

The Global Emergence of Comfort Women: Japanese Military Sex Slaves of WWII

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ABSTRACT

The issue of sexual enslavement of women in the Pacific theater during World War II has played a prominent role in postwar relations between Japan and its neighboring countries. In the immediate aftermath of the War, the existence of so-called “comfort women” was virtually unknown to the public throughout the world, existing primarily as a problem for the surviving victims living in silent shame.

This paper will examine when and how the comfort women issue entered public awareness, and the circumstances that led to its politicization in Korea, Japan and other affected countries. External factors such as the post-WWII occupation of Japan, the Cold War, international reactions and the role of the United States will be examined, as well as the impact of China’s rise and development into a world power. Finally, the paper will offer perspectives that may broaden readers’ understanding of how the issue of comfort women can contribute to contemporary global discussions on women’s rights and human trafficking.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Japan’s twentieth-century relations with its neighbors is complex and tragic. The sexual enslavement of women by the Japanese military in World War II’s Pacific theater has remained a sensitive and incendiary topic in Japan, Korea and other affected nations. While the majority of the victims were Korean, and Korean survivors played a central role in bringing the issue to light, other countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, China, Vietnam and even Japan itself were impacted. The legacy of this sad chapter of history continues to haunt Japan’s current international diplomacy, internal politics, education system, and even, it can be argued, its position and image in issues affecting women’s rights. In 2014, Japan was ranked 104th out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap ranking, by far the lowest ranking in the G8.¹

How is it possible that an advanced industrial society like Japan remains mired in the legacy of WWII? What circumstances distinguished Japan’s post-war experience from that of its Axis ally, Germany? How was Germany, in spite of the specter of the Holocaust, able to largely divest itself of that history – at least inasmuch as its contemporary image is concerned – while Japan’s role in many

¹ “Japan,” *Global Gender Gap Report 2014*, Global Economic Forum, accessed December 16, 2014, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/economies/#economy=JPN>

wartime atrocities remains controversial to this day?

The answer to these questions lies in Japan's indispensability as an industrial powerhouse, trading partner, Cold War ally and, today, counterweight to the rise of China.

Very simply, Japan's usefulness in these roles since the end of WWII has outweighed the world's objections to its past, even as governments and NGO's continue to say all the right things.

Post-World War II Korea-Japan relations have been characterized by a perpetual state of impasse over the comfort women. The Japanese government's policies regarding war crimes and reparations have shifted with their own domestic politics. The comfort women are a case in point, as the government of Japan has by turns moved towards an apology, and then away from it, while the government of South Korea insists on an unambiguous admission of guilt accompanied by redress for the survivors. In the meantime, the surviving comfort women themselves have been visible and vocal in South Korea, notably at weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. These so-called "Wednesday demonstrations," which started in 1992, have become the longest-running continuous rally on a single theme in history.²

THE ORIGINS OF COMFORT WOMEN

During World War II, thousands of women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military. Although scholars have debated the official numbers, there is broad historical consensus that the number of Comfort Women ranged between 50,000 and 200,000, eighty percent of whom were ethnically Korean.³ Some recent Chinese sources put the number as high as 410,000.⁴ The term "Comfort Woman" is a translation of the Japanese euphemism *ianfu*, a polite way of characterizing prostitutes.⁵ Of course, these women were not local prostitutes; they were prisoners of a military system of wartime sexual exploitation.

² Kevin Ritchie, "The women who won't be silenced," *Saturday Star*, November 29, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/the-women-who-won-t-be-silenced-1.1788420#.VLQ-Xf10wqQ>

³ Margaret D. Stetz and Bonnie B. C. Oh, *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II* (New York: M E Sharpe Inc., 2001), 3.

⁴ Hua-Lun Huang, *The Missing Girls and Women of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan: A Sociological Study of Infanticide, Forced Prostitution, Political Imprisonment, "Ghost Brides," Runaways and Thrownaways* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), 206.

