

Considering the Comfort Women Issue: Toward a Shared Historical Understanding and Reconciliation

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*Editorial note: The following text is the content of a presentation given at an Introduction to Peace Education event held in Okinawa in June 2014. After Professor Park published her *Comfort Women of the Empire in South Korea* in August 2013, she was sued for defamation on the basis of this book in June 2014. To this day, heated debate on the issue continues in Japan as well as in her native South Korea. The text below, a transcript of her presentation, is presented in largely unedited form in line with the purpose of this book¹ and the wishes of the author.*

What is the best way to consider the “comfort women” issue? I would like to approach this question—perhaps the greatest cause of worsening relations between Japan and South Korea in recent years—by exploring the thoughts of two historians at the forefront of the comfort women issue in Japan, adding my own commentary to their positions.

The foundation for my presentation comes from a radio program broadcast in June 2013, “Hata Ikuhiko and Yoshimi Yoshiaki: Considering the Comfort Women Debate with Two Leading Historians.” Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has said that he wishes to “leave interpretation of the past up to the historians.” However, the debate among even the so-called leaders in that field has been unsuccessful to date in crystallizing the points of broad agreement on historical truth, making it clear that historians on their own are unlikely to produce an agreement between Japan and South Korea on the comfort women issue. Indeed, the issue is so thorny that it is proving difficult to produce an agreement even within Japan, let alone Japan and South Korea.

What are the reasons for this difficulty? During the long years that the issue remained unresolved, citizens of both countries absorbed detailed information about the issue, taking it beyond academia and into the realm of politics. What is more, in addition to information concerning the experiences of the comfort women and the traditional discourse concerning it, now attitudes and emotions, along with people’s concerns about their own political positions have entered the picture, making it difficult indeed to break through the fixed ideas that they have on the comfort women issue. The number of people connected to the issue, either directly or indirectly, has also risen over the years, with most of them coming to view themselves as concerned parties indirectly connected to the comfort women question. For many, given the long period of time that they have associated themselves with the issue, the “comfort women” issue has become to identify the very means of expressing their identity as well as their very way of living. We have thus arrived at a time when it is extraordinarily hard to break down people’s positions and ways of thinking in this area, preventing the participants from

1 This text was published as chapter 5 of Yamaguchi Takeshi, ed., *Heiwa to kyosei o mezasu Higashi Ajia kyotsu kyozai: Rekishi kyokasho, Ajia kyodotai, heiwateki kyoson* (Common Teaching Materials for East Asia Aimed at Achieving Peace and Symbiosis: History Textbooks, Asian Communities, and Peaceful Coexistence), Akashi Shoten, 2016.

arriving at an agreement with one another. And all of these factors have arisen in part because we are now in the post–Cold War era.

What is needed now is, firstly, a shared understanding of who the comfort women were, along with the recognition of the protest movements and conflicts that have taken place over the last 20 years. In short, we must grasp not only the comfort women issue but also the conflict associated with it in order to achieve a common understanding of all the questions involved.

1. Who Were the Comfort Women?

Defining the “Comfort Women”

Since the early modern era, a rising number of men headed out of their own countries on their own, making use of rapidly developing transportation networks and internalizing their nations’ drive to extend influence overseas. This was soon accompanied by a growing number of women moving abroad to support these men in their activities. In the case of Japan, this first took the form of the provision of women to serve foreign military personnel arriving on Japanese shores, but around the same time, such women also began traveling overseas. These were the so-called *Karayuki-san*, many of whom hailed from impoverished households, either being sold by their parents or making this sacrifice of their own volition for the sake of their families.

Some of these women went to the Korean Peninsula in the wake of the men who were stationed there as part of the imperial military or who had moved there in line with the state policy promoting the movement of Japan’s population to its colony. In time, a licensed prostitution system was set up in Korea, and Korean women also began working within it. From the time of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, there had been women “offering comfort” to the men in the military; they had come to be called the *joshigun*, the “women’s army,” in the light of the ancillary role they played to Japan’s troops.

In other words, “comfort women” could be defined as “women who moved to combat zones or colonized areas to support the men who were there as part of the state’s policies to extend Japan’s political and economic power.” The “comfort stations” used by troops and merchants alike appeared quite early on. Terms in Japanese like *iansho* (comfort stations) and *ianfu* (comfort women) are often thought of as having their genesis in the 1930s, but the functions they describe began in the early modern era as an aspect of imperialism broadly defined, including that practiced by Western powers.

