

The fable of “forced abduction of comfort women” is finally imploding.

The reality of the comfort women was that they were ordinary sex workers.

Lee Woo-yeon, co-author of *Anti-Japan Tribalism*

Criticism against Professor Ramseyer’s Article

Professor Mark Ramseyer at Harvard University stated in his article, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War,” in *International Review of Law and Economic* that the relationship between comfort women and comfort stations was contractual. A group of American and South Korean scholars have criticized the professor’s article. The core of their criticism is that there are no contracts or pieces of “paper” to substantiate the contractual relationship. Underlying their comment is the fact that they do not understand the difference in contractual cultures between that of European and American countries, where contracts are written, and that of Korea, where people tended to make oral contracts.

The criticism that there is no paper contract suggests that there was no contract at all in the first place. The critics argue, “There was no contract concluded, and so there could no written contract.” The common perception shared by Professor Ramseyer’s critics is that women were forcibly abducted by the Japanese military, police and government officials and were made to become comfort women, and not by a contract.

Critics claim that there is a mountain of evidence, “grounds for their confidence,” in their support—“testimonies from victim former comfort women”; “confession by a Japanese perpetrator, Yoshida Seiji”; a Japanese Army document instructing “forcible abduction”; the 1993 Kono Statement expressing an “apology” by the Japanese Government; the Coomaraswamy Report issued by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and other reports by Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists and other NGOs. However, among these “grounds for their confidence,” the only thing that might be considered “valid” are the stories of the former comfort women. The rest are either false or not based on primary sources but solely on the statements of former comfort women.

Reports issued by international organizations were based on either testimony of former comfort women, Yoshida Seiji’s story, documents from the Japanese Army or the Kono Statement. The Kono Statement was issued as a desperate, ill-conceived measure by the

Japanese Government, in response to those who claimed that the comfort women issue was proven given the testimonies from both victims and perpetrators, and Japanese military documents. Later, however, the Japanese military documents in question proved to have nothing to do with an order for “forcible abduction” of anyone. Japanese military documents referring to “forcible abduction” were not found in Japanese archives. Yoshida Seiji so-called confession has proven to be completely fictitious. In Japan, the *Asahi Newspaper* solemnly reported Yoshida’s fiction—only to ended up retracting all reporting involving Yoshida’s fiction, thereby damaging the newspaper’s credibility. At first glance, it looks as if evidence abounds, but, in fact, in the end, one is left with the stories of the former comfort women.

So can we believe their claim that “they were forcibly abducted to be made comfort women”?

Victims’ testimony polluted by political intention

When former comfort women came forth early in the 1990s, their statements said nothing about “forced abduction.” They did say that they were deceived by Korean brokers or sold by their parents and became comfort women. However, as the comfort women issue became a social and political issue, and then developed into a diplomatic problem between South Korea and Japan, the comfort women changed their testimonies and started to claim that they were coerced into being comfort women. Their claims were politically polluted. Let me mention one example.

Now being treated like a national treasure and acting as if she were an a former independence fighter, former comfort woman Lee Yong Soo appeared in a KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) program on August 15, 1992. When the emcee asked her how she came to become a comfort woman, she answered:

“I was 16 years old at that time. My family was so poor that I had hardly any wearable clothes. One day, someone came and gave me a new dress and a pair of new shoes. I was so happy with the present and followed the man without knowing anything.”

Her narrative refers to a typical case of a kidnapping committed by a Korean. However, Ms. Lee Yong Soo told a completely different story at a hearing held on February 16, 2007 in the U.S. House of Representatives which she attended as a witness. She stated

the following, which greatly facilitated the adoption by the U.S. House of Representatives a resolution condemning Japan:

“A military man came into my house with a woman, held my shoulder with one hand and covered my mouth with the other, tapped me on the back and carried me away. I am a living history.”

The biggest flaw of the former comfort women’s “testimonies” is the lack of consistency, as this episode illustrates.

This is a serious problem as there are no objective methods to verify their statements. An official document indicating Japanese authorities’ involvement in “forcible abduction” has yet been found, nor has a record left by a third party, including civilians, been found who might have witnessed coercion, nor testimony to that effect. The pro-coercion advocates claim that “200,000 women” were forcibly abducted, yet not a single piece of evidence has been presented to substantiate this, for the past 30 years. One can only conclude that their “testimonies” are not at all trustworthy.

Multiple procedures for personal identification needed in order to become a comfort woman

Professor Alexis Dudden, Faculty of History, University of Connecticut, who has led the criticism against Professor Ramseyer and became famous in Korea, stated on a TV program, “Without papers to back it up or without evidential materials, any assertion cannot be true.” He used words such as “typical” “cruel” and “fraud.” I wonder if the “testimonies” of the former comfort women cleared Professor Dudden’s threshold.