⁵ C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), xii

In the early 1930s, Japanese Imperial armed forces (both army and navy) personnel in China patronized professional prostitutes, most of whom were imported from Japan. The name given to the military brothels was “Comfort Stations,” the first of which was established in Shanghai in 1931.⁶ Soon, however, with the rapid expansion of Japanese military activities and conquests, there was an acute shortage of women for this work, and a solution was sought to recruit “comfort women” from the conquered territories. This recruitment effort constituted the first of four pillars in the comfort women system, the other three of which were transport, establishment and administration of comfort stations (“*Ianjo*”), and the physical control of the women once on-site. The Japanese Imperial Army was intimately involved and complicit in all four phases of the comfort women system, as will be demonstrated below.

JAPANESE MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

Recruitment of the comfort women was pursued along two parallel tracks. In the beginning, a deliberate effort was made to target girls from poor backgrounds. Thousands were enticed by false promises of well-compensated work in factories or as housekeepers, only to discover upon arrival at the terminus of their journeys, when it was too late to resist, that they were virtual prisoners in what amounted to rape camps. Many Japanese apologists claim that the recruitment effort was conducted by go-betweens, and that the military was not involved in the deception or outright abductions that were soon to follow.⁷ However, the military’s involvement has been well documented by Japanese historians and feminists, among others, in publications dating back to the 1950s.⁸

Once the War had begun in earnest, the well-documented scorched-earth policies of the Japanese Imperial Army gave them both procedural cover and a legal rationale for violent seizure and trafficking of girls and young women in the war zones. The Japanese followed a three-tiered system to categorize the areas which came under their control. The first tier, called “Pacified,” was characterized by a local population that was docile, obedient and cooperative in trade and military matters.⁹ The second and third tiers, called “Semi-Pacified” and “Unpacified,” respectively, referred

⁶ Miki Y Ishikida. *Toward Peace: War Responsibility, Postwar Compensation, and Peace Movements and Education in Japan* (United States: iUniverse, Inc, 2005), 66

⁷ Mary White Stewart, *Ordinary Violence: Everyday Assaults against Women Worldwide* (United States: Praeger, 2001), 387.

⁸ Yuki Tananka. *Japan’s Comfort Women (Asia’s Transformations)* (London: Routledge, 2001) Kindle Edition, location 234-39

⁹ Ishikida, *Op. Cit.*, 9.

to areas which were either partially conquered or where resistance was active and ongoing.¹⁰ In the “Unpacified” areas, military policies such as “The Three Alls” (kill all, burn all, loot all) applied.¹¹ Millions were killed under these rules of engagement, and girls and young women from such areas were subject to murder, rape, kidnapping and transport to faraway comfort stations.¹² In his testimony, Japanese soldier Kaneko Yasuji stated, “They cried out but it didn’t matter to us whether the women lived or died. We were the emperor’s soldiers. Whether in military brothels or in the villages, we raped without reluctance.”¹³ During the later stages of the War, especially many of the comfort women came from such circumstances.

The transport of the comfort women from their villages to their ultimate destinations required the full participation of the Japanese military establishment, both in terms of the necessary papers as well as the means of conveyance, be it by train, ship, truck, or a combination. In areas under Japanese control, all vehicles were subject to military necessity and could be commandeered at will by military personnel. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of girls and young women couldn’t be transported to destinations under military control without the full knowledge and cooperation of the military itself.¹⁴

As for the establishment and administration of the comfort stations, despite Japanese revisionist claims that these were created and run by civilians without any prompting from the military, the facts are well-documented and resulted in several death sentences for Japanese officers who were tried by French and Dutch authorities after the War.¹⁵ The demand for comfort women was the only rationale for the establishment of comfort stations. The putative rationale given by the Japanese government that the comfort women system would prevent rape and venereal disease was belied by the widespread incidents of rape throughout occupied Asia, and the fact that venereal disease was rife among the soldiers, including those who visited the comfort stations. Of the few comfort women who survived the War, the vast majority were so ravaged by venereal disease that

¹⁰ Ibid., 9

¹¹ June Grasso, Jay Corrin, and Michael Kort. *Modernization And Revolution In China: From the Opium Wars to World Power* (M E Sharpe Inc, 2004), 129

¹² Stewart, Op. Cit., 388

¹³ Rodney Stich, *Japanese and U.S. World War II Plunder and Intrigue* (Nevada: Silverpeak Publisher, 2010), 13.