“Comfort Women” and “Korean Comfort Women”

As a matter of course, in seeking to provide comfort women to support the men departing from Japan to points overseas, the authorities – naturally - looked first to Japanese women. Korean women were incorporated into this system once the Korean Peninsula became a colony of the Japanese empire. By the 1920s, Korean women were already stationed in places like China and Taiwan to serve the needs of the Japanese (and the Koreans who had become subjects of the Japanese empire) there. These women may be understood as being the precursor to those who today come to mind when one hears the phrase “Korean comfort women.”

The Karayuki-san Become the “Women’s Army”

Among the Karayuki-san were some who, even though they were sold by their families and worked in brothels, had carved out a situation for themselves there, achieving a status where they could lend some money or offer a place to carry out confidential talks to the men who were there “for the sake of the nation.” It was this status that earned these women the moniker “women’s army.” While they were looked down upon from many quarters in society, they had also achieved a certain “promotion,” so to speak. There were also some cases where these women expressed pride in being able to support, however indirectly, the men who were laboring for the sake of the Japanese nation. Once the state began moving toward war, they would also support the cause of Japanese imperialism. It must be noted, of course, that during all of these phases there was little change in the fundamentally brutal nature of their lives, which was such that it drove more than a few of these women to try taking their own lives.

2. On the Comfort Women During the 15-Year War

A Range of “Comfort Stations”

From the time of the Mukden Incident of September 1931, the Japanese Imperial Army managed hygiene and other related issues at prostitution facilities for the sake of troops stationed on the continent—tasks that on the Japanese home islands were handled by the police. (Some of these facilities were restaurants, cafes, and other types of businesses.) Facilities that met certain standards were designated as comfort stations exclusively for military use, while other stations were created within military regiments. As the number of troops stationed on the continent climbed, the military came to rely on the services of intermediaries who recruited women to work in these stations.

In other words, the facilities that we today consider to have been comfort stations were not all newly built by the military; some of them had existed in some form since the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War and the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War. Moreover, some of the “third-party operators” operating this system were actually affiliated with the military, or treated as civilian military employees, to make it easier for them to handle movement of workers and business management within the military system. Japan’s military officer class, meanwhile, tended not to make use of the rougher comfort facilities in the regiments, opting to patronize dining establishments called clubs in nearby cities.

It is commonly understood that the military built or designated official comfort stations in order to prevent venereal disease from spreading and clamp down on espionage. There were other reasons, though, including the purpose of ensuring that the rising numbers of military personnel using the stations could do so affordably. This was accomplished through the use of controlled-cost rate charts for the facilities. It is important here to recognize that the comfort stations that would later come to be viewed as problematic took many different forms, depending on the time when and the place where they were established.

A Range of “Comfort Women”

This also means that in the strictest sense, not all locations where Japan’s soldiers satisfied their sexual needs can be deemed “comfort stations.” For instance, brothels staffed primarily by

local women, not to mention straightforward cases of rape, should be considered separately from the “comfort women” (defined as those women working to support the troops from their own country). These other women occupied a different position from the “women’s army” who served as compatriots to the military men. The term *ianfu*, comfort women, is properly applied only to Japanese citizens, which also include women from Korea and Taiwan, who were then subjects of the empire.

The situation was undeniably muddled, though, given that the ordinary brothels also provided sexual services to Japan’s military men. There were even some establishments outside the military system—designated brothels though they may have been—that put up signs advertising themselves as “patriotic establishments” and opened their doors to Japanese troops.

In the 1990s, when the existence of the comfort women became an international issue, the issue was plunged into confusion by calls to all women who had had sexual relations with Japanese troops to take the name “comfort women,” despite the lack of a common understanding of just who the actual comfort women were. This is the primary cause of the divergence of opinion within Japan about the definition of these women.

The comfort women differ from one another in many ways—depending on their nationality and the period in which they entered the system, on where they served (near the front of the fighting or in a rear area), and on their individual character. The experiences they underwent and the way they handled them similarly differ as a result.

