

Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone

Ikuhiko Hata

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Recent events in the Republic of Korea have demonstrated a transformation into a state that George Orwell would readily recognize—one where facts that contradict the Korean nationalist narrative can be discarded down a “memory hole”, thereby allowing the Korean nationalist elites to create a history to their liking. To Korean nationalists, Japan is to be condemned for Korea’s humiliation during the 1910-1945 period of annexation. Japan, then is to be kept in a state of perpetual humiliation—and Koreans have been successful so far in accomplishing this. While the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea “completely and finally” settled issues of reparations and claims against Japan at both state and individual levels, South Korean nationalists have nonetheless sought reparations for wartime Korean “comfort women” and “slave laborers”, tying-up Japanese courts with lawsuits. As part of normalization of relations, Japan handed over \$800 million in “economic cooperation” to South Korea, which including \$300 million in grants. Consigning both the 1965 Treaty and \$800 million to the memory hole, Korean activists persisted and in 2015 extracted over \$8 million from Japan, in exchange for an agreement that “finally and irreversibly” “resolved” the comfort women issue. The actions of Korean nationalists should not have been a surprise to the Japanese, as current South Korean President Moon Jae-in promised, as a presidential candidate, to renegotiate the “final and irreversible” agreement, stating that it “disregarded the victims and the South Korean public.”¹ Going beyond renegotiation, President Moon shuttered the foundation that was set up to administer Japanese government funds to Korean comfort women.²

More recently, Korean nationalists, with the backing of the South Korean judiciary, followed up on their unilateral rejection of agreements signed in good faith by seizing assets of Japanese companies in Korea--“reparations” for Korean “slave laborers”.³ , “Completely and finally” and “irreversible” are terms that are apparently alien to South Koreans and, furthermore, it appears that legally binding agreements signed between heads of states can be nullified with abandon. (Seeing that South Korean rejection of previous agreements with a pacified Japan reaped dividends without consequences, perhaps it would not be surprising to expect such behavior from North Koreans, if and when they sign an agreement with the U.S. to denuclearize in exchange for economic cooperation.) Seeing that the current Abe Shinzo administration has taken no substantial

¹ Minegishi, H. Moon in a bind over ‘comfort women’ as Japan threatens rupture. *Nikkei Asian Review*. December 29, 2017.

² Haas, B. Anger in Japan as South Korea dissolves ‘comfort women’ foundation. *The Guardian*. November 21, 2018.

³ S. Korean court seizes assets of Japanese company over forced labor. *VOA News*. January 9, 2019.

action regarding South Korea's shenanigans, one wonders how "conservative" and "intolerant" the administration really is as portrayed by the popular media.

One could airily dismiss current tensions between Korea and Japan as dating back hundreds of years, but the modern Korean nationalists have primarily focused on the Japanese annexation and all of the supposed attendant ills that came with the Japanese, including the so-called "comfort women" issue.

For non-Japanese speakers needing the details of the so-called Korean "comfort women" issue, or the Japanese military "comfort women" issue, currently available information in the English language range from an infrequent, though thoughtful essay (which is quickly obliterated⁴) to an occasional book with much-to-be-desired editorial content.⁵ Recently, the facts have finally been written in plain, easy-to-understand English by Ikuhiko Hata, professor emeritus of Nihon University, Japan. Hata's book shows that the prewar and wartime Japanese military brothel system was entirely a fee-based service: the women were given an advance by civilian recruiters, worked as prostitutes exclusively for military personnel and military-related civilians until they repaid their advance and were free to either leave or continue to work.⁶ The current book also points out that the women were paid much more than civilian factory workers, prostitutes working back in the home country and military officers. The book suggests that the "comfort women" can hardly be characterized as "sex slaves", as luridly depicted by activists and the media.

One other major activists' claim that the current book deflates is that most of the comfort women were Korean—in fact, many were Japanese. Hata points out that this fact raises an interesting question: why are former Korean "comfort women" strident in seeking redress but former Japanese comfort women are not? Hata goes on to show the true nature of the former Korean "comfort women" by collecting their mercurial autobiographies, which change as circumstances and the needs of their Korean nationalist handlers change. Surprisingly, as Hata points out, that former Korean "comfort women" were in fact "comfort women" have yet to be independently verified, such as by their former owners or their Korean or Japanese clients. In spite of this, their word is taken as gospel by willing audiences, including representatives of foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations.⁷

⁴ Gray, G. (2013). Comfort women, military prostitution and human trafficking. *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*.

⁵ Hosoya, K., Yamamoto, Y. (2018). WWII Korean Women Not Sex-Enslaved. Xlibris.

⁶ At the end of the war, "Allied officials viewed... the system [the Japanese "brothel network"] they uncovered as an extension of homeland practice." Edward Drea (2006), in: *Researching Japanese War Crimes Records*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration for the Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group.

