

The Issue of the Japanese Military Comfort Women

How to solve the farce of global fraud that deceived the entire world

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I am Kim Byung-heon, a history researcher, living in Seoul, the Republic of Korea. After teaching at Sungkyunkwan University and Central University and working as a specialist for the Independence Hall of Korea, I am now the President of the Korean History Textbook Research Institute and a Representative of the National Action to Abolish the Comfort Women Act.

I have been studying Korean history textbooks since 2014 and have found errors and distortions scattered at various places. Since 2019 onwards, I have been working on the street for the removal of comfort women statues, against the Wednesday demonstrations staged by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance, and for the abolition of the Comfort Women Act. I also participated in overseas actions to remove the comfort woman statue in Berlin, Germany, to protest “The Non-Freedom of Expression Exhibit” in Nagoya, Japan, together with organizing a total of 200 rallies both at home in Korea and abroad.

The comfort women issue in Korea can be called a farce of global fraud staged by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, putting forth poor, old former comfort women and deceiving the Korean people and the entire world. Consequently, Japan was branded as a despicable violator of comfort women’s human rights, and the Korea-Japan relationship further worsened almost to the point of collapse. It is totally unfortunate for both countries to go on in such deplorable circumstances.

How do we deal with the comfort women issue that has been left unresolved for more than thirty years? Here, I would like to present a solution in my capacity of a South Korean history scholar.

In my judgment, time is not yet ripe for the complete restoration of the Japan-South Korea relationship

As of July 2023, the frozen relationship between Japan and South Korea is about to thaw. It's been five years since the Korean Supreme Court returned verdict in favor of the plaintiffs in the lawsuits related to the mobilized workers during the period of Japan's Annexation of Korea, held in October and November 2018. After the court decision, in July 2019, Japan announced export restriction, excluding Korea from the list of favorable trading partners. In retaliation of the Japanese action, Korea announced the termination of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Thus, a close-call crisis emerged.

Under such circumstances, the core of the Moon Jae-in Administration resorted to anti-Japan provocations, using the old revolutionary song of "Bamboo Spear" and the legendary Korean Admiral Yi Sun-sin's "Twelve Turtle Ships" that fought against the Toyotomi Hideyoshi's campaigns invading from Japan. Then, the hostility grew into a nationwide movement under the slogan of "No Japan" ("no go" and "no buy"). Many made-in Japan goods disappeared from stores and stores linked to Japan were forced to close, one after another. Misfortunes never come alone. The covid-19 pandemic shut down the human exchanges and the Japan-Korea relationship virtually broke off.

The hostilities in the diplomatic relations that lasted for five years changed completely when the Yoon Suk-yeol Administration came to power. The Yoon Government started with the notion that the deadlocked Japan-Korea relationship did not benefit the national interest and actively worked to solve it. To begin with, the Korean Government decided to have the foundation under the South Korean Government pay the compensation and interest for arrears to the plaintiffs who have been acknowledged as mobilized victims by the decision of the South Korean Supreme Court in 2018. It was the so-called "subrogation by a third party," in which it was not the defendant Japanese companies but the Korean side that would be held totally responsible for the payment.

In response to this action, the Japanese side immediately acted. In March this year, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio invited President Yoon Suk-yeol to Japan and held a summit between Japan and Korea and immediately after this meeting, the Japanese Prime Minister visited South Korea. After that, the resumption of "shuttle diplomacy" was announced, in which both heads of state regularly and mutually visit each other and talk. It has been twelve years since President Lee Myung-bak and Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko met in 2011.

With this favorable wind, Japanese products, once completely out of sight in Korea, came back to fly off the shelves, Japanese animation films became box office hits and the number of

tourists to Japan skyrocketed. It looks as if the frozen relationship between Japan and Korea has completely recovered. However, I should warn you that this is nothing but an illusion. It is only that a hint has been found to the solution of one of the two major problems causing the awkward relationship between the two countries, namely, the “mobilized workers issue” and the “comfort women issue.” The comfort women issue, which is much tougher than the mobilized workers issue, is yet to be officially discussed. The comfort women issue dragging on for more than 30 years and having now become an international topic is the toughest issue to be overcome by all means, in order to resume the perfect Japan-Korea relationship.