On “Forced Conscriptioin”

It goes without saying, therefore, that the paths that took these women to the position of engaging in sexual labor for the army were also varied. One of the first people to raise the comfort women issue in Korea mistakenly conflated her experiences as a member of the *chongsindae*, laborers mobilized to support the war effort, with those of the “comfort women.” As the mobilization took part on a school-wide scale, with all students at her school being sent off to work in factories, she assumed that this was forcible conscription. In fact, though, the *chongsindae* system was aimed at mobilizing subjects of the nation who were enrolled in school for purposes of the war—in other words, educated young people. Most women who eventually became comfort women had lower levels of education, or no schooling at all. The wide-spread Korean belief that the comfort women were forced into the system arises not from, as deniers in Japan assert, the former comfort women are lying about their experiences, but rather from this misunderstanding that arose during the 1990s.

Going back further, we find that as far back as the colonial era, there were already rumors afloat that women who joined the *chongsindae* would end up becoming comfort women. The comfort women were said to be called up “to perform duties for the troops.” In fact, these duties extended well beyond those of a sexual nature; the women assisted in nursing tasks and did laundry. Korean comfort women were asked to do jobs including washing bloodstained military uniforms and cleaning the graves of fallen soldiers.

The cases where Korean comfort women claim to have been forcibly taken by the military and placed in the system are, from an examination of collections of their statements, relatively few

in number. And even then, there is a strong likelihood that business operators affiliated with the military sent men wearing military-style clothing to procure labor for the comfort stations. This is not to mean that no physical force was involved in obtaining women to work in the system (and, of course, the military played a central role in transferring the women conscripted in this way to the stations where they served), but such cases should be viewed as exceptional cases.

We can view the cases where Dutch or Chinese women were gathered directly by the military, placed in isolated facilities, and pressed into sexual labor as being forced conscription in the broad sense. These cases were not, however, part of the “comfort women” system as I describe it above. These were not Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese women called up from within the Japanese Empire to play a supporting role for its military. Here the Japanese troops were involved in single, or repeated, incidents of rape involving “enemy women”. But as the experiences of the comfort women came to be viewed in the same light as those experiences of the enemy women, people on the opposite sides of the debate lost the ability to develop a shared understanding of critical concepts such as “forced conscription” and “comfort women.” The confusion has only grown in the debate since then.

“Comfort women” then, can be categorized into three different groups. The first are what might be called “camp-following” comfort women, who moved from place to place along with the troops in what could be viewed as a form of national mobilization, a more loosely defined *chongsindae* system. The second are those who worked in privately managed facilities designated for use by the military authorities to maintain hygiene, including some that had been in place since early on in Japan’s fighting in or occupation of the territories where they were located. And the third are those “enemy women” who were captured on the battlefield or in occupied territories and raped or pressed into forcible prostitution.

Physical force was clearly involved in the cases of the Dutch and Chinese women. For some Korean women who view their own experiences as having been forced conscription, I believe their cases may have involved people wearing military uniforms (operators designated as military-affiliated) deceiving the women by stating that they would be joining the *chongsindae*—a forcible form of conscription, albeit one that was codified in the law as “state mobilization, and moreover labeled as “voluntary” participation by the young people taken away.

The Japanese Army and Korean Comfort Women

The Korean comfort women were given Japanese names and wore Japanese kimono in their work. They were, in other words, substitutes for Japanese women. Different rates were set for the comfort women, with the Japanese earning the highest amounts, followed by the Koreans. These Koreans had been mobilized for the sake of “patriotic duty” to Japan—a duty these women ordinarily would prefer not to be involved with. In this sense, the Korean comfort women were a product of Japanese colonial rule, and the comfort women issue was not a product of the war *per se* by war, but something that predated it as a problem that came with imperialism. There were also Koreans who were raped when, for example, the troops moved from place to place—something made more likely by the discriminatory attitudes the Japanese held toward the Koreans.

At the same time, we can see different structures in place in the military comfort stations where women were assembled “in the service of the state.” Here the women found themselves in

the position of comrades standing alongside the troops in the face of the enemy. The officers and military police protected the women from violence on the part of the troops and the businesses associated with the stations. Given the nature of the structure, it may even have been possible for love to blossom between the Japanese military men and the Korean comfort women.

