi 2014; Torpey 2017). In the United States, for example, there have been renewed calls for reparations for the descendants of slaves for the centuries of suffering endured (Huddleston 2021). Indeed, the rise in the number of lawsuits and movements seeking reparations reflects a global trend toward historical justice. It reflects claimants’ refusal to settle on the terms agreed upon by governments (Arrington 2019). Money, as is often the case, lies at the center of reparation disputes. Even though reparation claims are inextricably

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linked to deeply felt grievances and life-changing experiences, scholars often treat the discussion of meaning in these claims as separate from monetary disputes. This distinction can be attributed to the inherent tension between commensuration and meaning-making that economic sociologists have identified. Money is viewed to have diminished the unique experiences that victims suffered. It is probably for this reason that the monetization of suffering is approached as antagonistic to meaning-making claims.

The commensuration thesis implies an unease towards discussing unique historical experiences in monetary terms. Sociological works on reparation politics have instead primarily focused on how people reject the equation of what they lost with money. When victims seek money as a form of compensation, there is the concern that layers of meaning are stripped away from the moment traumatic losses and life-changing experiences are *reduced* to money. Moreover, victims engaged in reparation politics often embody the contradictory tension between money and meaning. Dromi (2014), for example, in discussing the meanings of money in the 2005 removal of Jewish–Israeli settlers from Israeli-occupied territories, identified the tension by showing how settlers on the one hand demanded full compensation but, on the other, insisted that no compensation could make up for what they had lost. In so arguing, sociologists follow a long-standing thesis that can be traced back to the classical works of Marx and Simmel, which see money and the single-minded focus on exchange value that monetary circulation promotes as alienating (Marx 1982; Simmel 2004).

Other studies of reparation generally adopt a utilitarian approach to the analysis of compensation for victim groups. It is an understanding that judges the success or failure to resolve a dispute solely by its outcomes—specifically, whether or not states are in favor of compensating claimants (Atuahene 2011; Rwelamira and Werle 1996; Williams and Collins 2004). Money is viewed quantitatively. It is treated as a ledger that tallies the gains and losses between aggrieved groups and their governments. The question is always “How much?” and not “What kind?” This again focuses on money’s persistent tendency to convert quality into quantity (Espeland and Stevens 1998; Carruthers and Espeland 1998).

Drawing from the works of economic sociologists, we assert that money and morals should not be treated as mutually antagonistic. We further advance a view of monetary acts inspired by the works of economic sociologists such as Zelizer (1989) and the notion of performance as proposed by Alexander (2004). We also engage with works that examine how actors’ perception of the meaning of money shapes their actions and apply it to our specific case. To demonstrate what a cultural approach can offer when studying reparation disputes, we turn to an instance of historical grievance in Japan where legal recourse was sought—the lawsuits of war orphans against the Japanese government. In the course of litigation, the parties at once confronted the diverse meanings of money and disputed how much was sufficient. The war orphan litigation showcases disputes over both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of money. It is a particularly appropriate opportunity for exploring the oft-neglected aspect of monetary dispute as the parties identified, clarified, and promoted the qualities of money that they upheld. The lawsuits that we study in this paper were launched by a group of Japanese citizens, known as the war orphans,



against their own government. The litigations were unprecedented in many ways. There was no insurance money, and no prior settlement offers to mitigate the nature of the litigation as a moral trial. The orphans accused the government of depriving them of their rights to live and work in their motherland and to immerse themselves in the Japanese culture and language. The litigants talked about the rights and duties of citizenship, and the responsibilities that their state owed to them as a result of the government's act of abandonment. The war orphans demanded monetary compensation for the hardship and lost opportunities that they suffered as a result of the government's neglect.¹ Surely, as part of the dispute, they must have demanded *more* money from the Japanese government than what the latter offered? However, the dispute was not just about more or less compensation. Difference does not convert into magnitude, to either the war orphans or the Japanese government. At the heart of the dispute was also what this money *meant*. Such meaning only comes to be situated in the performance of money acts (see below).

This study makes several contributions to the extant scholarship on money and historical reparation. Monetary demand inevitably lies at the core of historical grievance cases. Yet, the performative work of money can be analytically distinguished from its utility value in reparation politics. The patently moralistic character of the dispute shines a light on the dual nature of money that is often concealed in everyday transactions. We argue that meaning is performed in "money acts," actions that justify why money needs to be offered, what the money in dispute entails, and how the sum of money is determined and allocated. It is through these performances that the war orphans performed their suffering to others and convinced others to believe in and identify with their experience (Alexander 2004; Ng and Kidder 2010; Dromi 2014). It is also through these performances that the Japanese government performed their duties to the victims, albeit falling short of offering a direct apology. Our turn to cultural meaning explains why the war orphans remained unfulfilled even though the Japanese government offered close to what the war orphans requested in terms of monetary settlement. The nature of the money as defined by the government and the way it is distributed preclude the meaning of an apology. In the conclusion of this article, we discuss the broader implications of our study. In particular, we suggest that the current debate about reparation for African Americans should give more consideration to the meaning dimension. We argue that felicitous resolutions of other reparation cases depend on whether victims and the government could agree on meaning or at least result in a situation in which each party can continue to hold on to their preferred meaning of money.

¹ Zelizer (1996, p. 482) describes compensation as money that implies an equal exchange of values. Here we adopt the term as it is used in the legal context—money provided to compensate a victim for having been the victim of the defendant's act.



Cultural performance of money

Economic sociologists have shown in numerous studies that money is socially encoded in varied ways. As Zelizer (1997, 2005, 2012) insistently points out, different kinds of money are shaped at the core by the cultural values the users bestow upon them. These values do not simply appear from nowhere. They are embodied in the social practices surrounding money that sort otherwise identical media into distinct categories. For this reason, people routinely *earmark* different meanings and separate uses to particular monies (Zelizer 1997). But if the meaning of money is shaped by social practices, it is also an important means through which social relations are defined and affirmed (Bandelj 2012; Zelizer 2012). Indeed, as Bandelj et al. (2017) suggest, a growing volume of research has followed Zelizer's call to study how people painstakingly negotiate what kinds of money or payments are appropriate for the different kinds of social relations in which they participate (Anteby 2010; Almeling 2011; Bandelj 2009; Mears 2011; Biscotti et al. 2012; Haylett 2012). To extend the cultural thesis of money to studying reparation politics, we argue that in historical grievance claims, there are "money acts" that are socially performative. Sociologically speaking, a performance is a "social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander 2004, p. 529). We use the term to highlight social actions and institutional practices that give meaning to money in these campaigns.

Money acts can be analytically distinguished into at least three types of action. First, money acts can refer to the public acts of demanding, negotiating, and awarding of money in disputes. If, as Zelizer (2012) suggests, people negotiate their relations with one another through multiple monetary distinctions, then acts of offering and accepting money are performances through which human associations are defined and valued (Dodd 2014, p. 294). In historical grievance cases, victims explain why they seek money; they articulate what the money means to them. In so doing, they shape money for their own causes, and bend it to their own political goals. They also signify to themselves and to others the meanings money holds for them (Dromi 2014). Pecuniary and nonpecuniary values are interpellated through the performance of this form of money act. It adds a layer of significance that goes beyond simply dollars and cents.