¹⁴ Ishikida, Op. Cit., 66

¹⁵ Robert Barr Smith, “Japanese War Crime Trials,” *Historynet.com*, accessed September 1, 2014, <http://www.historynet.com/japanese-war-crime-trials.htm>.

they were unable to bear children.¹⁶

In the last pillar of the system, the comfort women were controlled with threats of violence and starvation. Constant abuse, hunger and disease broke the morale of the women, who were often required to serve twenty to forty men a day.¹⁷ The women were also guarded 24 hours a day in tiny barracks that were usually only equipped with a mat and a bucket of disinfectant.¹⁸ Maria Rosa Hensen of the Philippines, who was arrested in 1943 at the age of 16, described her life as a comfort woman in these words: “You cannot say no as they will definitely kill you. During the mornings, you have a guard. You are free to roam around the garrison, but you cannot get out. I could not even talk to my fellow women. We were not allowed to talk to each other.”¹⁹ Many women were left so injured from the sexual and physical abuse that they became barren.

Geography played a major role in helping to maintain the comfort women system. For security reasons, the Japanese military preferred to import comfort women from abroad rather than from the areas that they were invading. Foreign comfort women would have no knowledge of the land, the language, or the people and customs of the areas to which they were sent. Thus, most of the women found themselves in foreign territories. This made escape extremely difficult, if not impossible. Even if the women were able to escape the camp, all modes of transportation were commandeered by the Japanese military. The Kempeitai, or Japanese military police, were patrolling everywhere, and there was no way to move any long distance by road, rail, air, or ship without official papers and permission from the military authorities. Movement of personnel, war materiel and “goods” (some shipments of comfort women were designated “priority goods”) were all tightly controlled by Japanese officials.²⁰

In postwar Japan, while the militarist elements that had instigated the War were purged, the emperor cult and Hirohito himself were left in place as a means of legitimizing the outcome of the War and the subsequent occupation. As Japanese war crimes took place largely beyond the view of the Japanese homeland, it was possible to maintain the image of the lost Japanese cause and the way

¹⁶ Stewart, Op. Cit., 388

¹⁷ Stetz and Oh, Op. Cit., 12.

¹⁸ Stewart, Op. Cit., 388

¹⁹ “Testimonies of the Victims,” *The Comfort Women Issue and the Asian Women’s Fund* (website), The Asian Women’s Fund, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.awf.or.jp/e3/oralhistory-00.html>.

²⁰ George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (USA: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 61.

it was pursued as honorable in the minds of the population. This is one reason why the omission or downplaying of war crimes in the Japanese educational system has been a particularly sensitive issue in relations between Japan and its formerly occupied neighbors.²¹ The annual visits of high ranking Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni shrine which memorializes the war dead – including some notable “Class A” war criminals²² – is a continual reminder to both the Japanese and the world that the ideology underlying the Pacific war lives on in defiance of history and worldwide disgust.²³

TREATMENT OF JAPANESE WAR CRIMES

In order to understand the world’s collective amnesia on the comfort women issue, one must first consider the differences between the ways that post-war Japan and Germany were treated, and how these differences affected the way that Japanese war crimes came to be viewed, both by the Japanese people and the world at large.

First, Japan was not partitioned into occupation zones as Germany was. The Soviet Union had tried and failed, in the last days of the War, to get American agreement to a shared postwar occupation of Japan.²⁴ In the emerging cold war between the Western powers and global communism, Japan’s American overlords wanted to ensure that Japan remained firmly in the American orbit. To accomplish this, Emperor Hirohito was left in place as a means of legitimizing the War’s outcome and the occupation, even though there was plentiful evidence that Hirohito had been far more than a mere puppet at the outset of the war.²⁵

Thus, even as the Western allies celebrated their victory over Japan, they had also started to court her as a future ally in the fight against communism.

A similar dynamic played out for different reasons in the Far East. After 1949, the People’s

²¹ Thomas Crampton, “The ongoing battle over Japan’s textbook,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2002, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/12/news/12iht-rtexts_ed3_.html

²² James Fallows, “What Is a ‘Class-A War Criminal’? More on the Yasukuni Controversy,” *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2014, accessed November 2, 2014, [war-criminal-more-on-the-yasukuni-controversy/283004](http://www.theatlantic.com/2014/01/war-criminal-more-on-the-yasukuni-controversy/283004)

²³ Ed Payne and Yoko Wakatsuki, “Japanese Prime Minister Abe visits controversial Yasukuni war shrine,” *CNN.com* accessed October 17, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/25/world/asia/japan-pm-war-shrine/>.