The Third-Party Operators

There is no denying that these women were gathered by third-party operators in response to the needs of the Japanese military. To date, though, there are no statements or textual materials that show conclusively that the military itself took the initiative in instructing these operators to abduct women or lie to them to secure their services. The operators, both Japanese and Korean, were the entities that did at times draw the women into service on false pretenses, forced them to work even when sick, monitored them to ensure that they did not escape, and pressured them to get abortions when they became pregnant. There were, of course, some exceptions to the rule, but many of the comfort women found themselves exploited by these operators, forced into inescapable debt and treated like slaves. And the operators functioning on a larger scale tended to be the Japanese ones.

Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki has noted that the comfort women lacked the freedom of residence—to live where they wished—and the freedom to leave their jobs. But this is, simply stated, because they were held captive by the operators. It appears that in many cases they were stripped of their freedom by military oversight for the same reason that men in the military were not free to move about at will: to prevent espionage, or because the surrounding areas were dangerous.

The “200,000 Girls”

The figure 200,000, often given as the number of comfort women, is believed to have actually been the total number of women in the *chongsindae*, including both Japanese and Koreans mobilized by the state. There is a Korean newspaper article published in 1970 that refers to 150,000 Japanese women and 50,000 to 60,000 Korean women involved in these efforts. The above-described misunderstanding has only been amplified by those who take this number to be that of the comfort women.

There were in fact very few women young enough to be called “girls” who became comfort women. In the infrequent cases where girls under the age of 15 appeared in the system, the military men of the time treated them as exceptions to the ordinary state of affairs. Almost all of the former comfort women who report being pressed into service as girls also note that most of the others were older than them. On the basis of statements and historical materials available to us, we can state that the average age of the comfort women was above 20. When girls who had not yet attained adulthood were in the comfort stations, this was likely due to the actions of the operators, not the desires of the military.

The 1965 film *Sunset on the Sarbin River*, directed by Jeong Chang-hwa, offers a glimpse into Korean memories of the comfort women system as held in the 1960s. The comfort woman who appears in this story is no young girl. It is only in more recent years that the standard image of the comfort woman has been presented as a child.

This does not mean, of course, that there were no young girls within the system. To this very

day, indeed, many of the females pulled into the sex industry are underage. It was indeed because of their young age, in part, that society's safety nets were unable to protect them. There also appear to have been cases where girls were taken away to work as servants, only to be pressed into labor as comfort women later on.

Returning Home After the War

During the period surrounding the end of the conflict, some comfort women lost their lives in bombing raids near the front lines. Many of the comfort women stranded in China as the war ended found themselves in the same situation as the Japanese who had moved there to live in their nation's colonial holdings, suffering greatly in their efforts to make their way back to the Japanese islands. Some of them no doubt met their ends during this difficult journey back home. Those who survived either returned home or remained where they were on the continent. Many of the third-party operators abandoned the women where they were, and the remnants of Japanese military helped some of them return to their homeland.

3. The Comfort Women Debate: Postwar Reparations and Memory

Apologies and Reparations in the 1990s

In the 1990s, Japan launched the Asian Women's Fund, with the aim of providing apologies and reparations to women who came forward as former comfort women. This fund was founded on the authority of the cabinet at that time. Due to doubts about whether the women had been forced into service, it had no chance of gaining approval in the National Diet, but the Japanese government—the members of the cabinet—agreed to provide these apologies and monetary reparations. This was blasted, however, by those arguing that the government was evading its proper responsibility by pushing this decision through without relying on the legislator-initiated approach which they championed, and some Diet members opposed the cabinet decision.

Considering, however, that the Japanese government's position on individual claims to reparations was that they were settled by the 1965 agreement between South Korea and Japan, (and hence there could be no official payments), that therefore there was no legal duty on part of the Japanese government to provide such aid, the government looked instead to its "moral duty" as reparation for these women. This move may be understood as the government taking a neutral stance in the face of fierce opposition from those arguing that the comfort women did not constitute a historical issue in the first place. When the government launched the Asian Women's Fund as the channel for reparations, moreover, the Japanese people responded positively, donating a considerable amount to its funding. If we are to define an apology by the Japanese state as a "statement on behalf of its people," then it may be argued that this fund served such purpose.

In the end, some 89% of this program was paid for out of state coffers. But this effort encountered continual, strong opposition, and divided opinion in South Korea, eventually leading at first just 7 women—and even in the end, a total of only 60—to accept payments via the Asian Women's Fund. The fund itself was closed down in 2007.