President Yoon made a promise that is never to be fulfilled

On June 14, 2023, the so-called victimized Japanese military comfort woman Lee Yong Soo appeared at the sixteen hundredth Wednesday demonstration held by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance on the street near the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. This was her third appearance after March and May. The 95-years old woman took the platform and her demanding speech seemed to be clear and urgent. She asked the President Yoon to keep his promise to her that he would solve the comfort women issue in September 2021, as a presidential candidate at that time. Then, President to be Yoon also promised her that he would certainly induce Japan to apologize, even if he could not become President.

However, now, a year after he became President, he has not even referred to the comfort women issue, let alone the promise he made. The greatly disappointed Ms. Lee came all the way to Seoul from distant Daegu and stood on the stage. However, Ms. Lee’s apparently urgent appeal turned out to be an empty cry. The reason is clear. President Yoon made a promise that is impossible to carry out even if he intends to.

The National Mobilization Act in 1938 and any other laws did not carry a clause stating mobilization of comfort women. Comfort women were professionals who provided sexual services at prescribed fees.

Comfort women were targets of recruitment by a comfort station master, but they were not targets of mobilization by the state or public authority. However, Ms. Lee, claiming herself to be a victim of the Japanese military comfort women system, stated that she was forcibly abducted by the Japanese Army on every occasion available, such as at the United States Congress in 2007 and the French National Assembly in 2018. However, Ms. Lee’s statements clearly contradicted her own initial ones.

In 1993, in the book *Forcibly Abducted Korean Military Comfort Women (1)* published by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (The Korean Council), Ms. Lee stated, “I silently followed Bunsun on tiptoe. Without saying anything to my mother, I left my house, just following Bunsun” and then, “A man wearing the national uniform and a combat hat handed me a bag and I peeped into the bag to find a red dress and a pair of leather shoes. Given these, how happy I was as a little girl! The gift made me completely absent-minded, and I followed the man light-heartedly.” She continued to state, “The man who took us from Daegu was the master of the comfort station. We called him “Daddy.” Nowhere in Ms. Lee’s initial statements appeared the Japanese Army. On top of that, at Shinchiku, Taiwan, where Ms. Lee lived as a comfort woman, there was no Japanese military comfort station. After all, Ms. Lee was not a Japanese military comfort woman, let alone a victim of the Japanese military comfort women system, forcibly abducted by the Imperial Japan. Therefore, there is no comfort women issue to be solved by President Yoon for Ms. Lee.

The world’s longest illegal demonstrations violating the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations

On January 8, 1992, during the then Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi’s visit to South Korea, about ten women gathered for a demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. They held up slogans saying, “Japan, build a statue in memory of drafted victims,” “Clearly state the fact of forced draftees in history textbooks,” and “Japanese Government, admit the fact of forced draftees and apologize.”

Thus, a demonstration started, which came to be known as “Wednesday demonstration” and in June 2023, this event had been held over 1,600 times. Particularly, at the 1,400th demonstration held on August 14, 2019, nearly 20,000 participants (by the organizer’s estimate) completely jammed the streets and pedestrian walks in front of the Japanese Embassy.

The Wednesday demonstration is now the symbol of the comfort women movement and the icon for anti-Japan demonstrations. The Wednesday demonstration self-appreciated by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance is not only based on fiction distorting the true nature of comfort women, but also the world’s longest lasting illegal meeting, violating the promise of the international community as well as the Korean domestic law.

The reasons are as follows. First, the “Volunteer Corps” they discuss were not the comfort women. The Volunteer Corps at that time were those with certain academic career and skills who worked at factories and earned money. Moreover, there was no fact that they were forcibly mobilized by public authorities. Imperial Japan promulgated “Women’s Volunteer Workers Act” on August 23, 1944, in mainland Japan and the Korean Peninsula to mobilize the Volunteer Corps. To be eligible for the Act, women with an ordinary school level academic ability, following the “Act of Declaration of National Job Ability” or with skills in the mining and industrial fields had to apply in person. However, at that time, in the Korean Peninsula, there were hardly any women able to meet these conditions and with the special status of being Korean women, so the Act was merely promulgated but was not actually implemented. Of course, there were some cases where Korean women went to the Volunteer Corps through recruiting or mediation. These cases were completely different from the forced mobilization by law.