²⁴ Encyclopedia of the New American Nation, s.v. “Reparations - Complications of cold war compensation,” accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/O-W/Reparations-Complications-of-cold-war-compensation.html>

²⁵ Herbert P. Bix, “Hirohito: String Puller, Not Puppet,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/opinion/hirohito-string-puller-not-puppet.html?_r=0

Republic of China was competing with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition and trade with Japan. Thus, surprisingly, neither country claimed war reparations from Japan in the way that Israel had claimed reparations from Germany.²⁶ For decades, the Chinese government, in a bid to establish its own place on the international stage, actively discouraged any mention of atrocities such as the comfort women or the Rape of Nanking.²⁷

In summary, the dynamics of Cold War geopolitics made the victorious powers eager, once Japan's wartime leaders had been tried and eliminated, to move on to normalization. They were, in effect, if not in intent, complicit in the cover-up of the comfort women story.

Moreover, the physical distance between the Japanese home islands and the conquered territories where the atrocities had taken place, meant that Japanese civilians had little or no direct experience of them. In postwar Japan, there was nothing equivalent to the way that German civilians had been forced to march through death camps and dispose of bodies.²⁸ They knew only of their own suffering at first hand, and after the war, this fact made it possible for revisionists to downplay Japan's atrocities and gain some traction in promoting their views in school textbooks and popular culture.

Unlike present-day Germany and Austria, where Holocaust denial and even the symbols of the Nazi state are banned in law, there is no such proscription in contemporary Japan, where the ideology, symbols and beliefs of Japan's wartime militarists live on with impunity.²⁹

There was one more critical factor in the world's collective amnesia about the comfort women: the decades-long silence of the victims themselves. This silence was mainly due to the traditional perception and role of women in East Asian societies.

²⁶ Alyssa Rosenberg, "Japan, World War II and the case for reparations in the United States," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/07/28/japan-world-war-ii-and-the-case-for-reparations-in-the-united-states/>

²⁷ William Lam, "China's Own Historical Revisionism," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2005, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112370720480510111>

²⁸ Rebecca Onion, "In This Photo, German Soldiers React to Footage of Concentration Camps," *The Vault* (blog), June 11, 2003, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/06/11/photo_german_soldiers_react_to_concentration_camp_footage.html

²⁹ Uncomfortable truths," *The Economist*, May 3, 2007, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/node/9116999>

COMFORT WOMEN AS SEEN IN THEIR HOME COUNTRIES

In traditional East Asian societies, women were regarded as chattel property, and could be bought or sold on a whim.³⁰ They had few or no rights of divorce, inheritance, or domicile. A man's word was sufficient to ruin a woman's life. Girls were taught that they were "worthless females," and that their main purpose in life was to bear male offspring for their husbands. They were to be obedient, docile, uneducated and, above all, chaste. Confucian values held female purity to be a virtue greater than life itself.

Thus, a young woman who had lost her virginity was worthless in terms of marriage.³¹ Since women of that time were not permitted careers outside the home, the "dishonor" of rape meant, in effect, the end of their usefulness to family or society. This is why many girls who were abducted and taken to the comfort stations killed themselves, why the few who returned home were reluctant to talk about what had happened to them, and why some of those who did were told by their own families to commit suicide.

Rape as a weapon of War is an ancient and widespread practice, a heinous demonstration of the total domination of one society by another, but in the context of East Asian cultures, with their codes of honor and face, its impact is especially devastating. Not only is the woman dishonored, but her father, brothers and children. A total loss of face is suffered by all family members.

