SAVING FACE

American Efforts to Treat The Hiroshima Maidens and Maintain Moral, National and Cultural Superiority

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The Hiroshima Maidens, twenty-five young Japanese women who suffered disfigurement from radiation burns, arrived in the United States on May 8, 1955 for reconstructive surgery. The *Lucky Dragon* incident, a nuclear testing disaster that spread radioactive ash over 7,000 square miles in the Pacific, occurred a year before the Maidens' appearance and initiated urgent public outcry over testing and the effects of fallout. The Maidens stay in the U.S., then, coincided with the American public's first taste of the real dangers of nuclear energy and radiation. Since testing no longer remained a strictly wartime issue and instead affected the public directly, many Americans counted themselves as victims alongside the Japanese. They took a world-view, identifying nuclear war and radiation as problems belonging to the whole human race. During this time of urgency, however, many Americans ignored the existence of the Maidens as individuals and instead perceived them as symbols of Japan and the atomic bomb. They then took on the roles of financial benefactors and nurturing "parents" (but never apologetic equals) to the group, allowing themselves to retain their sense of moral, national and cultural superiority over Japan and to privately relieve guilt they felt over America's role in dropping of the bomb. These roles, and their results, exist
both in the historiography concerning the Maidens and in many Americans' actual relationships with the Maidens.

The history of American response to the atomic bomb, nuclear war and fallout revolves around "cycles of activism and apathy."¹ After failed attempts by some scientists, such as Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard, to form a world-government and, thus, enforce international control, America settled into "a dulled acquiescence"² during the late 1940's and early 1950's. At the same time, and perhaps facilitating the birth of this new era, the Cold War and the resulting arms race with the Soviet Union ensued, along with media attention to the promise of atomic energy. Unable to effectively solve the nuclear problem and inundated by the government and the media with messages concerning its political necessity and social benefits, the public accepted the dilemma as part of the Cold War rationale.

The lack of protest created a cultural climate that made it easier for the United States and Russian governments to increase their testing efforts. According to The Saturday Evening Post, the United States fired 132

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² Ibid., 291.
bombs and the Russians fired 206 between July of 1945 and
the fall of 1958, with more bombs fired in 1957 and 1958
than all the other years combined. The whole world felt the
results. On March 1, 1954, the Bravo weapons test at Bikini
atoll destroyed an island and tore a large hole in the
ocean floor. The consequences of the fallout, though,
proved more serious than planned. The "radioactive cloud
soared unexpectedly high into the atmosphere, met a west
wind and was blown east." Radioactive dust fell on twenty-
three Japanese fishermen aboard the Lucky Dragon. Returning
to port "suffering from severe radiation sickness," one of
the men eventually died from the fallout. Besides the
fishermen, 239 natives of Marshall Islands, 28 Americans on
Rongerik Island and nine scientists took fairly high doses
of radiation as well. A year later, in 1955, the Atomic
Energy Commission released information stating that "there
was sufficient radioactivity in a downwind belt about 140
miles in length and of varying width up to twenty miles to
have seriously threatened the lives of nearly all persons

3 Steven M. Spencer, "Fallout: The Silent Killer," The
Sat/urday Evening Post, 232 (September 5, 1959), 84.
4 Ibid., 232 (August 29, 1959), 89.
5 M. Susan Lindee, Suffering Made Real (Chicago, Il: 
6 Spencer, Ibid., 232 (August 29, 1959), 90.
in the area who did not take protective measures."7 Adding fuel to the fire, Harper's Magazine published excerpts of Ralph Lapp's *The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon*, which "kept alive the ban-the-bomb movement."8

The public's recognition of the severity and universality of fallout reached even higher levels in the late 1950's when reindeer bones in Alaska and sheep in Newfoundland both demonstrated a high strontium-90 content.9 *The Saturday Evening Post* cited the pessimistic view of Linus Pauling, a chemist and Nobel laureate, that "10,000 persons had already died or were dying of leukemia caused by fallout, and continued testing would cause 200,000 mentally or physically defective children to be born."10 The report, whether accurate or not, served to alarm many American readers into action.

Letters to the editor poured in, one demanding that "for the sake of public health and the genetic wholeness of mankind, the United States must put an end to its nuclear-bomb testing here and now" and another claiming a moral

9 Spencer, 232 (September 5, 1959), 84.
10 Ibid., 232 (August 29, 1959), 89.
right to continue testing only if "scientists are able to have all of the fallout descend solely within our own country." Both cited the physical and moral hazards of continued testing. Both viewed testing as a world issue. Under these circumstances, particularly with the outcry over the Lucky Dragon incident, activism increased in the mid-to-late 1950's and sought to end nuclear testing.