On the other hand, “comfort women” were professional prostitutes who provided sexual services in exchange for fixed fees as clearly seen from the Korean Supreme Court decision of 1966, defining that “In daily life, comfort women refer to females who act as prostitutes.” As of the Japanese military comfort women, there were strict regulations stipulating that before departing from Japan they were to make a contract with the owner of a comfort station, report in person to the police station in charge and have identification card (presently visa) issued and upon arrival at the overseas place, they were to report to the local consulate police station, submit the approval of the parental authority, business permit and research report of the person and two portrait photos of themselves for approval. Only after clearing the above procedure, the woman was allowed to work as a comfort woman.

The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan that led the comfort women movement changed its name in 2018 to the “Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.” They changed the issue of “Volunteer Corps” to the issue of “the Japanese military sexual slavery system.” However, there was not only no “Japanese military sexual system,” but also Japanese military were mere customers at the comfort station and did not treat the comfort women like slaves. Therefore, the term of “Japanese military sexual slavery system” did not match the historical fact. Therefore, whether it is called “Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery” or “Council for Justice and Remembrance”, it is an organization with a name that does not reflect its true nature. It is extremely strange that such a body has led the comfort women

movement for more than 30 years. The Wednesday demonstrations organized by such a contradictory body for 31 years right in front of the Japanese Embassy clearly violate the “Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which is a promise made by the international community. The Vienna Convention’s Article 22-2. states: “The receiving State is under a special duty to take all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity.” In addition, this demonstration also violates the domestic Korean “Law on Meetings and Demonstrations,” stating “meetings within 100 meters perimeter of the foreign embassies and consulates shall be banned.” Therefore, the Wednesday demonstrations the Council for Justice and Remembrance boasts of as the world’s longest lasting demonstration is, in fact, the world’s longest illegal meeting, violating the promise of the international community and the domestic Korean law.

“Girl of Peace Statue,” a symbol of lies and hatred

The statue is a symbol of fault and hatred reflecting the sculptor’s wrong recognition of history, serving as a mere propaganda tool for the farce of the comfort women fraud. The sculptor stated in his creator’s note titled “A promise inscribed on an empty chair”: “During the colonial period, Japan committed merciless crimes without hesitation, deceiving blossoming Korean young girls and women, forcibly taking them to the battleground and forcing them into sexual slavery and killing them.” He virtually claimed that comfort women were victims of war crimes.

However, truthfully, Korea at that time was not occupied by Japan and Korean women were Japanese citizens. In addition, comfort stations were facilities for legal prostitution, established and managed to prevent war crimes against women in occupied regions. Japanese military comfort women made contract with the owner of a whorehouse prior to departing from Japan and went through various procedures, submitting required papers before they legally worked as a prostitute. Therefore, it was totally unlikely that young girls were kidnapped, lured or abducted and forced into sexual slavery.

The sculptor said that he made the statue of a girl aged between 13 and 15, modeling after his own 11 years old daughter. However, among papers submitted for the permit of working as a comfort woman, the family register copy made it easy to confirm the parental authority and the age. It was impossible to make a false statement. The point is that at that time the Japanese military comfort women had to be over the age of seventeen. Therefore, the sculptor’s claim

that girls aged 13 to 15 were taken to serve as comfort women is a clear lie.