⁷ One striking, consistent theme in both today's American "#metoo" feminist movement and the Korean comfort women is that "the victim must always be believed". (Murphey, D.D. (1992). *Feminism and rape. Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, Spring, 13-27.) The fantastic claims of both the Korean comfort women have yet to be tested in a legal system, with evidence testing and cross-examination. While sexual assault accusations are taken seriously, a surprising number of them turn out to be fraudulent (Turvey, B.E. et al. (2018). *False Allegations: Investigative and Forensic Issues in Fraudulent Reports of Crime*. NY, NY: Academic Press).

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The current book also delves into the actual degree of Japanese government and military involvement of operating the military brothel system, with activists claiming that the “comfort women” were a “gift of the emperor [of Japan]”. Hata points out that there was in fact conflict within the government, particularly between the Home, Foreign and Army Ministries concerning supplying prostitutes for military personnel, as laws prohibited overseas trafficking of prostitutes and criminal enticement for overseas travel. The civilian ministries accommodate the military’s prewar and wartime needs as much as possible while imposing strict requirements on those traveling overseas. Both Japanese military and civilians authorities were notified when recruiters used deceptive and illegal means to recruit comfort women. In response, the government ordered background checks of brothel owners who were to supply the military with prostitutes and the military advised scrutiny of brothel owners who were to supply and run military comfort stations.

From media coverage of the Korean comfort women issue, it may seem that civilian-run military brothels were somehow unique to Japan. However, this is not at all the case and Hata gives lengthy descriptions of other countries’ military brothel systems, including South Korea’s and the U.S.’s during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Again, given current media coverage, one would be very surprised on hearing the plight of Korean comfort women who serviced U.S. military personnel, long after the Korean War, and their lawsuit against the South Korean government filed June 25, 2014 for apologies and reparations. In conjunction with their lawsuit, the plaintiffs presented a document signed by then South Korean President Park Chung-hee, authorizing government funding for Korean comfort women. (President Park is the father of Park Geun-hee, who was President at the time of the lawsuit.)

Probably the most useful aspect of Hata’s book is that it asks questions about the comfort women issue that have yet to be addressed, despite the outpouring of literature and media coverage on this subject. As mentioned earlier, the current book asks why there has been no attempt to independent verification of any of the comfort women’s stories. The book raises other puzzling questions, such as why are there no stories from the comfort women recruiters or those that ran the comfort stations? If there were “200,000 Korean comfort women”, then why are there almost no stories from those who “captured” them?⁸

There is, though, Yoshida Seiji, a Japanese who allegedly “enslaved” hundreds of Korean women on Jeju Island and Hata did his own fact checking concerning Yoshida claim. Hata was unable to find any of Yoshida’s “former subordinates” to corroborate his claim. No Koreans present at the time of the “comfort women hunt” were able to back Yoshida’s story. Prior to Hata’s field exercise, a local Korean reporter was likewise unable to corroborate Yoshida’s story. Regardless, the *Asahi Shimbun* used Yoshida’s claim as the basis for dozens of their stories on the comfort women. The *Asahi Shimbun*

⁸ One book, written by a Korean brothel owner, was published in Korean and Japanese, but yet to be fully translated into English: Transl. An, B.-j. (2013). *Diary of a Japanese Military Brothel Manager*. (Seoul: Esoope). Although Hata found from government documents that there were 400 military brothels in 1942, just one brothel owner’s story has emerged.

belatedly issued a retraction of the articles in 2014 when they finally got around to fact checking their own stories. One question the book does not entirely have an answer for is how can a baseless claim be used today as evidence of Japanese “enslavement”?

Given the findings in current book, it will be clear that the “facts” as presented by Korean nationalists do not accord with actual history. Furthermore, given that the Japanese government has blundered its way throughout, failing to solve the issue through diplomacy, one wonders what is to be one. Former President Park Geun-hye stated that the Japanese face “one thousand years” of Korean resentment, so it should be apparent that any more appeasement on Japan’s part will be useless. While Hata states that he has not “included personal views or proposals” in the current book, he does hint at a possible path—“avoid spinning off on multiple fronts and to focus on South Korea.” A couple suggestions mentioned in the book include bringing the 2014 Korean comfort women lawsuit against the South Korean government into wider international awareness and to support Korean dissenters who have shown that the Korean nationalists’ comfort women narrative is patently false. In fact, independent-minded Koreans who have done so face prosecution and loss of their livelihood. While Hata’s suggestion to focus on South Korea is indeed a shrewd one, it would also be important to get Japan to stop fanning the flames—Hata writes that Japanese activists, South Koreans have pointed out, are the ones who have been at the forefront of the comfort women issue. Thus, while vigorously defending the truth in South Korea, where the comfort women issue has become sate ideology, the Japanese must also get their house in order. Writing a book such as Hata’s, one that documents the historical facts in an expansive and an in-depth manner and one that is easily readable, is one way to counter Japanese activists, to inoculate oneself from fabricated history and to mobilize the people. A mobilized Japanese people can get their government to think straight and to remind it to put the interest of Japanese people first.