The Hiroshima Maidens, as a symbol of the bomb and its effects, furthered the test-ban case by affecting grassroots opinion, and, thus, "defining the parameters within which the policymakers operated." The Maidens, who suffered drastic scarring on their faces and bodies, elicited wide sympathy from the public, especially through the efforts of Norman Cousins. Cousins, the influential editor of The Saturday Review and a liberal intellectual whose causes included the banning of nuclear testing, created the Maidens project after meeting with the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto (of John Hersey's Hiroshima) and learning through him that a group of badly scarred girls had formed

a support group in Tanimoto's church. Cousins had previously formed a moral adoption program, which provided financial help for the orphans of the bomb. Readers of the Saturday Review had sent monthly or annual donations (more than 600 people gave a total of $70,000) for the children's care. Cousins viewed the Hiroshima Maidens project as a similar method for Americans to improve the lives of those who suffered through the first atomic bomb.

Cousins, in his editorials, portrayed the Hiroshima Maidens as "the most poignant of these [atomic bomb] sufferers." Indeed, the Maidens were of marrying and working age, but none had husbands and children and none held steady jobs due to scarring and its psychological and physical effects. Besides provoking compassion Cousins also ensured that readers did not sense any feelings of bitterness or desire for revenge on the part of the Maidens and the Japanese people in general. According to Cousins, the Maidens "like to see pretty American girls and imagine that we are they." Cousins introduced the Maidens to the public as individuals who suffered because of the American bomb, but also as young girls who, harboring no ill will,

14 Ibid.
admired and wished to emulate their American counterparts. He also introduced the Reverend Tanimoto in the same benign way. Tanimoto, according to Cousins, believed that "the American people have been just and generous to Japan in defeat." By disregarding the complexity of the Japanese people's feelings towards America and its role in dropping the bomb and by focusing primarily on reconciliatory statements by the Japanese, Cousins allowed the public to separate the bomb issue from the Maidens project. Cousins asked his readers to sympathize and help, not out of guilt over the bomb, but out of their own humanitarian impulses.

Cousin's superficial representation of the Maidens' experiences not only formed a large part of the historiography about the Maidens, but affected future depictions of the women as well. Rodney Barker, a young boy when his family housed two of the Maidens, traveled to Japan in the 1980's to research and write the first (and only) book about the Maidens. Although Barker, unlike Cousins, devoted time to the Maidens' individual stories, he nonetheless viewed them as a group "more comfortable and natural around children than adults with a shared spirit of

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15 Ibid.
innocence and wonder.\textsuperscript{16} Like Cousins, Barker depicted the Maidens as a homogenous group sharing the same, almost carefree, feelings typical of children who have yet to experience any authentic and "adult" forms of emotional and physical pain.

Many Japanese people, though, did feel anguish and hostility. One of the Hiroshima Maidens, Toyoko Morita, often envied her father's sudden death due to the bomb and wondered, "Why do I go on living in this world?" She survived the ten years before arriving in America for surgery by drinking alcohol, which numbed her frequent desires to commit suicide.\textsuperscript{17} Reading Cousins, though, Morita merely existed as one of the twenty-five Hiroshima Maidens; her personal depression over the bombing and any feelings of anger against the United States were not recognized. Many in Japan also found it difficult to forget America's role in dropping the atomic bomb. In a 1955 interview conducted by \textit{The New York Times Magazine} with an elderly Mrs. Moto in Hiroshima, the mother of two bomb casualties stated that "All we in Hiroshima want is for the United

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 11.
States to say she regrets and apologizes." The interviewer continued by noting that "the same answer was heard from professors, doctors, teachers, journalists and other citizens." Clearly, many Japanese felt not only that there was a lack of closure regarding their suffering, but that the United States was the only country capable of giving it. Tension in Japan also surrounded the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission's no-treatment policy. Instead of attempting to ameliorate the survivors' suffering, the ABCC used them as (according to Japanese press accounts) "guinea pigs" to "prepare for the next war." Anger and hostility still edged the voices of many in Japan, but for the sake of assuring the Maiden project's success, Cousins decided to leave the feelings of the Maidens and the Japanese people in general out of his writing. Barker, writing almost three decades later, followed suit.

Other media sources besides The Saturday Review disconnected the Maidens from America's role in the bombings as well. Cousins, attempting to raise funds for the project, arranged for the Reverend Tanimoto to appear in an episode of Ralph Edward's popular television show.

19 Lindee, 124.
This Is Your Life. The show's high-point was a handshake between Tanimoto and Captain Robert Lewis, who with Paul Tibbits piloted the Enola Gay. Two Maidens appeared silhouetted and stated that "They were happy to be in America and thanked everyone for what the U.S. was doing for them." Both the handshake and the statement assured home viewers that no conflict existed. Seemingly free from guilt, then, Lewis gave a check for $50 that "represented his and his fellow crew members' contribution to the fund." Edwards urged the audience to contribute as well, "for this is the American way." Many, about 20,000 people, wrote positive letters and the project collected $55,000. The separation of issues allowed some Americans to privately relieve any guilt they might have felt without publicly acknowledging the immorality of America's decision to drop the bomb. By contributing, they became merely financial sponsors of a good cause.