These cultural and geopolitical implications served to obscure the story of the comfort women for almost five decades. An indigenous women's movement in East Asia was needed to break through the wall of silence surrounding the issue, and bring it to the attention of the world.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

It is estimated that three-quarters of the women who were forced or deceived into the comfort women system never returned home.³² In the immediate aftermath of the War, those who were able to return

³⁰ "Asian American Families – Family Structures and Gender Roles," accessed November 21, 2014, <http://family.jrank.org/pages/103/Asian-American-Families-Family-Structures-Gender-Roles.html>

³¹ Connie Chung, "Korean Society and Women: Focusing on the Family," accessed November 21, 2014, http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~yisei/issues/spring_95/yisei_95_30.html

³² Peter Popham, "Japan should resist right-wingers who discount the country's war crimes," *The Independent*, May 1, 2014, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/japan-should-resist-rightwingers-who-discount-the-countrys-war-crimes-9313408.html>

were often humiliated and ostracized by their own families³³ and other members of society. Others, like Ha Sang-suk, a Korean survivor, never returned to their homelands out of shame and disgrace. When interviewed in 2013, Ha reflected that she hadn't written to her family once since the day she left home.³⁴

Japan's comfort women system was not completely unknown to the public in both Korea and Japan in the early years after the War. More than two hundred Japanese documents regarding the comfort stations were published in numerous formats, such as books, journal articles, and memoirs, between the years 1950 to the time of Hirohito's death in 1989.³⁵ In 1974, Senda Kako published an account of sex tourism that included post-defeat stories of the comfort women.³⁶ This informed Japanese readers of the actions committed by the Japanese military and the mistreatment of the victims.

In 1976, Kim Il Myon published *The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women*, a comprehensive study on the comfort women system that included the personal stories of victims and the overall recruitment process.³⁷

Although these were pioneering works that served to expose the plight of the comfort women, they did little to garner interest in the issue from the public at large and governmental entities. In accordance with the Confucian emphasis on female chastity and modesty, most of the surviving Korean victims were reluctant to come forth themselves, choosing instead to bury the past. To speak out would make no sense. Most of the victims had come from poor, rural backgrounds and had little means to right the injustice done to them. For those who had managed to reintegrate themselves, however precariously, into society, going public would mean risking what they had salvaged of their lives with no clear purpose or incentive. Moreover, the comfort women issue was considered taboo in Korea, because bringing it up evoked shame and disgrace. Even today, many older Koreans question why the matter should be revisited at all.

³³ Peipei Qiu, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196.

³⁴ *Arirang Special "Comfort Women" One Last Cry*, directed by Tae-Yeul Park, (Arirang T.V.; 2013), Online Video

³⁵ Soh, Op. Cit., 146

³⁶ Tanaka, Op. Cit., xv.

³⁷ Soh, Op. Cit., 148

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The emergence of the comfort women into public view took place in the context of a worldwide revolution in women's consciousness. Western women's movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth century had focused on legal issues such as property rights and suffrage. Starting in the 1960s, however, the women's movements in North America and Europe began to vigorously challenge traditional views regarding gender roles, sexuality, rape, domestic abuse, divorce and systemic inequalities in the workplace and the public sphere. Western feminism of the 1960s, '70s and '80s made a profound contribution to the international community's readiness to react to the comfort women revelations of the 1990s.

In Japan, the postwar constitution imposed by General MacArthur in 1947 had enshrined equality for women into Japanese law.³⁸ The provisions on equal rights for women, articles 14, 24 and 44, drafted by a 22-year-old naturalized American woman, Beata Sirota, gave Japanese women the vote, and mandated gender equality in political, economic and social relations, including marriage. After negotiations ended on February 10, 1947, Lt. Col. Charles Kades, head of the 25-member constitutional committee, told Sirota, "My God, you have given Japanese women more rights than in the American Constitution!"³⁹ While the cultural attitudes towards women in Japan were and remain slow to change, this marked a significant turning point for the Japanese and East Asian societies in general.

In South Korea, disgust with military dictatorships and a desire to reunite the country under democratic principles gave the women's movement different priorities.⁴⁰ Gender issues were held in abeyance in favor of broader political aims. But when South Korea fully democratized in 1987, the rising tide of women's consciousness around the world emboldened Korean women toward a more radical agenda.

At first, this was reflected in the opposition of Korean women's groups – often church-based – to the Korean sex tourism industry whose customers were mostly Japanese men.⁴¹ This served to

³⁸ Christine Russell, "The American Woman Who Wrote Equal Rights Into Japan's Constitution," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2013, accessed November 26, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/01/the-american-woman-who-wrote-equal-rights-into-japans-constitution/266856/>

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Kyungja Jung, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women's Movement Against Sexual Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

⁴¹ Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 139.

refocus awareness of the phenomenon of Japanese exploitation of Korean women.