Second, there are money acts that articulate the nature of money. Specifically, we refer to how money is labeled, not only as privately earmarked by individuals, but also publicly as part of their political demands. Our approach draws attention to the plurality of labels that money is assumed to take in reparation disputes—compensation, damages, solatium, pension, benefits, etc. Just as the social practice of earmarking confers meaning to types of money, the label given to the money in transaction indexes the losses victims seek to redress and the relationship they wish to be repaired or restored. The question is as much about "What kind?" as "How much?" Each of these labels define the relationship between the payor and the payee in different ways. They also connect or distinguish individuals within the group who are given the money. In their study of the social significance of the Earned Income Tax Credit, Sykes et al. (2015) argue that the *value*



of the tax credit as a form of money is that it confers dignity to the recipients and creates a sense of inclusion for them. Third, money acts also include the institutional arrangements of dividing and dispensing money that give expression to the meaning of money. These techno-bureaucratic practices are “objectivating” in the sense that they uphold an appearance that meaning stands outside of individual subjectivity (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Acts of this category offer less of a narrative throughline. However, when a reparation dispute is settled, there still remain administrative details that need to be addressed. Who is eligible for the money? Is such eligibility going to be fault-based or means-tested? How is money going to be distributed? What is the modality of distribution? Lump sum? Instalments? Or some other form? All these seemingly mundane questions of implementation give a different complexion to money that changes hands. To refer to Sykes et al. (2015) once more, tax credit is valued more highly because it is not *means-tested*. The money confers dignity to the recipients compared to other forms of means-tested government support. Other studies of welfare money also show that the form of payout matters. For example, recipients are given more freedom when they receive lump sum payments (Arkes et al. 1994; Epley and Gneezy 2007; Sykes et al. 2015).

Another question that this article addresses is the condition, from the perspective of meaning, under which a felicitous resolution of reparation disputes can be achieved. Of course, for victims and the state to come to a resolution, both sides must more or less agree on the amount of money offered and accepted. But beyond this, they must either: (1) agree on what the money means; and (2) if not, settle matters in a space in which multiple meanings are able to coexist. In other words, both sides can sustain their chosen meaning in that space, even if they disagree on what the meaning may be. Even when a consensus is absent, the parties can still reconcile their differences as long as the money acts by both sides create a sufficiently large tent to accommodate a coexistence of meanings. This is a point that Lainer-Vos made in his study of the Israeli national bond in the 1950s. He attributes the success of the Jewish bond project to the social character of the bond as a boundary object that allowed American and Israeli Jews, despite their differences, to attribute multiple meanings to their mutual engagement (Lainer-Vos 2012, p. 80). Borrowing from science studies scholars, Lainer-Vos uses the term “boundary object” to suggest that monetary practices with defined meanings can sometimes allow diverse groups to engage with and disagree with each other simultaneously. The key to sustaining a boundary object is the presence of a social space that actors can attribute their preferred meanings to the monetary exchange. As we will see, our case of the war orphans shows that the money offered by the Japanese government failed to serve as a boundary object that enables the coexistence of meanings. Although the two sides came close to agreeing on the amount of money, they remained far apart in terms of what the money actually meant. The nature of their disagreement was not quantitative but qualitative. Most important, the money offered by the Japanese government was too firmly entrenched in routinized bureaucracies to allow for any apologetic meaning to be upheld by the orphans. Rather than serving as a boundary object, the money defined the war orphans as a group of senior citizens who were in financial need. It omitted any semblance of apologetic meaning from the monetary transfer.



Japanese war orphans and their lawsuits

After Japan's defeat in the Asia–Pacific War (1931–1945), it was estimated that more than 2500 Japanese women and children were left behind in northeast China.² They were described collectively by the Japanese media as *zanryū-koji*, literally meaning orphans left behind. Many were the children of families of Imperial Army soldiers, Manchurian railway employees, and farmers who had emigrated to northern China at the request of the Japanese government to establish a war-time puppet state known as *Manshūkoku* (Yamaguchi 2020). By the early 1930s, around 270,000 Japanese people had moved to Manchuria (Ōkubo 2006; Tamanoi 2006; Ward 2007). The Japanese government sent Japanese civilians to Manchuria under the name of the Manchurian–Mongolian Pioneer Youth Corps (*Manmō kaitaku-dan*) (Araragi 1994). When the Japanese imperial government surrendered in 1945, some Japanese people living in Manchuria were able to return to their homeland. Others died from Soviet attacks; some committed suicide collectively; yet others died from starvation and disease (Chan 2011). The war orphans are those women and children who survived in China.

Many war orphans were fostered by Chinese households as infants or toddlers. They did not know of their Japanese lineage until much later. Starting in the 1980s, a decade after the normalization of the diplomatic relationship between Japan and China in 1972, war orphans began to return to Japan. From 1981 to 2001, around 2000 war orphans and their families (spouses and children) moved back to Japan. Recent estimates indicate that around 6000 orphans' families lived in Japan. Many of them are now in their seventies and eighties.

In December 2002, 629 war orphans filed a class action lawsuit against the Japanese government in Tokyo District Court (the number of orphans who joined the Tokyo lawsuit eventually rose to 1092). They demanded compensation for the government's negligence to carry out early repatriation and offer settlement assistance (Itoh 2010, p. 175). The war orphans eventually filed their cases in 15 different regions of Japan, including, among others, Osaka and Kobe. The plaintiffs claimed compensation of ¥33 million (\$330,000) per person, totaling ¥21 billion (\$210 million) for the entire group (Itoh 2010, p. 176).³ Among the war-related compensation lawsuits, this was the largest monetary claim in Japanese history (Efrid 2008).

In July 2005, the Osaka District Court handed down the earliest verdict among the 15 lawsuits, which were based on very similar grounds. The Osaka court rejected the plaintiffs' claims and ruled that the government was not responsible for any compensation (Itoh 2010, p. 189). The Osaka decision was followed by the verdict of the District Court of Kobe. It was the Kobe court that gave the war orphans their

² According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Japanese people who were left behind in China were divided into three groups: *zanryū-hojin*, literally meaning Japanese people left behind in China; *zanryū-koji*, orphans left behind in China; and *zanryū-fujin*, women left behind in China. To distinguish a *zanryū-fujin* from a *zanryū-koji*, the government drew an age qualification: if someone was more than 13 years old at the time of the Japanese surrender, they were considered women left behind. In this paper, we mainly discuss the second group, who form the largest of the three.

³ The exchange rate for Japanese currency is calculated at US\$1 = ¥100.



legal victory. In December 2006, the court decided in favor of the plaintiffs. The judge in Kobe wrote that the Japanese government had failed in its responsibility to effect both the orphans' timely repatriation and their self-sufficiency once in Japan. The judge compared the treatment of the war orphans unfavorably to that shown to North Korean abductees. Above all, the Kobe judge noted that the war orphans were entitled to reparations (*isha-ryō*) due to the government's failure to repatriate them after the normalization of the diplomatic relationship between China and Japan (Efird 2008, pp. 384–385).