A Settlement of Historical Accounts in 1965

The 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea, being based in part on the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, was an agreement addressing matters related directly to the war, and not related to the settlement of historical accounts of Japan's colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. Reparations made to subjects who had been called up in service of the empire were limited to those drafted following the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War beginning in 1937, and the bulk of the treaty's measures aimed at squaring away financial matters, including the question of savings in what had become cross-border accounts following the sudden separation of the countries of Korea and Japan.

Japan, for its part, suggested allowing individuals to make claims for reparations. The Korean side, however, perhaps with the North Korean state in mind, rejected this overture, opting instead for a solution where the state could collect all reparations as the "sole state" on the Korean peninsula. This can be seen as an outcome of the harsh reality of the early Cold War era.

At first, the Koreans did seek to claim reparations for damage (including the loss of human life) suffered due to Japan's colonial rule. But this demand went unfulfilled—a measure demonstrating the lack of an apologetic stance in Japan regarding its colonial rule. This unapologetic position was one that postcolonial powers manifested could during the post-war era - a legacy that still demands our attention. In the early postwar years, though, both the former imperial power of Japan and its former colonies were bound by the strictures of the Cold War, pushed by the United States to rush through an insufficient settlement of accounts between them.

The Japan-Korea Treaty of 1910

The Japan-Korea Treaty, sometimes called the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty, signed in 1910 was "forcibly imposed" on the Korean side in an "illegal" manner, according to some. If this treaty is defined as illegal, then Japan naturally becomes legally culpable for its colonial rule over the peninsula. Even if it seems ethically proper to call this annexation illegal, however, realistically speaking it is difficult to make this claim. Japan performed this act with the approval of the great powers of the day—the United States, Britain, and other nations that were colony-holders in their own right—and the act was entirely in line with the rules that they had put in place at that time. Once the leaders of Korea agreed to the annexation via the 1910 treaty, it became difficult to describe it as technically illegal.

This does not mean, of course, that the agreement was without problems. It is important to recognize that "the law" at any given time is a reflection of the thinking and expectations of the polity defining it—it is a matter intimately connected with the people living their lives in that particular "here and now." Indeed, the views of these people are even more important than the question of the legality, or lack thereof, of the measures of that age. Japan's annexation of Korea could not be defined as illegal in a milieu where there was no law against the practice of one country ruling another. Illegality, then, cannot be claimed, on the basis of this lack of relevant law and the presence of Korean politicians who approved the move. More important than all of this, though, is that the majority of the Korean people did not wish for this to take place.

Of Sins and Crimes

The Korean side (organizations that were formed to support the former comfort women) was demanding that the Japanese side admit that the recruitment of comfort women and the use of comfort stations constituted criminal acts and also to pass legislation in the Diet to provide reparations to the victims of the system. (Supporters of this cause in Japan took the same position.²) Given, however, that prostitution was not illegal in Japan of that era, it is difficult to consider such act as constituting a crime. At that time not even sexual violence was viewed as criminal, leading men to commit rape repeatedly with little thought of the wrongness of their acts.

The buying and selling of human beings, however, was unequivocally viewed as wrong in that era, and was a crime. And a whole raft of actions of the era—control of colonies by imperial powers, rape, and the forcible mobilization of local populations (whether as soldiers or as the *chongsindae*) were undeniably wrong, giving little heed to the human rights of the non-Japanese races and the women who were treated so harshly. Despite the fact that they were all mobilized to the same front lines, though, the men sent to do the fighting saw legal redress for their hardship, while the comfort women saw nothing similar done for them. There is simply no way to use legal channels to pursue justice for them—a limitation of the modern state system that has long discriminated against women and those engaged in prostitution. Any consideration of how to craft new apologies to these victims must take place in full recognition of these factors.

The Asian Women's Fund Revisited

In this sense, the “moral culpability” that was the focus of actions in the 1990s was, while perhaps not comprehensively addressing the issues I described above, at least a valid effort in the direction of providing proper apologies and reparations to these women. There was a recognition that the Korean comfort women who had come forward were part of a system with its roots in colonialism, and compensation was being provided for this reason.

