

'Comfort Women' Denial and the Japanese Right

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Introduction

It is a remarkable thing to behold, the extent to which the issue of "comfort women" galvanizes the Japanese right more than two decades after the first Korean survivor appeared in public. The hopeful moments of the [Kono Statement](#) (1993) and the [Murayama Statement](#) (1995) seem to belong to a remote past. Circumscribed though they were, those official statements by the then chief cabinet secretary (Kono Yohei) and prime minister (Murayama Tomiichi) squarely acknowledged the grievous consequences of imperial Japan's acts of aggression not only on the Japanese people but their Asian neighbors, and most pertinently with respect to "comfort women," the involvement of the Japanese military.

That the "comfort woman" system has been documented¹ as entailing the Japanese military, meaning that it can in no way be written off as an enterprise of private brokers, is one of the several interlocking points that exercise rightist revisionists. Another is the use of the term *kyosei renko*, or "forced mobilization": the women, often young enough to warrant characterization as "girls," were recruited, transported, and made to serve against their will. The lure of promised employment in the dire circumstances produced by colonial rule-trickery, in other words-was part of the coercive character of this system. Acknowledging systematic coercion, in turn, is to acknowledge that the system was indeed one

of "military sexual slavery," underscoring the cynical deception of the "comfort woman" euphemism. (The term continues to be meaningful as historical referent, and specifically, as verbal coalescence of willful, flagrant deception.)

Denying the historical veracity and consequent interpretive validity of these points has inspired revisionists to place the blame on the shoulders of Korean and Japanese activists, along with the latter's avatar, the *Asahi Shimbun*. Were it not for the deceptions perpetrated by unpatriotic lawyers, scholars, and deluded citizens, aided and abetted by the *Asahi*, they reason, Koreans themselves would not have made such an issue of the misery experienced by poor women in the context of a decades-old war. Under the Abe regime, foreign ministry officials have been mobilized to pressure international media² as well as a US textbook publisher and author³ in an effort to set the historical facts straight and restore Japan's honor.

It is precisely such self-serving deception that Yoshikata Veki's article, translated here, demolishes by tracking coverage of the issue in the Korean press. The evidence is specific and irrefutable: Korean concern about "comfort women," as revealed in the press, antedates coverage in the *Asahi* (and for that matter, other Japanese papers) by decades. It is worth singling out two details in Yoshikata's work that address revisionist "talking points": it further (1) demonstrates the insignificance of the role of Yoshida Seiji, whose controversial testimony

has been formally repudiated by the *Asahi*,⁴ in inciting Korean awareness and (2) attests that "comfort women" and "teishintai" (volunteer corps) were used interchangeably ("confused," in Yoshida's words).⁵

In closing, it is important to remind ourselves that the "comfort woman" system encompassed far more than the Korean peninsula, and that some of the controversial features in discussion emphasizing the role of the *Asahi* and Japanese activists pertain particularly to the Korean colony. The variety and extent of the practice can be grasped from the fine documentary of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery (2000), now available for online viewing at the [Women's Active Museum site](#). The texture of "comfort woman" experience is conveyed in the recollections of survivors from seven countries and one Japanese soldier in New York-based Korean artist Chang-jin Lee's video and public art project, *Comfort Women Wanted*. NF & TY

"The *Asahi Shimbun*'s Fabrication Theory" Was a Fabrication

In August 2015, Prime Minister Abe is expected to deliver a statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of War II, and his plan is to do so without referring to the coercive nature of the "comfort-woman" system of the Japanese military. The view that the *Asahi Shimbun* report opened the floodgates to making the "comfort women" an issue is prevalent. An analysis of reports published in Korean newspapers, however, overturns this view, demonstrating that the claim that the *Asahi* fabricated the story is itself a fabrication, a complete fiction.

Translated by Julie Higashi

The far-fetched argument that "the 'comfort woman' issue is a fabrication by the *Asahi Shimbun*" has gained popularity and is widely accepted. Isn't this because the premise that "Before the *Asahi Shimbun* and Japanese lawyers began making a big fuss, there was hardly any discussion of 'comfort women' in South Korea" (Watanabe Shoichi, Professor Emeritus of Sophia University, *WiLL* 2007 August Special Issue) was accepted without anybody checking its validity?