The Kobe victory, however, turned out to be an aberration. Eventually, six other district courts handed down their decisions.⁴ All the verdicts went against the war orphans. In particular, the Tokyo District Court handed down what was considered a thorough defeat for the war orphans. Not only did the court rule against their claims, but it also did not recognize any pain and suffering that they endured during the years they were in China and their subsequent years in Japan—a historical reality that both the Kobe and the Osaka courts recognized (though the latter did not consider the government to be responsible, but rather that it was an unfortunate consequence of a series of historical events) (Sugawara 2009; Asano and To 2016).⁵

On the same day in which the crushing verdict by the Tokyo court was handed down, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered the war orphans an olive branch. Abe announced that, regardless of the outcomes of the remaining lawsuits, the government would provide the orphans with additional assistance (Asahi Shimbun 2007a). On the day following the announcement of the policy, Abe invited the plaintiffs to his official residence to personally inform them of the decision to offer new assistance.⁶ He assigned Minister of Health Hakuo Yanagisawa to spearhead the effort to develop a new policy to enable the orphans to live the rest of their lives with dignity. The Minister of Health responded that the policy would be announced by the summer of 2007 (Asahi Shimbun 2007b). To aid Yanagisawa, a project team made up of congress members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was formed to offer recommendations to revamp the assistance policy. However, this gesture of the Japanese government did not soothe the debate regarding what was owed to the war orphans. Quite the contrary was the case—by admitting that the Japanese government needed to do something more for the group, they pushed the debate into the public space. The exchanges between the two sides continued throughout the first seven months of 2007. Ostensibly, the discussion centered on the mechanism through which money would be given to the war orphans. As we will see, this lengthy exchange was bound up with the meaning of money as understood

⁴ These were the District Courts of Tokyo, Nagoya, Tokushima, Hiroshima, Kōchi, and Sapporo.

⁵ The Tokyo court also ordered that the legal costs were to be borne by the war orphans.

⁶ The following day, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with a group of war orphans and their advocates, and told them that, regardless of the outcomes of the lawsuits, he would direct the Minister of Health to produce a new assistance plan for the war orphans by early summer. The following day, he announced to the Diet budget committee that the new scheme would be designed to allow the orphans to “feel good about returning to Japan” and to “live with dignity as Japanese” (Minutes of the Diet 2007). The full text of Abe's remarks to the budget committee is available at <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/166/0018/16602010018002a.html>.



by the two sides. The orphans and the government officials continued to discuss what the money in dispute meant in their preferred terms.

In July 2007, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (hereafter the Ministry of Health) announced the new revised policy. This guaranteed all orphans a full basic monthly public pension of ¥66,000 (\$660). On top of this, each orphan whose household income was lower than the minimum income would receive a special subsidy of ¥80,000 (\$800), pushing the total monthly amount that an orphan would receive to ¥146,000 (\$1460). In the meantime, upon learning of the policy, the orphans and their lawyers demanded compensation of ¥170,000 (\$1700) per month, and an extra ¥70,000 (\$7000) for those who resettled in Japan with their spouse, increasing the total to ¥240,000 (\$2400) per month.⁷

The new monthly allowance, however, came with some strings attached. Dropping the lawsuits was a precondition imposed by the LDP's project team for the augmented pension and benefits (Asano and To 2016, p. 20). Reluctantly, and not without fierce internal debates, the war orphan representatives agreed to drop their lawsuits against the government and accepted the offer (Asahi Shimbun 2007c). While the government's proffered money still fell short of the group's demand, the gap was evidently narrowed. The government's package came into law in January 2008. A war orphan would be entitled to a total monthly benefit of ¥146,000 (\$1460) providing they passed the means test. Furthermore, the Japanese government promised to continue to provide medical and housing assistance.

More than a decade has passed since the introduction of the new policy—has the monetary dispute between the war orphans and the Japanese government finally been resolved? The answer is not so straightforward. On the one hand, the orphans dropped the lawsuits, on the other there is a general feeling among them that they were left with little choice. The decision to drop the lawsuits also drove a wedge between the orphans living in different parts of Japan. Many of them have seen an improved standard of living because of the policy (see below). However, they nonetheless continue to express resentment and a sense of loss. It does not appear that it is the remaining gap between the money that they requested and the money that was given to them which fuels this resentment. It all goes back to the debate in 2007. It fundamentally relates to what the money means to the orphans and the government. To understand why the dispute remains unresolved, the remainder of this paper analyzes the meaning aspect of the dispute by unpacking the money acts undertaken by the two sides.

⁷ See “*Chūgoku ‘zanryū’ koji ni taisuru aratana shien-saku ni kansuru yōbō-sho* [Request of New Policy for War Orphans Left Behind in China],” published by *Chūgoku “zanryū koji” zenkoku renraku-kai daihyō-dan* [National Liaison Committee Delegation of War Orphans Left Behind in China] on 11 April 2007.



Methods

The data for this study came from four months of field research in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe conducted during July and August 2019 and then December 2019 and January 2020. These three cities are among the largest in Japan and with the greatest concentration of war orphans. In terms of the significance of the lawsuits, the Tokyo lawsuit had the largest war orphan participation. The Osaka lawsuit verdict was the first among the 15 lawsuits (which may have had an effect on the rest of the lawsuits' judgments). In addition, the Kobe lawsuit was the only one to have a settlement in favor of the war orphans at the district court level.

The first author requested interviews with a total of 42 war orphans in the three sites—all but two agreed.⁸ Snowball sampling was used to identify our informants. Our informants were born between 1930 and 1945. At the time of the interviews, the informants were aged between 73 and 88 years old. The ratio of women to men was two to one. Their level of education varied, from some who never attended school to others who had obtained a doctoral degree. Most of them were educated in China. There was only one person who was not educated in China but had completed a high school degree at the age of 60 by taking classes at night school after returning to Japan.

In Tokyo and Osaka, interviews were conducted in local community centers which the war orphans attended.⁹ In Kobe, there are no community centers specifically built for war orphans. Consequently, the author recruited informants at the Japanese language classes for war orphans held in Kobe Friendship Center and Amagasaki City Lifelong Learning Plaza. The interviews were conducted at the two facilities after the informants had finished their classes. Three interviews were conducted at the apartments of the informants as it was inconvenient for the older informants to leave home.

The interviews were semi-structured. The authors prepared a list of questions as a guide. The first part of the interview related to their experiences upon returning to Japan. Informants were then asked about their views on the lawsuits against the Japanese government and their lives after the lawsuits. The interviews typically ranged from one to two hours. The shortest lasted around 30 minutes and the longest took over four hours. Many interviewees were eager to share their views. The first author conversed with the informants in both Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. The informants would generally choose to speak in Japanese at the beginning of the interview. However, they would sometimes supplement this with Mandarin Chinese. Even after living in Japan for many years, the war orphans were palpably more comfortable speaking in Chinese. Most of the interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants, although six preferred not to have their interview taped. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the informants.

⁸ Notes were taken during the interview. Furthermore, among the 39 interviewees, 33 of them agreed to have their interviews recorded.

⁹ The author conducted the interviews in the meeting rooms of these centers when they allowed for privacy.



Interviewing Japanese government officials proved to be a challenge. The first author's requests for interview were declined.¹⁰ That said, the Japanese government's position towards the war orphans is well known, as it has been repeatedly stated in public documents. To understand the money acts performed by the government, the authors conducted archival research of legal documents and policy statements that enunciated the government's rationale for offering money to orphans. We also studied how the money was labeled and its mode of dispersion. We performed a close reading of the minutes of the meetings concerning the new policy and the statements and transcripts of the officials of the Ministry of Health in four discussion meetings with the war orphans and five experts' meetings. These documents recorded events that occurred between January and July 2007. They were also a source of contemporaneous quotes that shed light on how the activist war orphans and their lawyers articulated their demands while the process of formulating a new policy was ongoing. We analyzed the war orphans' requests, testimonies, statements, flyers, and brochures; and the lawyers and NGOs' statements concerning the manner of compensation and related news articles.¹¹

Based on our reading of the transcripts of the interviews, we generated categories to differentiate the ways in which war orphans and their advocates on the one side and government officials on the other viewed and discussed monetary value. The questions that guided our analysis included: What did both the war orphans' and government's sides find to be relevant factors to cite when negotiating the contents of the policy? How did both sides justify the demand and the offer of money? Was the discussion related to the amount of compensation or other aspects? Which features of the new policy did the war orphans want to change?