It was in this atmosphere that Professor Yun Chung-ok of Ehwa Women's University formed a radical feminist group that focused on the comfort women issue as a way to simultaneously address themes of morality, feminism and patriotism, and connect them to current practices of the sexual exploitation of women.⁴² After Yun published her investigation on the comfort women in January of 1990, feminist awareness of the issue and support of the surviving comfort women grew. Korean feminist groups published a declaration in which they demanded reparations for the comfort women during Korean President Roh Tae-woo's visit to Japan.⁴³ Although Emperor Akihito expressed his regret about the comfort women issue, Socialist Senator Motooka Shôji sparked anger when he denied any formal responsibility on the part of the Japanese military. Korean feminist groups responded by providing official evidence and testimonies of the comfort women themselves. Thirty-seven feminist groups formed the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, which was later renamed the Committee for Former Comfort Women.⁴⁴ The Council presented the Japanese government with a list of six demands:

1. Acknowledge that the comfort women were forcibly taken away
2. Issue a public apology
3. Conduct a thorough and honest investigation
4. Construct a memorial remembering the victims
5. Pay compensation to the victims or surviving heirs
6. Create educational programs and accurately pass on the history of the comfort women to succeeding generations

The watershed moment came on August 14, 1991, when Kim Hak Sun, with the support of the Korean feminist movement, gave public testimony of her experiences as a wartime comfort woman. Her story included this harrowing scene:

“A commissioned officer took me to the next room ... Even though I did not want to go he dragged me into the room. I resisted but he tore off all of my clothes and in the end he took my virginity. That night, the officer raped me twice.”⁴⁵

⁴² Carrol Harrington, *Politicization of Sexual Violence: From Abolitionism to Peacekeeping* (Great Britain: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010), 79

⁴³ Beauchamp, Op. Cit., 48.

⁴⁴ Beauchamp, Op. Cit., 42

⁴⁵ Christine Ahn, “Seeking Justice—Or at Least the Truth—for “Comfort Women,” *Foreign Policy In Focus*

Kim's testimony caused uproar in South Korea. Soon after, in December 1991, Kim Hak Sun and two other victims filed a lawsuit demanding that the Japanese government take responsibility. In 1993, inspired by Kim Hak Sun's public testimony, several more comfort women stepped into the public sphere and sued Japan on the basis of international rules regarding crimes against humanity. This lawsuit finally propelled the comfort women issue into the international spotlight.

In 1992, Jan Ruff O'Herne, a Dutch survivor who had lived in the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) before the War, inspired by Kim's courage, came forward to testify. O'Herne's testimony dispelled the notion that the comfort women issue was purely an Asian one. Dutch, Australian and French women who fell under the control of occupying Japanese forces in Asia were also victimized.

JAPANESE RESPONSE

By this time, the issue had catapulted into the center of Korea-Japan relations. For decades, the Japanese government had said almost nothing about it, promoting the fiction that the comfort women had merely been camp followers. But in December 1991, under increasing pressure from human rights groups around the world, the Japanese government undertook an internal study of the matter.

On January 17th, 1992, Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa presented formal apologies for the suffering of the victims during a trip to South Korea.⁴⁶ Documents had been

published that showed the official involvement of the Japanese military in organizing the comfort stations. However, Japan continued to deny the use of coercion during recruitment, and refused to take legal responsibility, which would open them to the obligation of reparations and other forms of redress. Their position was based on the 1964 normalization treaty between Japan and South Korea.⁴⁷ Because the treaty had been negotiated while the comfort women were still a taboo subject, it failed to address the issue at all. The Japanese position was and continues to be that the normalization treaty is the last word on Japanese war crimes against Korea and Korean claims to reparations from Japan.⁴⁸

(website), accessed November 27, 2014, <http://fpif.org/seeking-justice-least-truth-comfort-women/>

⁴⁶ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and Kazuhiko Togo, *East Asia's Haunted Present: Historical Memories and the Resurgence of Nationalism (PSI Reports)*(Connecticut: Praeger, 2008), 131.