Many comfort girl statues within South Korea and abroad were made and installed based on distorted or fabricated information. Moreover, these statues of a girl carry the name “peace,” but in reality, they are nothing but a symbol of fallacies and hatred, causing conflicts between both parties and putting the Japan-Korea relationship on the brink of bankruptcy. The comfort girl statues established in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and near the local Japanese Consulates are illegal sculptures violating the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

The Japan-Korea Comfort Women Agreement of 2015 to be abolished

In March 2023, the news media reported that during the Japan-Korea top meeting, regarding the “Plan of the third-party payment” related to the mobilized workers issue, Prime Minister Kishida stated, “The Japanese Government highly appreciates the planned procedure as a means of restoring the relationship between the two countries which has been extremely adverse back to the normal.” At the same time, the Prime Minister requested President Yoon to steadily fulfill the “Japan-Korea Comfort Women Agreement of 2015.” Prime Minister Kishida thinks that the solution of the comfort women issue is to fulfill the 2015 Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Agreement. Since at the time of the conclusion of the Agreement in 2015, Kishida was Japanese Foreign Minister who led the agreement, it is natural for him to state so. However, the Japan-South Korea Agreement of 2015 was one that should have never been agreed on in the first place.

The fundamental reason is that no one is qualified to apply for the measure mentioned in the Agreement. As previously mentioned, there is not one victim of the alleged Japanese military comfort women system. The Agreement was made on the premise that there were Japanese military comfort women victims, of which, in fact, there were none.

Another reason is that details of “the Agreement” are against the currently effective “Comfort Women Act.” In fact, the statement by South Korea in the Agreement says, “About the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul, the Government of the ROK will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue,” hinting that the statue in question may possibly be removed. However, this contradicts Article 11 (1) of the Act that states, “Memorial or solacing projects can be made.”

In addition, in the Agreement it is stated, “The Government of the ROK, together with the Government of Japan, will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations,” while Article 11 (3) of the Act states, “educational, publicity and academic activities, international exchange and joint survey and other domestic and overseas activities can be conducted,” contradicting the Agreement. If educational and publicity activities related to the comfort women issue and domestic and overseas activities are continuously carried out, it is utterly impossible to refrain from criticizing and accusing the counterpart.

In gist, in order to carry out the Agreement, it is necessary to abolish the Comfort Women Act. But the Agreement was made, leaving the Act effective as it is.

With the two measures conflicting with each other practically and theoretically, if the Japan-Korea Comfort Women Agreement is to be implemented, the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance and other groups involved in the comfort women movement will be sure to violently protest, claiming that voices of accusations will be muffled while comfort women victims do exist. To them, apart from facts and logics, the comfort women issue is a tool for anti-Japan propaganda and a life-or-death issue to be dealt with. The Agreement that is not in accordance with historical fact and includes theoretic faults cannot be free from their fierce revolt. Following such confusion, South Korea will surely fall into the whirl of conflict and struggle once again and the solution of the comfort women issue will be moved further away.

The solution of the Japanese military comfort women issue

How to solve the issue. The answer lies in the true “investigation of the truth.” Currently, Article 2 (objective) and 4 (enterprise) of the standing rules of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance clearly state, “the investigation of the truth.” At the site of the 31 years old Wednesday demonstration, banners clearly reading “seven demands, including the “investigation of the truth” are used as a backdrop. What I mean is not this kind of “investigation of truth,” but precisely the “true investigation of the truth.”

President Yoon Suk-yeol once stated regarding the comfort women issue, “To correctly remember history, there is an issue of finding the real truth.” Apparently, President Yoon considers “the true investigation of the truth” to be the very key to the solution of the comfort women issue. Then, Korea should find out, at the Government level and through the true

investigation of the truth, who, among Korean comfort women, (1) were forcibly mobilized and taken, (2) were enticed, kidnapped and abducted, (3) were sexually abused and forced into sexual slavery, and (4) were killed or fatally abandoned.

If historical facts about the comfort women should be revealed through such thorough investigation, the solutions of respective cases will be naturally discovered. After all, the first step toward the solution of the comfort women issue is to clarify the truth about the alleged Japanese military comfort women victims. Then, on the basis of this notion, both countries should share “the historical facts” related to the comfort women issue and the difficult issue left unsolved for as long as 30 years will be finally solved and with this remarkable success, the complete restoration of the normal relationship between Japan and Korea will be finally accomplished.