The Japanese government's view: money as "Pension and Benefits"

To outside observers, it seems obvious that the enhanced pension and benefits offered by the Japanese government were a direct response to the lawsuits launched by the war orphans against their own government. However, the government never admitted to the connection between the two. The Ministry of Health maintained that the new policy was offered to all eligible war orphans, including those who did not participate in the lawsuits.

When describing the reason why the Japanese government offered aid to the war orphans, the Ministry of Health and the ruling party's project team stated that, although the government did not have any obligations or responsibilities legally or morally, the war orphans were Japanese nationals with tragic life experiences and

¹⁰ The author also set up an appointment with a government official from the Ministry of Health who was in charge of matters related to war orphans, but this meeting was canceled by the official. Itoh (2010) also mentioned that government officials did not respond to her requests to be interviewed on the subject matter.

¹¹ The minutes of experts' meetings can be found on the official website of the Ministry of Health. As regards the minutes from representatives of the plaintiffs' testimony and others, the first author obtained them during her field trip in the summer and winter of 2019.



thus the government could not ignore this disadvantaged group of people in society. In April 2007, when it responded to the war orphans' proposal, the ministry emphasized that this benefit was not (*kokka hoshō*), which is monetary compensation given for the state's wrongdoings, but it is instead supporting aid considering the war orphans' marginalized situations. It further maintained that, since the state did not have any legal responsibilities to compensate the war orphans, they would not provide support to their spouses.¹²

No lump sum

The government was steadfast in refusing to offer a lump sum payment to the war orphans. In format, the lump sum payment, irrespective of what it is called, was too close to reparation. Anyone who received a one-off payment would be marked as different from other senior citizens. As mentioned, the government insisted that any money given to the orphans should come in the bureaucratic and routinized form of pension and benefits (Ōkubo 2004, p. 227). The ruling party's project team absolutely rejected the option of a lump sum payment in the report. It made much of the possibility that a lump sum, however, large, would not be enough to cover the expenses of some orphans for the rest of their lives. The average age of war orphans was around 70 in 2007. As the group grew older, the government reasoned, medical care and caring services would only become more expensive. The government expressed that some of the orphans would still need further welfare support if they received a lump sum. Moreover, since the war orphans were dispersed across around 800 different municipalities, a flat payment would fail to take into consideration the varied living standards of different regions. In metropolitan cities such as Tokyo and Osaka, living expenses are higher than those in more rural regions of Japan. It is noteworthy to highlight that the government rejected any lump sum payout on the grounds of protecting the livelihood of the orphans. The money is intended to *kaigo* the orphans. In so doing, the Japanese government identified itself as a paternal authority that took care of its older citizens (lump sum is uncertain), quite the contrary to the war orphans' claim that it was a government that abandoned their citizens.

Treating the orphans as vulnerable but intrinsically no different from any other senior citizens was a theme that underlined the Japanese government's efforts in negotiating with the war orphans and their advocates. It was also cited as a reason why the government could not offer the orphans too much money: the war orphans were just one of many groups of senior citizens which the welfare system needed to take care of. If the policy deviated significantly from the existing formula of calculating pensions and benefits for the seniors, it would incur unfunded liability that would put a strain on the Japanese welfare system. The government argued that a

¹² See Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's "Shigatsu Jū ichi-nichi zuke Genkoku-dan Yōbō no Mondaiten [Problems of Plaintiff Group's Request]," 11 April 2007.



huge amount of money offered to the war orphans could lead to deeper deficits in the already stressed welfare state.¹³

However, there was a previous case of the Japanese government offering targeted money to a group of victims. In 2002, when the Japanese civilians who were abducted by the North Korean agency returned to Japan, the government decided to pay the public insurance fee to enable them to obtain the full amount of the national pension [¥66,000 (\$660)]. Similar to the war orphans, the abductees could not contribute to the national pension fund during the years in which they were held in North Korea. In the case of the war orphans, the Japanese government insisted that they had to be fair to all Japanese citizens.

Are the war orphans satisfied?

One year after the implementation of the new policy, the Ministry of Health conducted a survey among the war orphans. Around 75% of the responding war orphans and left-behind women said that they were satisfied (31.8%) or somewhat satisfied (43.1%) with the new policy. However, there were also approximately 20% of war orphans and women who were dissatisfied with the new policy.

A closer look at the survey identifies the sources of satisfaction among the majority of the respondents. Over half of them (57.5%) indicated that their income level had risen following the implementation of the new policy. Around a third (33.8%) said that they were less anxious than before with the new guarantees provided by the policy. Around another third (31.8%) suggested that responses from various government departments had improved. Other reasons that contributed to the higher satisfaction level included lessons provided to the war orphans to learn the Japanese language, opportunities for them to take trips to visit overseas relatives, support provided by social workers in everyday life, and the availability of a translation service.

The questions in the government-administered survey measured the efficacy of the new support measures. They sought to reveal whether the orphans' income level had risen and whether they felt less anxious about living in Japan. The creator of the survey was noticeably preoccupied with answering one big question: Has the new policy improved the material lives of the war orphans? This approach seemed reasonable, but only if one does not question the designation of the money as strictly a pension in the first place. It is clear from its wording that the Japanese government treated the additional money offered as a *kikoku-sha no nenkin*. The survey concerns the utility that the new benefit brings, presupposing that the money offered *means* benefit and nothing else. By labeling the money as a special pension, the government played down the difference between the war orphans and ordinary seniors in Japan. The war orphans received a public pension from the government, just

¹³ See Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's "Shigatsu Jū ichi-nichi zuke Genkoku-dan Yōbō no Mondaiten [Problems of Plaintiff Group's Request]," 11 April 2007.



like other senior citizens aged 65 years or above with a minimum of ten years of contributions.¹⁴

Support benefits?

There is a complex bureaucratic mechanism created to govern the distribution of the extra money given to the war orphans on top of the full basic-level pension. Besides being eligible for the national pension, the government also offered the war orphans who were in need *shien kyūfu*. In order to be eligible to receive “support benefits,” a war orphan is required to pass the means test. The government would run a check of the individual’s assets and decide whether they *needed* the support benefits. The determination of the eligibility for receiving support benefits is modeled upon the welfare system made eligible to the lower-income population in Japan (the *seikatsu hogo* system). In reality, though, many of the war orphans, in particular those who participated in the lawsuits against the government, were *in need*. According to a 2003 survey conducted by the Japanese government, more than 60% of the war orphans repatriated to Japan received support benefits. One can assume that, among those who joined the litigation, the percentage was much higher.

The descriptors of “pension” and “benefits,” innocuous sounding as they are, were political labels. They positioned the money offered to the orphans under the mammoth social welfare bureaucracy of the Japanese government. The orphans are defined as “ordinary citizens” who are “in need.” What is conspicuous by its absence was the reason why most of the war orphans were in need in the first place. Through bureaucratic embedding, the money was cleansed of any apologetic meaning. It was, above all, not reparation by any means.