⁴⁷ Soh, Op. Cit., 159

⁴⁸ Sarah Soh, "Japan's Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors," Japan Policy Research Institute, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp77.html>

By August 1993, enough evidence had been made public to force Japan to finally admit, after decades of denial, that coercion had indeed been used in the recruitment of comfort women. However, ultimate responsibility was shifted to private recruiters, in spite of plentiful evidence that military personnel had been used in many of the roundups.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the 1993 admission was accompanied by what seemed to be a significant apology and statement from Chief Cabinet Minister Kono, who said, in part:

“Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”⁵⁰

The following year, the Japanese government established the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) to provide private donations to the victims from the Japanese people. As it was a private fund, and not state compensation, it was regarded by many as a way for Japan to avoid the admission of legal responsibility. Thus, many women’s groups and victims protested strongly against the fund, which was discontinued in 2007.

Those who are new to this story understandably ask why the victims, feminists, human rights groups and governments around the world continue to insist on an official apology from Japan when apologies were issued in 1992 and ’93. The answer is that Japan has sent mixed signals, often putting a different spin on developments for domestic audiences, and changing their position whenever there is a shift in the political winds at home.

For example, Ishihara Nobuo, a former senior official who helped draft the Kono statement, has recently cast doubt on its sincerity, characterizing it as the result of “pressure for improved relations with South Korea.”⁵¹ The current conservative government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in what is widely seen as pandering to his right-wing supporters, has made a show of

⁴⁹ Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 37.

⁵⁰ “Summary of Kono Statement,” *The Japan News*, January 8, 2015, accessed January 9, 2015, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001644649>

⁵¹ “Kono statement drafter: No records of military coercion in recruiting ‘comfort women,’” *The Asahi Shimbun*, February 21, 2014, accessed December 1, 2014, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201402210054

considering a retraction of the 1993 Kono apology. At the same time, Abe's administration has mounted an international campaign to roll back the academic and diplomatic consensus surrounding the comfort women's history and right to redress.⁵² Abe has publicly expressed doubt that coercion was used in recruiting the comfort women. In October of 2014, he dispatched an envoy to the United Nations in an attempt to revise that organization's scathing 1996 report on the comfort women.⁵³ The effort was rebuffed, but there can be little doubt that it was timed to played well with Abe's conservative base, just in time for the elections of December 2014.

This political pandering emboldens the vitriolic Japanese right-wing press and neo- militarist groups who, unhampered by the kinds of restrictions that Nazi sympathizers live under in Germany, have lately been issuing threats against reporters and news organizations that give voice to the comfort women's plight.⁵⁴

CONTEMPORARY PERCEPTIONS

It is not surprising, then, that Japan is diplomatically isolated on this issue. International opinion regarding the comfort women has repeatedly condemned Japan for not taking full responsibility.⁵⁵

In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted Resolution 121,⁵⁶ which urges Japan to acknowledge and apologize to the comfort women formally. The Netherlands, Canada, the E.U., and the Philippines have passed similar resolutions. They have been joined by universities and international bodies such as the United Nations and Amnesty International.

In 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a closed-door meeting with aides, stated: "The correct term is not 'Comfort Women,' but 'Enforced Sex Slaves.'"⁵⁷ Coming from a

⁵² Mindy Kotler, "The Comfort Women and Japan's War on Truth," *New York Times*, November 14, 2014, accessed November 20, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/15/opinion/comfort-women-and-japans-war-on-truth.html?_r=0

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Martin Feckler, "Rewriting the War, Japanese Right Attacks a Newspaper," *New York Times*, December 2, 2014, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/asia/japanese-right-attacks-newspaper-on-the-left-emboldening-war-revisionists.html>

⁵⁵ Peter Popham, "Japan should resist right-wingers who discount the country's war crimes," *The Independent*, May 1, 2014, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/japan-should-resist-rightwingers-who-discount-the-countrys-war-crimes-9313408.html>

⁵⁶ Govtrackus, accessed November 30, 2014, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hres121/text>

⁵⁷ "Clinton says 'comfort women' should be referred to as 'enforced sex slaves,'" *Japan Today*, July 11, 2012, accessed December 7, 2014, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/clinton-says-comfort-women-should-be-referred-to-as-enforced-sex-slaves>

person who is considered by many to be the most viable candidate in 2016 for president of the United States, this statement, although off the record, cannot be a welcome one in Tokyo.