With this question in mind, I spent my days gathering materials at libraries and resource rooms in South Korea to investigate how the issue of "comfort women" was actually perceived. The discoveries exceeded my expectations, and I became completely absorbed in an excavation-like process of research. Let me introduce part of my findings.

The perception of "forcible mobilization" already existed in Korea by the 1960s

As I looked through the back numbers of Korean newspapers, not much could be found between the Korean War and the 1950s and early 1960s, when Park Chung-hee seized power through a military coup d'état. After this period, however, Korean articles challenging the views currently popular in Japan began to appear. First, I found an article written by the well-known intellectual Song Kon-ho in the August 14, 1963 *Kyunghyang Shinmun* under the title, "An evil born on the eve of Korea's liberation from imperial Japan." In this article, the author selects the word, "teishintai," as "a word for remembering on August 15." Let me excerpt and translate the relevant passage:

By Yoshikata Veki



Photo 1: Article (blocked off in red) written by well-known intellectual Song Kon-ho in the August 14, 1963 issue of the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, under the title, "An evil born on the eve of Korea's liberation from imperial Japan." The image illustrates the forced mobilization of "comfort women." Image provided by Yoshikata Veki.

Teishintai-also referred to as "delivering up the virgins." Women of marriageable age were mobilized and sent to the battlefield and made into "comfort women." They were all sacrifices for the imperial Japanese soldiers. . . . Nobody knows how many young women were transported to the war front or what happened to them.

The caption to the illustration accompanying the article reads as follows: "The imperial Japanese army even delivered virgins." The illustration depicts a soldier-like man carrying a big bag, suggestive of wartime delivery, who forces a helpless schoolgirl to accompany him. Her family is shown crying in the background, and the picture amply suggests the use of physical force. This article alone, published 19 years before the first reports of Yoshida Seiji's testimony⁶, attests to the groundlessness of the theory that it was the *Asahi's* unsubstantiated

reports of Yoshida's testimonies that first created the perception of the forcible mobilization (recruitment and/or transportation) of "comfort women."

There is another interesting article dated March 23, 1964, which special correspondent Okamura Akihiko of Pan Asia Newspaper Alliance (PANA, now Jiji News) contributed to the *Dong-a Ilbo*. Okamura, in a report on the maritime area near the 38th parallel, recounts the following words from the captain of the fishing boat he boarded during his investigation:

"During the Greater East Asian War, young Korean girls from age 18 to 20 were taken away in the name of 'teishintai.' In the end, they were all forced to become prostitutes for the military." [When he said this,] I could not bring myself to look him in the face.



Photo 2: March 23, 1964 article with photo in *Dong-a Ilbo* by special correspondent Okamura Akihiko of Pan Asia Newspaper Alliance (PANA, now Jiji News). The article describes Okamura's experience of listening to a story told by the captain of a fishing vessel about Korean women

being made into "military prostitutes" under Japan's colonial rule.

"comfort women" as a representative atrocity committed by imperial Japan.

An article entitled, "Japan, Respond to Us," dated February 17, 1965, and submitted by the president of the Bereaved Family Association for Those Who Died for Their Country (Sunguk-seon-nyeol) to the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* also includes the following: "In the name of the teishintai, unmarried women were kidnapped and forced to become comfort women." All these descriptions appeared earlier than Park Kyong-Sik's pioneering publication, *Chosenjin Kyosei-renko no Kiroku* (Miraisha, 1965), or "Records of the Forced Mobilization of Koreans." The argument that "the Japanese had planted the idea of the 'comfort-woman' issue in the minds of Koreans" no longer holds.

Related reports found even before the 1990s

Among the six nationwide newspapers published from before the 1980s, four provide accessible databases. I searched these databases for articles related to "comfort women" published from the time of Korea's liberation up to the early 1990s. I summarize my data collection methodology below.