If there were no “forced abductions” by Japanese authorities, how and why did women become comfort women for the Japanese Army? There were cases where a Korean recruiter said to a woman, “I will find a good job for you,” (recruiter fraud) and took the woman without telling her that she was going to work as a comfort women or deceived her parents into selling their daughter. In such cases, there was no employment contract concluded or upfront cash was not paid or paid less than in the case where it was agreed to work as a comfort woman in the first place. In Korea, kidnapping, including recruiting fraud, was the target of police crackdowns before the War. At that time, there were thousands of labor recruiters in Korea.

When recruiters took women from Korea to comfort stations, a number of official documents were needed. Those travelling to China and Southeast Asia were uniformly required to submit a document stating the purpose of the trip and to obtain a “personal reference form” which was issued by the local police chief. Procedures for comfort women were even stricter.

Papers that were required included “application for business permit as temporary bar maid,” which was to be jointly filed by the woman and the comfort station owner, two copies of a self-portrait photo, employment consent form stamped by head of the household and the applicant, stamped certificates of both and a copy of her family register (The employment consent, stamped certificate and a copy of the family register must be filed in person to be issued). On top of these, staff at Japanese Consulates directly confirmed if she intended to work at a comfort station of her own volition. (Mr. Ju Ik-jong stated the above in YouTube Channel of Syngman Rhee School set up by Professor Lee Young-hoon, co-author of *Anti-Japan Tribalism*.)

When a woman arrived at a comfort station involuntarily, this was a problem. The army unit in charge of usage and administration of the comfort station needed to confirm if she came to the station with the understanding of the nature of the work in which she was going to engage. The unit was also to confirm the above-mentioned papers. There were cases in which new arrivals were brought to the station through deception and were immediately sent home.

Judging from the above, it can be said that cases of human trafficking by parents selling their daughter, fully aware of the work she was expected to do, far outnumbered cases of recruiting comfort women through kidnapping. Newspapers at the time revealed that human trafficking of daughters by parents was common practice and became a serious social problems. In the mid-1920s, a similar situation occurred in Japan. A society in which families were so poor that they had no option but to sell their daughters to survive triggered the 2-26 coup d’etat incident in 1936.

Statement that prostitutes were either volunteers or sold by their parents

As I stated in my previous article, “Contents of an American paper logically explaining that comfort women were not sex slaves,” the practice of recruiting comfort women fell

on the boundary between illegal human trafficking on one hand and legal enforcement of rights and labor recruiting on the other. Human trafficking, called “human meat market”, was rampant and became a serious social problem. Those arrested on the charge of human trafficking were mostly found “not guilty”.

Considering the circumstances, parents dealing with recruiters were fully aware where their daughter was going and what work she was to do. Even though there was no clear written contract present, the transaction constituted a contract as Westerners generally refer to, if parents knew all about it. Anti-Ramseyer critics in South Korea and the United States show their ignorance of the time.

I wrote previously, “The typical case where a contract was concluded between a comfort woman and the business owner was that the woman had worked as a prostitute within and outside Korea before the War. Here are statements by Koreans who described the situation at the time. They were from inquiry records of three Korean prisoners of war captured by the U.S. Army in 1945. (Composite Report on Three Korean Navy [Imperial Japanese Navy] Civilians List No. 78, dated 25 March 1945, Re Special Questions on Koreans.)

The questions were: “Do Koreans know that the Army is recruiting Korean women to work as prostitutes for the Imperial Japanese Army? How do ordinary Koreans react to this? Do you know about any riot or friction caused by it?”

Their answers were: “Prostitutes we saw were all volunteers or sold by their parents. This is a Korean way of thinking. If Japanese directly conscripted Korean women, young and old alike would stand up in a fury. Men would get madly angry and would have instantly killed Japanese whatever would become of themselves later.”

Their answers indicate that “forced abductions” never happened and could never have taken place. Instead, the general path to become a comfort woman was parents dealing with a human trafficker, by prostitutes changing jobs or by direct employment. I have never heard more inclusive statements about the process of becoming a comfort woman.

Comfort women were “sex workers”

Human trafficking by parents and prostitutes who wanted to become comfort women were the major methods. Comfort women themselves or their parents concluded

economic contracts with the business owner. Comfort women were not sex slaves, but were sex workers. Comfort women concluded a contract with a broker or a business owner to start sex work, just as any worker concludes a labor contract with an employer.

If an actor acts in a fixed pattern, this means that the person acts according to a contract, and therefore a contract exists. To deny a contractual relationship, it must be demonstrated that there are no materials present that verify a substantial contract, which Professor Ramseyer claims constitute a contract, such as receipt of upfront payment, the existence of a contract period and the rate of dividing revenue between the comfort woman and the comfort station.

However, criticism against Professor Ramseyer's article, even partially, has yet to be substantially documented. I am confident that this is a good opportunity for the Korean academic circle and those around the world to launch a meaningful discussion on the comfort women issue.