There are many lessons to be drawn from the story of the comfort women. First, there are good and bad people everywhere. Although the Japanese government has been the villain in this story, there are many Japanese feminists, historians, journalists and political activists whose hard and unrelenting work has been indispensable in bringing this story to light. Some of these people are under threat in their own country by right-wing neo-fascists, and they should be recognized and given support and encouragement.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Although there is no moral equivalency between the comfort women system of WWII and the prostitution systems that served American soldiers during the Korean and Vietnam wars, Western armies and, indeed, Western sex tourists contribute in their own way to the continued trafficking and enslavement of women around the world.

The story of the comfort women should be used to not point fingers at others without taking a hard look at our own society's part in perpetuating the problem of sexual slavery.

Relevancy due to China's growth

Japan may never apologize unequivocally – at least not in the way that Germany has atoned for its past. The diplomatic advantage that Japan inherited as a result of the Cold War is undiminished today because of the rise of China. There is now talk in Japan of revising Article 9 of its constitution, which prohibits the maintenance of armed forces with belligerent potential.⁵⁸ Combined with what is widely seen as a diminishment of American power, conservatives in Japan believe that the West needs them more than ever as a counterbalance to China,⁵⁹ no matter what stance they take on individual issues. Unless something changes in the geopolitical mix, they are not likely to feel compelled to alter their position.

⁵⁸ Linda Sieg and Kiyoshi Takenaka, "Japan takes historic step from post-war pacifism, O.K.s fighting for allies," *Reuters*, July 1, 2014, accessed December 25, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/01/us-japan-defense-idUSKBN0F52S120140701>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

The role of women's leadership

It was women who brought this story to the world's attention. It was women's leadership that put it on the agenda. Were it not for the efforts of countless women in church groups, universities, clubs, governments and NGOs, the comfort women would never have stepped forward. It is mostly women who man the barricades at the weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. It is mostly women who support and care for the surviving comfort women at the House of Sharing in Gwangju.

The truth is, macroeconomics and geopolitics will always trump human rights, unless people refuse to let it. And so often in history, it is the women who refuse to let it.

For four days in December 2000, Yun Chung-ok and other leaders of the Asian women's movement convened the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal. Its purpose, she said, was "to try the criminals, and restore the honor and the dignity of the survivors." The following is a quotation from the Tribunal's final judgment:

"The Crimes committed against these survivors remain one of the greatest unacknowledged and unremedied injustices of the Second World War. Accordingly, through this Judgment, this Tribunal intends to honor all the women victimized by Japan's military sexual slavery system. The Judges recognize the great fortitude and dignity of the survivors who have toiled to survive and reconstruct their shattered lives and who have faced down fear and shame to tell their stories to the world and testify before us. Many of the women who have come forward to fight for justice have died unsung heroes. While the names inscribed in history's page have been, at best, those of the men who commit the crimes or who prosecute them, rather than the women who suffer them, this Judgment bears the names of the survivors who took the stand to tell their stories, and thereby, for four days at least, put wrong on the scaffold and truth on the throne."⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

Increasingly, it appears likely that Japan may never fully acknowledge its role in the sexual enslavement of hundreds of thousands of girls and young women between 1937 and 1945, this despite the overwhelming consensus of historians, both within Japan and around the world, as to the essential accuracy of the facts presented in this report. Much of the primary source evidence comes from Japan's own military archives, and the testimony of soldiers who fought in the ranks of Japanese

⁶⁰ *Politics of Trauma*, "Community, Resilience, Activism, & Healing," accessed December 28, 2014, <http://politicsoftrauma.com/2012/10/27/community-resilience-activism-healing/>

Imperial forces. When added to the first-hand recounts of the victims themselves, the body of available evidence is both compelling and definitive.

Nevertheless, a combination of Japan's internal politics, which must to some degree accommodate the demands of right-wing nationalists, and external position in the geopolitical landscape, has immunized Japan from criticism, resulting in a freezing of its position on the comfort women and other wartime atrocities, at least for the foreseeable future.

However, this is not the end of the movement that was triggered by the comfort women revelations. The demonstrations are also likely to persist as the body of evidence grows. A new generation of world leaders is more aware of the story of the comfort women than ever before. This is due, in no small part, to the courage of the comfort women themselves, who came forward at great risk to remind the world of the inhumanity that is possible when the world looks the other way.

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