However, designating the money as “benefits” was not without its problems. Clearly, even at the level of utility, the “benefits” offered to ordinary Japanese seniors and the *special* “benefits” offered to the war orphans are different. For example, anyone who receives welfare receives house-call inspections by the Social Welfare Bureau two to ten times per month (Itoh 2010, p. 134). This would mean that, if a war orphan traveled outside of Japan, their benefits would be reduced by their days of absence. As a group, the war orphans had lived for four decades in China. Almost without exception, their spouses are Chinese. Having spent the bulk of their lives in China, they wanted to be able to make trips to China to visit friends and family members. Consequently, while maintaining that the money was “benefits,” the Japanese government relented and agreed that the war orphans could leave Japan to travel to China for as long as two months without being subjected to the standard penalty that would apply to others in the benefits system.

¹⁴ Regarding the Japanese pension system, it primarily consists of the national pension (*kokumin nenkin*) and employees’ pension (*kōsei nenkin*). If Japanese nationals living in Japan are between the ages of 20 and 60, they have to enroll and pay this pension plan to the government. The employees’ pension is mainly for those who are employed by private companies and employees are entitled to receive pension payment after their retirement.



How money is viewed by the war orphans

The last section showed that, while the Japanese government increased the sum of money to meet the demands of the orphans, they never wavered from designating the money as pension and benefits. In this section, we shift our focus to the war orphans and examine what they want to receive from the Japanese government. We ask the question: What does the money from the government mean to them? And, equally important: What do they want the money to mean?

“We Are Not Pensioners”

From the very beginning, the war orphans identified themselves as a distinct group of victims. They saw the money as a form of compensation. This was the reason for their consistent rejections of any means-tested or needs-based system. They argued that all war orphans including their spouses should receive the same amount of money from the government. Although individual suffering varied, war orphans shared the same experiences of abandonment that defined them as a group. The war orphans talked about this collective suffering and harm. This sharing of a collective identity was made most evident in their legal petitions. Below is an excerpt from the orphans’ petition to the Tokyo District Court:

Although the harm that each plaintiff suffered is different, there are commonalities in that they were separated from their [Japanese] birth parents and were left behind in China. Plaintiffs grew up unavoidably under the circumstances in which they were forced to live as Japanese in China, facing possible persecution. In addition, plaintiffs also suffered severe hardship. They barely survive in the absence of any assistance from the defendant [the Japanese government]. This lack of support has persisted even after they returned to Japan more than forty years after the end of WWII. These are the common experiences shared among the plaintiffs.¹⁵

The same collective identity is emphasized by the war orphans in the interviews. For example, Mrs. Akiyama, aged 77, who is now a retiree after working as a janitor for a decade in Japan, stated that any compensation should be for all of the war orphans:

Why did I participate in the lawsuit? It is not a problem involving just one person. All of us are victims of the war ... This is not only for myself. I always think we [war orphans] are like brothers and sisters. So, I desperately wanted to participate in the lawsuit.¹⁶

Even after the withdrawal of the lawsuits, the war orphans continued to talk about themselves as a group united by common experiences. They insisted on the principle

¹⁵ See “Legal Petition to Tokyo District Court,” December 2002.

¹⁶ Interview conducted by author with Yoko Akiyama (pseudonym). Tokyo, Japan, July 29, 2019.



of receiving equal amounts of money from the government regardless of their varied financial needs. In fact, they resisted the label “welfare money,” or *seikatsu hogo*, which connotes the meaning that money is given to them individually based on their financial situation.¹⁷ One informant, Mr. Tsukamoto, aged 75, who worked as an engineer (*Saitame-ken*) in Japan before retirement, expressed:

I worked really hard so I could buy a house in Japan. I studied hard and put in a lot of effort to get a better life in Japan. Honestly, there are people who just want to receive welfare from the government and do not like to work at all. However, I think that the government should look at us from a historical perspective, and not treat us as a group of individuals who need to be taken care of.¹⁸

In general, the war orphans have few assets in Japan (Asano and To 2016, pp. 279–281). Neither have they earned enough income to fail the means test. Their opposition is to the meaning created by the bureaucratic mechanism that branded the money as welfare benefit. When they talked about needs, the informants emphasized their unique needs as “war orphans,” not the common healthcare needs of aging seniors. They talked about the education of which they were robbed. They talked about the economic boom in the 1980s that they missed out on. They talked about the careers that they might have enjoyed. Mrs. Nakajima, aged 77, who also worked as a janitor after returning to Japan, noted ruefully:

When we were little, we were deprived of the rights that the government offered to its citizens. Isn’t it free to study at elementary and middle schools in Japan? We did not have that right. After we returned to Japan, we kept pushing ourselves to work and work. However, we spent the bulk of our lives in China. Owing to my lack of Japanese language skills, I could only get a part-time job. If I introduce myself to other people as a Japanese, nobody trusts me. Everyone believes I am a foreigner.¹⁹

A constant struggle faced by the war orphans is how their limited Japanese-language skills present a barrier for them. Growing up in China meant that many could not speak or write Japanese with any proficiency.²⁰ Facing this language barrier, they talked about being alienated from their own culture and language. The feeling

¹⁷ See *Chūgoku “zanryū koji” ni taisuru aratana shien-saku ni kansuru yōbō-sho [Request of New Policy for War Orphans Left Behind in China]* published by *Chūgoku “zanryū koji” zenkoku renraku-kai daihyō-dan* [National Liaison Committee Delegation of War Orphans Left Behind in China], 11 April 2007.

¹⁸ Interview conducted by author with Akira Tsukamoto (pseudonym). Tokyo, Japan, December 20, 2019.

¹⁹ Interview conducted by author with Naomi Nakajima (pseudonym). Tokyo, Japan, December 18, 2019.

²⁰ The war orphans whom the first author interviewed did not show any great fluency in Japanese. It was the oldest of the group, the *zanryū-fujin*—that is, women who were aged over 13 when they were left behind in China—who spoke Japanese the most proficiently.



of being a stranger at home is encapsulated by the response of Mr. Moriyama, aged 77, who worked in a factory in Japan for several years before retirement. He said:

The most distressing thing is that we not only lost our loved ones, but we also lost our own language. We are not deaf or dumb. People say we can't talk; but our ears are fine, and we can speak Chinese very well.²¹

Despite the hardship during the post-war Showa period, the war orphans believed that, if they had grown up in Japan, they could have shared a sense of collective achievement that characterized that generation of Japanese people. They could have spoken Japanese fluently and that, in turn, would have meant it would not have been an issue for them to find a job. They could have worked and contributed to *kōsei nenkin*, the national pension scheme.²² Giving them public assistance now diminishes the losses they suffered and, above all, the initiating role of their own destiny that they could have assumed:

I've always wondered: What could have been if I had been able to return to my homeland as a child or a teenager? I'd probably have been able to use my mother language without difficulty, work as diligently as anyone else, make contributions to Japanese society, and, by now, enjoy some peaceful olden years.²³

Even though they agreed to drop the lawsuits, the war orphans continue to view the means test as demeaning and divisive. They mention a shared identity forged by common experiences—the experiences of abandonment that the Japanese government was reluctant to talk about.

Symbolic quality of the quantity of ¥170,000

When the Japanese government categorically refused to offer any lump sum payment, the war orphans demanded a monthly payment of ¥170,000 (\$1700) per person from the government. The figure of ¥170,000 carried symbolic meaning to the orphans far beyond the difference between what they demanded [¥240,000 (\$2400)] and what the Japanese government offered [¥146,000 (\$1460)]— ¥170,000 was the amount the government offered to the five ill-fated Japanese civilians who were abducted by the North Korean government between 1977 and 1983. In a meeting with the officials of the Ministry of Health, a war orphan expressed: “It pains me to see the difference in treatment between the North Korean abductees and us by the

²¹ Interview conducted by author with Taiki Moriyama (pseudonym) Kobe, Japan, August 5, 2019.