Former colonial powers such as Britain and Italy had already apologized for their rule over the colonies. In Japan, too, similar actions were taken by figures such as Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro and Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi. These apologies offered in the 1990s did not have the desired impact, though, leading to the need for additional measures for the remaining survivors. This led naturally to the need of expanding the discourse to include not only the war but also Japan's colonial rule. This is because the case of Korean comfort women cannot be understood merely by comparing against the cases of Dutch and Chinese women in the context of women's human rights during war time. Once, however, the issue is viewed from the perspective of problems engendered by the colonial rule as practiced by the Netherlands and other imperial powers of the past, then it becomes possible for the all colonial nations, including the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands to reflect upon their own roles and at last confront it squarely as their own issue, too—an issue tied in with the way that all of these countries, in both the past and the present day, have mobilized women both from their own citizenry and from other nations out of a desire to expand their own national power.

2 On April 23, 2015, civic groups in Korea and Japan altered their position somewhat on this point, stating that if the Japanese government were to use public funds for reparations and offer an apology to the former comfort women, it would obviate the need to formally accept legal responsibility.

Sexual Slavery or Prostitution

In people's efforts to deny culpability for the comfort women issue or to seek evidence casting doubt on it, they often rely on the image of either prostitution or sexual slavery. But in truth the difference between these two is not important. Even in cases where women were involved in the system without having been forced into it, there is no change to the cruelty of the conditions in which they found themselves. When seeking grounds to hold Japan responsible for the comfort women issue, there is little significance in questioning whether they were sex slaves or prostitutes; whether they were forced to take part or did so voluntarily. The needs of the state indirectly caused them to be mobilized; to maintain the war effort they were required to provide sexual services. As people who in some cases lost their very lives in this cause, whether to battle, sickness, or brutal labor, they can certainly be described as slaves of the state or the empire.

The Kono Statement

The Kono Statement of 1993, issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei on August 4 of that year, noted of the comfort women that "in many cases they were recruited against their own will." It was not, however, an admission of forcible conscription into the system. It simply touched on the facts that the process by which they were brought into the system was not in line with their own will, and that it was not their choice to perform sexual labor in the comfort stations, in these cases. This was an admission not that the Japanese state had directly used physical force against them, but rather that there were (colonial) systemic aspects of force working against them at that time. The statement is an accurate recognition that in the case of the Korean women, even when they voluntarily went into the system, this was an outcome of Japan's colonial rule over the peninsula. The statement does not, in other words, represent an admission that Japan wielded force in conscripting these women, as is claimed by those who seek to have the statement retracted or amended. In terms of the Japanese state's role in managing the system, meanwhile, the statement's admission that "administrative/military personnel directly took part" is based firmly in fact, and until this is proven otherwise, there is no reason to revisit the Kono Statement.

The Struggle for Resolution

Voices within Japan opposed to the Asian Women's Fund have helped to bolster the claims of the Korean civic groups supporting the victims, and over the past two decades—the last 10 years in particular—the number of Japanese people opposed to the claims of the Korean side has risen considerably. Any new effort today to publicly collect funds for the victims would not likely see a response of public support like that seen the last time. The Asian Women's Fund, despite its lofty goal of helping to resolve the comfort women issue and build peace in Asia, can only be described as having led to further discord in the region.

Some of the supporters of the comfort women see the system that used them as a unique problem created by Japanese fascism, thereby defining all comfort women across the board as purely victims who were taken by force into the system. However, this serves only to conceal the problematic aspects of the colonized state as an entity pressed into cooperation with the colonizer. The supporters of the former comfort women successfully made their appeal to the global community, but the issue of the Korean comfort women has not been fully perceived as one of the universal human rights of women.

With respect to the offering of apologies or reparations, once the issue became an issue to be resolved between states, the only way to resolve it was to bring about an agreement between their peoples of the two nations. But when nongovernmental organizations supporting the comfort women held a mock “international tribunal” in 2000 and found Emperor Showa guilty – setting asidewhether or not this was an appropriate verdict from a legal standpoint, - it would only distance the citizens of Japan from coming to an agreement. And indeed, the first decade of the new century saw the rise of the *ken-Kan ryu*, or “anti-Korean wave,” in Japan, and the 2010s saw increasing incidents of hate speech against Koreans in the country. These developments were followed by a hardening of Japanese opinion on the comfort women issue and a steady souring of Japanese-Korean relations.