While Americans acknowledged the benefits of the project, many clearly stated that any help came strictly as kind gestures and not as methods for atonement. Minutes

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20 This Is Your Life (May 11, 1955), as quoted in Barker's Hiroshima Maidens, 11.
21 Ibid., 12.
22 Ibid.
after the television show ended, members of the American
Armed Forces called and voiced their anger at watching "a
decorated Army Air Force man all but apologize for his part
in a mission that put an end to the war." The bomb,

justified itself because it ended the war and saved lives.
Others, including Arthur J. Barsky, the chief surgeon in
charge of the Maidens' operations, agreed. He felt the "use
of the bomb was defensible as a military decision that had
saved lives." His participation in the Maiden project
rested, then, on "the challenge presented by atomic burns"
and his concern "for the innocent children [the Maidens]."
Members of the public with no ties to the armed forces or
to the project expressed their refusal to apologize as
well. In response to an article in The New York Times
Magazine that suggested the United States finance more
reconstructive surgery "in atonement for dropping the
bomb," a reader responded by arguing that regrets and
sympathies were due, "but never apologies" and that if
Japan had the bomb, it would have used it against America.

23 Barker, 93.
24 Ibid., 75.
25 Ibid.
26 Trumbell, 9.
27 Letters to the Editor, The New York Times Magazine (August
14, 1955), 5.
These unapologetic statements further increased the general view of the project as a humanitarian gesture and nothing else.

The belief of American national superiority also remained inherent in the Hiroshima Maidens project and in the relationships between the Japanese and Americans connected with the undertaking. Although Cousins made it a point to recognize Reverend Tanimoto as "the man who first did something specific about the plight of the Maidens,"28 the project left the hands of Tanimoto and became a primarily American venture. Tanimoto lost all decision-making powers and served as the Maidens' "spiritual counselor"29 instead. He also spent time giving speeches and fund-raising for the project and his other works in Hiroshima. Since the money raised by This Is Your Life covered the Maidens' expenses, Tanimoto wished to forward the rest of the funds raised to his church in Hiroshima. Cousins and the project's steering committee denied his request. Instead, they forwarded $1,000 to the Hiroshima church for "borrowing your services" with a note indicating that "Mr. Cousins feels the moment you agreed to come to

28 Cousins, 25.
29 Barker, 119.
30 Ibid, 122-123.
America you agreed to play on a bigger team." Cousins and his steering committee first publicized the project as a joint Japanese and American effort, but in reality, the Hiroshima Maidens and any credit deriving from the project belonged solely to the American organizers.

Project organizers and participants also maintained and perpetuated national superiority through their relationships with the Maidens themselves. By viewing the Maidens' ties to Japan and their families as weak and by portraying Japan and Japanese parents as impoverished, Americans, especially the families that housed the Maidens, easily took on the roles of primary "parents" with the ability to fully nourish and care for the Maidens. The first use of the term "parents" to describe the couples housing the Maidens appeared in one of Cousins' Maiden reports. The Maidens, after arriving, "adjusted beautifully to their new 'parents'" and indeed the "average weight gain per girl has been almost four pounds." Here, Cousins replaced the Maidens' Japanese parents with the American couples, suggesting a lack of parental ability or even

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existence on the side of the Japanese. He further solidified this new relationship by quoting one of the parents as witnessing "no homesickness."32 Based only on an American's perception, Cousins neglected any of the Maidens' longings for Japan and their real families. In fact, their families (parents, siblings, and the like) were never mentioned. Cousins' mention of the Maidens' weight gain also painted a picture of deprivation (this time physical) within Japan and their families. In America, where food and wealth abounded, the Maidens flourished and reached their optimal level of health. In Japan, they lacked basic nutrition. The Maidens, then, left Japan without looking back. The country and families' resources did not compare to America and its wealth.

The interactions between the Maidens and their "parents" propagated cultural superiority as well. In this case, the austerity of Japanese culture seemed to prove inferior to the affectionate and open-minded culture of America and its families. When two Maidens intruded upon their American "parents" kissing, the couple stopped them from sneaking away and asked, "Is it true that in Japan there is no kissing, even between husband and wife?" When

32 Ibid., 22.
the Maidens admitted that they never saw their parents kiss, the couple replied, "Oh, well, we do it like this," and began to kiss "American style." The Americans also recognized that in Japan, parents did not play ball or read to their children. Culture not only opened the Maidens' minds to seemingly warmer and richer relationships, but it also allowed the "parents" to fulfill the Maidens' cravings for affection.

At the same time they sought to end nuclear testing and prevent another Lucky Dragon incident, Americans remained unwilling and unable to treat the Maidens as individual people and to see beyond their status as symbols of an inferior Japan and the bomb. They either ignored America's role in the Maidens' suffering or privately alleviated the guilt they felt over this role by participating in the Maiden project or by supporting it financially. The Maidens' arrival and stay in America ten years after the dropping of the bomb made it clear that while the young Japanese women were ready for physical healing, many Americans remained ill-equipped to deal with the atomic bomb on a deeper level.

33 Barker, 114.
34 Ibid., 114-115.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