²² Also known as the employees' pension insurance.

²³ Interview with Mr. Mitsuo Hatsuda. Mr. Hatsuda, the leader of Kobe Plaintiff Group, stated this was what he said at the Second Experts' Meeting hosted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on 21 May 2007.



government. We orphans are still not being accepted as Japanese; we are still not being accepted in Japan.”²⁴

To Mr. Hatsuda, the war orphans and the civilian abductees²⁵ similarly lived in hostile foreign countries against their will (North Korea) or not as a result of their own choosing (China). Yet, the Japanese government’s treatment was different. When the five abductees were returned to Japan in 2002, the Japanese government promptly provided them with a monthly stipend of ¥170,000 for a single person and ¥240,000 (\$2400) for a two-person household within months (Itoh 2010, p. 169).²⁶ In addition, the government paid in full the public-pension premiums for the period during which the victims were abducted in North Korea, to make sure that they would receive a full pension upon retirement. On top of this, local government agencies gave the abductees jobs, housing assistance, and other benefits (Itoh 2010, p. 170).

Compounding this, it took the Japanese government only 50 days after their return to enact a law to assist them. The orphans would claim, bitterly, that it took the government 49 years after their abandonment in China to legislate the 1994 Assistance Law for them (or 13 years since their repatriation began in 1981). Asking for ¥170,000 was as much about asserting themselves symbolically as the equals of the abductees—who were clearly considered by the Japanese government to be a group of special victims—as getting more money. If they were stranded in a hostile foreign country for much longer but were helped less, as Mr. Hatsuda said, the inevitable conclusion would be that the Japanese government did not treat them as real Japanese nationals. According to the *jus sanguinis* (rights of blood) principle in the Japanese nationality law, the war orphans are Japanese nationals. Many war orphans were born in China but, since their parents were Japanese citizens, they are by law Japanese. Many war orphans suspected that, because they were not acculturated as Japanese, they were not treated as full Japanese nationals.

However, as we have seen, the Japanese government refused to offer the same special monthly stipend to the war orphans. It was not purely a question of “How much?” The government was willing to provide more money to the group, but this had to be done through the institutional channels of pensions and benefits.

Compensation in another name?

There are some war orphans who insist that the money offered by the Japanese government is indeed a form of compensation. Except when explaining the new government policy in the interviews, they rarely used the terms “pension” or “benefits”

²⁴ Interview with Mr. Mitsuo Hatsuda. Mr. Hatsuda basically reiterated what he said at the Second Experts’ Meeting hosted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on 21 May 2007.

²⁵ From 1978 to 1983, there were Japanese civilians who were abducted by the North Korean agency, with most of the abductees being around 20 years old. After the North Korean leader Kim Jung-il admitted and apologized for North Korean agents’ abduction of 13 Japanese citizens (only five remained alive) at the summit in 2002, it became a sensational issue in Japanese society (Chanlett-Avery 2008).

²⁶ The payments, which lasted for five years, were not pension or benefits, and were given to the abductees with no strings attached (Itoh 2010, p. 169).



to describe what they received from the government. They regard the money from the new policy as a form of compensation that the Japanese government offered to apologize for their past deeds. It is also for this reason that many war orphans continue to celebrate the anniversary of the Kobe verdict, the only verdict in which a Japanese court ruled that the government should compensate the group.

Welfare money is intended for people whose household income falls below the minimum living expense in Japan. War orphans do not see themselves as normal welfare recipients for lack of personal means. They maintain that they are historical victims of the Japanese government's war-time policy that moved low-income Japanese farmers to settle in Manchuria to make up the "Pioneer Youth Corp of Manchuria and Mongolia" (*Manmōkaitaku-dan*). They returned after spending decades of their lives in China. As mentioned, reintegration was difficult for them. To the war orphans, the money should be viewed as compensation rather than welfare benefits, no matter what label the Japanese government attached to the money. They describe the offering of the money as an act infused with "care" and "concern" from the government. One informant, Ms. Nakamitsu, aged 83, asked rhetorically:

And isn't the new policy an apology from the government? If this is not an apology, what is it? If the government did not feel sorry, why did the government give you that kinds of benefit? What is an apology? I think this is enough.²⁷

Another informant, Mr. Shinomiya, aged 74, added: "I think that making the new policy is the same as apologizing. It pays us every month. We can feel the government's care every month."²⁸ Nonetheless, Ms. Nakamitsu and Mr. Shinomiya are a minority among the orphans interviewed. The money was firmly designated by the government as pension and welfare. Ms. Ikeda, aged 74, remarked that she was reminded during her course of interaction with government officials about the nature of the money:

The welfare officials always told me that the welfare expenses were the blood and sweat of the Japanese people, that I have to find work early, and I should not play around. ... It was really hard for me to be told that I was lazy and wasting taxpayers' money.²⁹

The Japanese public generally hold a negative view of welfare recipients. Since the majority of war orphans are recipients of public assistance, as a group they are stigmatized as idle people. Besides this, a welfare recipient is not able to own their personal assets, savings, and possessions (Itoh 2010, p. 134). If they made extra money from a part-time job, their salary would be deducted from their benefit.

²⁷ Interview conducted by author with Yuka Nakamitsu (pseudonym), Kobe, Japan, December 9, 2019.

²⁸ Interview with Hironori Shinomiya (pseudonym), Tokyo, 19 December 2019.

²⁹ Interview with Ms. Sumie Ikeda. Ms. Ikeda, the leader of Tokyo Plaintiff Group, repeated what she said at the Second Experts' Meeting hosted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on 21 May 2007.



This discouraged the orphans from working because they could not keep their extra income.

Resentment

When asked why they participated in the lawsuits, many war orphans acknowledged that there was an unshakable sense of resentment toward their government. After repatriation, the Japanese government did not create a comprehensive resettlement policy for them. Many could not find a job through the government agencies because of their age and limited Japanese language abilities. Instead, they had to rely on themselves or their personal connections in Japan. The lawsuits were a means by which to fight for what they deserved to be given.

Among the war orphans who are most resolute in demanding compensation, they steadfastly refuse to accept the enhanced pension and benefits as a discreet form of apology. Mr. Tazumi, aged 76, who worked in a factory that made electric transformers, claimed in the interview that what he wanted from the government was not money to make ends meet, but genuine reparation:

I am not satisfied with the new support plan. I've never received welfare after coming back to Japan. I kept working and tried to get accustomed to living in Japan as a Japanese. Also, the ultimate purpose for the battle between the war orphans and the Japanese government is about what should be done to address our tragic experiences and suffering, not about giving us living expenses. The government should admit their faults first. Some orphans said that the new policy meant an apology, but I don't agree that it should be understood that way. An apology is an apology. The Japanese military invaded China. There were many cruel incidents. Even among the Japanese, there were many who suffered for the war. So, the new policy shouldn't be taken as an apology from the government.³⁰

Another informant, Mr. Okizawa, aged 76, was also dissatisfied with the current support policy. He claimed he had a miserable time in China when his Japanese identity was exposed, and he was accused of being a "Japanese spy" (*riben gouzi* in Chinese). In particular, he was in his early twenties during the Cultural Revolution and was politically persecuted by the Communist Party and forcibly sent to the countryside. Most orphans were not directly victimized in China, but they still lived in fear because of their Japanese identity. Some moved around places with foster parents to hide their identity, others gave up on going to college to avoid drawing attention to themselves:

Why was I a victim of the Cultural Revolution? It was my Japanese identity. Japan was the enemy of China, and I was the child of the enemy. I think this is

³⁰ Interview conducted by author with Hiro Tazumi (pseudonym). Tokyo, Japan, December 19, 2019.



all because Japan invaded China. If the Japanese government had not invaded China, I would not have been an orphan and my life would be different now.³¹

Those who suffered hardship in China wondered why the Japanese government did not take any actions to save the war orphans, although the government was keenly aware of the presence of Japanese civilians left behind in China. They were the forgotten ones. In fact, they were legally declared dead in 1959.³² Some people of this group claimed that, even if it was hard to repatriate them during the 1950s as normal diplomacy was severed, the Japanese government should have repatriated war orphans promptly after diplomatic normalization in the 1970s. The war orphans who had deeply traumatic experiences in China could not move on from their past without the Japanese government providing the closure they longed for—in the form of compensation and an apology:

As a Japanese citizen, I wanted to know why I was abandoned for decades in a foreign country. I wanted to know and understand what was considered right and wrong and listen to the state explanation ... Even Chinese foster parents looked after their Japanese children alongside their own children. Why did the Japanese government treat their children so heartlessly? It was not humane. So, I would like to know how the government responds.³³

Many war orphans needed the money provided by the expanded pension and benefits. Some had suffered chronic illnesses and desperately needed the money for medical treatment. But their sense of resentment lingered, as the prospects of an apology from the Japanese government dwindled. This was not helped by the fact that, from the perspective of the somewhat homogeneous mainstream media of Japan, the problem of the war orphans was already resolved (see Inagaki 2007; Japan Times 2007). The daily struggles of this group of aging Japanese citizens are seldom reported in the news these days. As they spend their remaining years in their homeland, the orphans are feeling increasingly abandoned as a group.

The orphans insist that the government should not just apologize for the act of abandonment, but also for procrastinating about the repatriations and for the indifference that they displayed to the war orphans when they initially returned. A mere aid policy without any clear explanation for its purpose is not sufficient for the war orphans, who most strongly feel that they were wronged. Mrs. Kondō recounted the orphans' meeting with then Prime Minister Abe:

³¹ Interview conducted by author with Toshiya Okizawa (pseudonym). Osaka, Japan, December 11, 2019.

³² In March 1959, the Kishi administration declared that those who did not repatriate to Japan or were registered as missing residents for the last seven years would be considered as war-time dead through the enactment of the Special Measure Law. Since the Japanese war orphans and women left behind in China were not able to return to Japan, their registry record changed to “war-time dead” and their domiciles (birth certificates) were removed by the local government registry. Due to the elimination of the war orphans and women’s domiciles, war orphans had difficulties in recovering their citizenship later on.

³³ Interview conducted by author with Sato Mimoto (pseudonym). Tokyo, Japan, July 22, 2019.



I don't want anything else. I want war orphans to have the rights they deserve. I think that the Japanese government should explain why we became war orphans in China and why Japan invaded China. I haven't received an apology yet. We have been to the National Diet (Japan's legislature) and we even met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. However, Prime Minister Abe only told us that he knew we were very tired and had a hard time in China and Japan. This was not an apology; it was not admitting wrongdoings. Now, the Japanese government is trying to revise the peace constitution. But they should not revise the law. If the constitution is changed, Japan will have the right to go to war. I do oppose war and think that peace must be maintained. Young people should know why there are war orphans and should learn about our part in history. I do not want the government to make us simply poor people and then offer us help. We need to let Japanese people know why we became war orphans.³⁴

During the tenth-anniversary celebration of the Kobe District Court lawsuit in 2017, one of the leaders of the plaintiffs, Mistuo Hatsuda, apologized to the others in the group. He said that he had failed to obtain an apology from the Japanese government, adding that the government had simply solved the problem of livelihood (*wenbao wenti* in Chinese) for the war orphans. Mr. Hatsuda stated that he was shocked when the head of the Tokyo plaintiffs announced that they would drop all the pending lawsuits there if the government provided a fair assistance policy. Mr. Hatsuda recalled that he was upset and saw the decision as a "betrayal to us (war orphans)."

War orphans such as Mr. Hatsuda refuse to look past the wrongdoings of the Japanese government. To them, money offered in an unapologetic form, however substantial, is hollow. They admitted that the supporting policy had made their life in Japan better than before. However, the ultimate goal of the class action and negotiation with the government was not to get money like a *qigai*, the Chinese word for "beggar."³⁵ The quantity of money was not the crux of their monetary dispute with the Japanese government. Rather, they searched for dignity, and only money in a certain form and with a certain meaning could give them that.

Discussion

Through a study of the litigations regarding historical grievances against the Japanese government by the war orphans, this article disaggregates the acts that shape money by articulating its purpose, labeling its nature, regulating its distribution, and limiting its use. The war orphans demanded monetary compensation for the hardship and missed opportunities that they suffered as a result of their abandonment by their government. The case touched upon the actions of Japan during its invasion of China. It brought to the forefront the moral responsibilities of the Japanese

³⁴ Interview conducted by author with Tomie Kondō (pseudonym), Kobe, Japan, December 10, 2019.

³⁵ One of the informants used the Chinese word *qigai* during an interview.



government and what it did to its citizens during the Asia–Pacific War. The lawsuits that they launched came after more than a decade since their reunion with their own state. In trials, they narrated the hardship that they had experienced in China. They talked about their lost opportunities of growing up as Japanese citizens. They talked about abandonment, as if they were among the war-time dead. In the lawsuits that the orphans launched against the government, they considered themselves as “dead people.” The ¥33 million compensation that they demanded was the amount of compensation offered to the family of a victim who died in a car accident.³⁶ The figure was convenient. It was also symbolic.

No compensation

All these factors led to the ultimate question: Was the government at fault or not? Although the orphans lost all but one lawsuits, with the decision from the Tokyo District Court being a crushing blow to the orphans’ claims, Abe’s administration concluded that it had seen enough. The Prime Minister talked to the orphans himself. The government promised to significantly raise the money that the orphans would receive, on one condition—that the orphans suspend their lawsuits.

The lawsuits, regardless of the outcome, fixated on the idea of compensation. At this point, it became abundantly clear that the Japanese government was unwilling to compensate them. It agreed to pay, but the money was not to be labeled as “compensation.” Compensation, whether it is termed legal compensation or special compensation, implies the notion of fault, if not guilt. In Japanese, one of the most famous tort cases involved the victims in Minamata ending up with compensation from the Japanese government, after decades of litigation (Upham 1976; Kidder and Miyazawa 1993). It was not the quantity of money that was at stake; rather, it was what, performatively, the money meant. The government was most reluctant to offer lump sum payments. Its justification, as we have seen, was that no lump sum payment could guarantee that the orphans would be taken care of for the remainder of their lives. However, as Sykes et al. (2015) point out, as a payment form, lump sum payment provides important implications on the dignity of the receivers and their sense of deservedness. In this case, however, the Japanese government seemed to regard a lump sum payment as being too close in form to compensation.