Global Opinion

Beginning in the first decade of the 2000s, instead of convincing the Japanese government of the justice of their cause, the activists looked rather to present their case to the global community in order to put pressure on Japan. This activist approach paid off. But the United Nations reports that criticized Japan for the comfort women system have not been entirely based on correct information. Many of them are grounded in the belief, for example, that as many as 1.2 million young women were forcibly conscripted, made to work as sex slaves, and in most cases massacred after the fighting ended.

Dutch women have also made statements to the United Nations on their experience as comfort women; in their case, their ordeals did indeed take place in what is properly termed a “rape center.” But as Koreans were placed alongside these Dutch women, people came to view them as having been in the same situation. Their situation was, of course, a cruel one to be in, but it should have been considered as a different case.

The Dutch women became victims when Japan took over Indonesia, which the Netherlands held as a colony. From the Dutch perspective, Japan, an enemy country, took and raped these women. This is another factor that may well have influenced the broader global perspective on the comfort women issue as a whole.

4. Empire and the Comfort Women

To the present day, in Okinawa and other places where US military bases are located, there are women present to provide “comfort” to the American troops stationed far from home. In Japan during the immediate postwar years, or in South Korea during the Korean War and thereafter, the military has continued to create “comfort women.” These women are not in the same conditions as those in the Japanese prewar and war-era system: the postwar women are not being mobilized “for the sake of the nation,” as in the past, and there is the difference between it being a time of war and a time of peace, as now (although this is a peace marked by readiness for conflict).

The bases in question were established in wartime, or during the Cold War, and have been maintained ever since. Today it is the United States that is creating comfort women in Japan and Korea. Of course, the governments of these host nations are quietly acknowledging this requirement as they facilitate the provision of the women.

In the past, states created empires in their quest to extend their spheres of political and economic

influence. In the contemporary era, the Cold War and the globalization that followed are creating new empires. The territorial issues and other troubles seen in East Asia today are rooted largely in American intervention in the region, but this fact is not clearly visualized in debate on the issues. The nations of Asia struggle against one another as a result.

The struggle between Japan and South Korea is driving militarization and increased conservatism in the latter country, which is acting also with the question of North Korea in mind. In cases where North and South Korea present a united front to criticize Japan, they are actually helping only to preserve the Cold War ways of thinking - thinking that in turn has its root in the era of Japanese imperialism. Once the parties involved realize the contradictions of this approach, arrive at a shared understanding of the comfort women issue, and become able to share a recognition of the problems of colonial rule, we will at last see a chance for true reconciliation.

Reference material: “A Third Voice on the Comfort Women Issue,” presented on April 29, 2014, at the Press Center, Seoul

Recommendations:

1. The governments of both countries should assemble a consultative body with a membership including former comfort women as the primary concerned parties, government officials, representatives of civic support organizations, and academics in the field. This body will begin substantive discussion to resolve the issues, with the ultimate aim being to achieve an agreement between the two countries. The process of forming this group and the content of its deliberations must be disseminated via the media to concerned parties and the public at the same time, allowing citizens of the countries to consider the issues and empathize with those involved.
2. Civic groups and related organizations in both countries must at once cease their slanderous acts against the other countries and against the former comfort women, redirecting their energy into efforts to resolve the issues. The comfort women issue is a human rights issue; as it is a source of conflict between Japan and South Korea, the governments of these nations must squarely face one another and pursue solutions.
3. The media in each country must not publish unmoderated content that fans the flames of hatred among citizens of the other country. Needed rather is content that contributes to mutual understanding; the resolution process for the comfort women issue must go beyond addressing this single issue to help reduce the ill will that has grown on both sides.

Reference material: Excerpt from “Sei to sensei” (Sex and Despotism), from Muramatsu Takeshi’s 1979 *Haruka naru kokyo: Rai to Chosen no bungaku* (A Distant Homeland: Hansen’s Disease and Korean Literature)

I now imagine a woman standing before me. Let us presume she is a representation of sex. If she is a Korean woman, we can easily become sadistic. If she is a woman from one of the countries of the West, we can easily change into impotent men. Our sense of eros sways back and forth between these two extremes. In the same way that the sexual act achieves the pinnacle of pleasure by effacing and annihilating our core sense of self, our logos, or logical thought, can annihilate the sense of self, easily enabling us to approach a state of fascism. Both our eros and our logos were put to work in these ways, in the realms of both our own authority and those of others.

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