¥170,000 vs. ¥146,000

The war orphans needed more money to live in Japan with dignity. After meeting with the Prime Minister, they reluctantly agreed to suspend their lawsuits, hoping that the government would apologize to them and offer them compensation. But,

³⁶ Author’s interview (25 July 2019) with lawyer Yonekura Yōko, who participated in the lawsuit in Tokyo. According to the lawyer informant, they determined the amount of money by referring to the amount awarded for death in a car accident in Japan. These war orphans weren’t dead, but they regarded the suffering and harm that war orphans went through as being close to death. As a meaning for lifetime damage, lawyers set 30 million yen.



rather than being offered a settlement, the war orphans' demands were absorbed into the mammoth pension and benefits infrastructure. The war orphans then asked for a monthly payment with the most compensatory meaning—¥170,000—precisely the amount that the Japanese government had given to the North Korea abductees as a special class of victims that the Japanese government recognized. In interviews, the orphans stated that they wanted to be treated by the government like the abductees had been.

The government instead agreed to offer a total of ¥146,000 (\$1460). There was of course the quantitative difference of ¥24,000 (\$240 per month). This difference was by no means insignificant. However, it was again the qualitative difference between the two that stood out. The ¥146,000 was calculated by adding a special subsidy of ¥80,000 to the full basic monthly public pension of ¥66,000. When it was explained why the monthly benefit could not be raised to the same amount given to the abductees, the government's primary justification was that too much unfunded liability would destroy the pension system. The reasoning hinged on the institutional-cum-interpretive practice that made the money given to the orphans a form of pension, despite the fact that many of the war orphans were now too old to work a sufficient number of years to contribute to the national pension system. In addition, as mentioned, they are allowed to do things (e.g., traveling aboard for an extended period of time) that normal welfare recipients are not.

Some additional money came in the form of *shien kyūfu*. Besides the stigma that “welfare money” brought to the group, the use of means tests to decide who would be eligible for the ¥80,000 subsidy means that it is not given to war orphans because of who they are or what they have experienced. The money is not offered to them unconditionally but is based on needs. The consequence is that the government owes them no moral debt. However, a bureaucratic mechanism used to determine eligibility, as opposed to a universal system, is more likely to result in exclusion from full citizenship (Sykes et al. 2015).

Lingering resentment

Our interviews with the orphans more than a decade after the lawsuits suggest that the government and the war orphans remain, in an important sense, in dispute. What makes this case interesting is that the two sides more or less agreed on the quantity of money. The case shows how a monetary dispute can continue after the money problem has been resolved. Many war orphans expressed that they were less concerned about their livelihood after the implementation of the new policy. The survey performed by the government suggested as much.

The survey, however, did not reveal the lingering resentments that many war orphans harbor. The “pension and benefits” that the orphans received deprive the money of any apologetic meaning. The money is distributed by the bureaucratic machinery of the Ministry of Health. By adding the term “supporting” (*shien* in Japanese) to describe the money, the Japanese government framed it as an “assistance package.” The government pronounced that this policy is to secure a stable retirement for members of the group. However, it did not explain why this group of people



were in need (Efrid 2008). Money distributed through the pension and livelihood protection systems does not distinguish between the war orphans and other seniors in Japan. Many war orphans continue to demand an apology from the government. The seemingly contradictory responses of the orphans could only be rationalized if we appreciate the duality of money in social use. The orphans are *satisfied* with the benefits provided by the money, but they are *dissatisfied* with the impersonal meaning, or the lack of an apology, that the pension and benefits imply. While the war orphans do not expect the Japanese government to agree with their interpretation of their historical experiences, the money is *reduced* to benefits and pension. As highlighted by scholars who study reparation politics, resentment is a powerful moral protest, generally adopted once other means of contention are impractical or unavailable (Dromi 2014; Brudholm 2008).

Conclusion

The dual nature of money as a quantitative medium and as a qualitative marker is fully at play in the dispute between war orphans and the Japanese government. Specifically, our study makes the following theoretical contributions. First, it moves the sociological studies of monetary compensation beyond the commensuration thesis. Certainly, money cannot be a full substitute for past deprivation. However, money does not leave meaning a hollowed-out shell of mere exchange value. In social life, practices of money constitute manifold meanings. Our case shows that disputes relating to money are not just about how much the victims should receive. Of course, nothing in this article suggests that the quantity of money—that is, the question of “How much?”—does not matter. To quote anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “such a conclusion would be absurd” (Geertz 1973, p. 434). On the contrary, because money does matter, many other things ride on it as well. Our work is among a growing volume of literature advocating a shift of focus from interests to cultural work (cf. Dromi 2014). Moral beliefs and monetary values interpenetrate and the question for sociologists is thus how the two interact through concrete social practices.

Second, our study advocates a performative turn that focuses on how meaning is made in historical grievance disputes. We develop the concept of “money acts” to identify performative actions that confer meaning to money in such grievance disputes. There are money acts that enact one’s social identity. The plaintiffs stated their demand for money by telling society exactly who they were and what they had experienced. In its responses, the government also explained how it perceived the plaintiffs and what it would do to help them. There is another type of “money act” that seeks to define and declare the very character of the money in dispute. We have discussed the labels that the war orphans and the Japanese government adhered to when they talked about money. The fact that the two sides could not agree on a common label was indicative of the deep disagreement in meaning. Finally, the concept also encompasses a set of institutional practices that shape the situatedness of the money. While Zelizer (1989) suggests that it is the provenance of money that marks it for its special meaning, we find that practices that coordinate and regulate the distribution of money could also alter such a meaning.



Money acts not only make money meaningful; they also make certain interpretations of money meaningless, or at least difficult to sustain. In that regard, they have a *causal* effect impacting upon victims. In the war orphan case, the use of means test and the fact that the money was distributed through the welfare bureaucracy rendered a reparational interpretation difficult to sustain. It disallowed the orphans from forming a reading of the money that carried an apologetic meaning. Viewed from this cultural perspective, it makes sense that despite the small disagreement on the amount of money, the grievances of the war orphans were not fully addressed. While the war orphans agreed to accept the government's proposal of "new benefits," they continued to ask for an apology and to celebrate the anniversaries of the Kobe District Court lawsuit. The money they receive does not satiate their desire for an apology. If anything, the Japanese government's exclusive focus on offering benefits may have made the war orphans even more determined to receive an admission of guilt. This is analogous to Zelizer's (1994) study of how "pricing" children in law and insurance shifted the terms of their value from primarily economic to "priceless" moral beliefs and emotional attachment.

These findings have implications that go beyond the case of war orphans itself. As stated in the Introduction, in the United States, there have been louder calls for reparation for the historical institution of slavery for African Americans. When politicians and scholars discuss "meaningful reparation," the focus has primarily been on the question of how much for each individual (Conley 2003; Craemer 2015). Economists have suggested some new welfare programs to distribute reparations to African Americans. While the amount of money that is meaningful to close the racial wealth gap is undoubtedly important, there has been scant attention paid to the symbolic meaning of money brought about by different forms of money. For example, would the money be a form of meaningful reparation if it is means-tested? Economist Stiglitz (2020), for example, proposed setting up a new program analogous to the GI Bill specifically for the descendants of slaves. Would the money be perceived as apologetic if it comes in the form of a new welfare program? Our study suggests that governments must also consider the meaning of these programs to the recipients. It is crucial to ask if the label of the money and the form of payout confer a sense of dignity to the recipients. Ultimately, it is not just about adding to the balance of the bank accounts of the victims, but how the money is justified, named, categorized, distributed, and yes, taxed, that confers meaning to the sum of money.

The Japanese government is willing to provide the war orphans with more money, so long as the war orphans are willing to accept that they are ordinary Japanese senior citizens. But the war orphans are the ordinary Japanese citizens who never were. Future research should pay more attention to the divergence of meaning, besides the divergence of the quantity of money, as a determinant for whether reparations claims are satisfactorily addressed.

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