First, because the term "comfort women" was also frequently used to describe sex workers for the United States military stationed in South Korea, it was necessary to look into the content of each article and eliminate those that were unrelated to the former Japanese military. I also searched for articles that included the term "teishintai." As is well known, in Korea, the two terms, "teishintai" and "comfort women," used to be confused, resulting in many accounts in which it is difficult to distinguish which function was being emphasized. I therefore eliminated those cases where the term could clearly be determined as referring to nonsexual, wartime labor service, which was the original meaning of the term "teishintai." In tallying up the total number of relevant articles, I decided that an article in which both terms, "comfort women" and "teishintai" appeared, would count as one. The fluctuation in the number of articles using the terms inevitably correlates with the increase in the number of publications, and although differences existed among the newspapers, I focused on the number of articles, including also the total number of articles for the four newspapers.

As my table shows, I found 23 articles on the "comfort woman" issue between 1946 and the 1960s. In the 1970s and 80s, however, the number shoots up to about 300. Given the number of articles on this issue appearing



Photo 3: The front page of *Kyunghyang Shinmun* on February 17, 1965, with articles related to Japanese Foreign Minister Shiina's visit at the height of Japan-Korea negotiations. The marked article, entitled "Japan, Respond to Us," is by the president of the Bereaved Family Association for Those Who Died for Their Country (Sunguk-seon-nyeol.) The sixth point in the article refers to the abduction of unmarried women to be turned into

before the 90s, it may be that we have entertained a mistaken impression that everything started in the 90s, a time of rapid progress in diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan. Furthermore, when we look at the numbers for every five years, the trend becomes even clearer. Even with slight ups and downs, the number of times Korean newspapers take up the 'comfort-woman' issue steadily rises between the 1960s and 80s.

The content of the articles also changed. The articles written on milestone occasions in the 1960s refer to "comfort women" as "a tragedy the Korean people should never forget," but after the 1970s, the focus shifts to the existence of former "comfort women." Representative of this trend is the emergence of a former "comfort woman," No Su-bok, who was "discovered" in Thailand in 1984 and was finally able to visit her homeland. *Joongang Ilbo* published a series of eleven articles about her life. Through such focus on the concrete image of an actual "comfort woman," the issue, which had existed only in the recollections of a handful, began to attract attention as an actually existing problem.



Photo 4: Article in *JoongAng Ilbo*, dated June 23, 1983. The sixth article in a series featuring a former "comfort woman," No Su-bok, who was living in Thailand in the post-war period. Her visit to her homeland after forty years received major coverage in the newspaper.

In the meantime, the perception of the coercive nature of the practice went unchallenged in the 70s and 80s. The biographical article on No Su-bok, for example, explains the process as one whereby Japanese policemen "hunted humans like they would hunt rabbits," capturing the

women and taking them away by force.

As for Yoshida Seiji, who is an obsession among the conservatives: apart from the 1980 translation of a book that nobody seemed to notice, the first time he appears in Korean newspapers is as a witness in a detailed report on the 1982 Sakhalin Koreans lawsuit. Subsequently, through the mediation of the Mindan Fujinkai [South Korea Women's Association in Japan] that Yoshida had approached, he is introduced in numerous papers on June 23, 1983 as "a Japanese wishing to build a monument in Korea as an expression of apology." In other words, the facts show that it was not the *Asahi Shimbun* that introduced Yoshida's activities.

The absurdity and dangers of an internationally isolated argument

We have now verified the collapse of the argument that the "comfort woman" issue- its "coercive" and "controversial" nature- was not an issue in Korea before the *Asahi* and Japanese lawyers made it into one. Over the years, in the course of which the subject became a diplomatic issue, we have indeed witnessed the accumulation of information and spread of attention in Korea through Korea's interaction with Japan. Distorting the issue and arguing that Korean perception originated from a particular "false report" in Japan, however, is the explosive expression of a dark desire in the hearts of conservatives to trivialize the matter.

As long as the argument that "the problem originated with the *Asahi*" is without foundation, spreading it will only widen the gap between Korea and Japan, which in turn will widen the gap between Japan and international society. Revisionists have been actively promoting their views overseas, requesting corrections in history textbooks in the United States. What we need to do now, however, is to face head-on the fabricated "story" conservatives have obsessed over for more than twenty years.

Long before the 90s: Numerous articles on "comfort women" in the Korean press

(1945-1994)

	Choson Ilbo			Dong-a Ilbo			Joongang Ilbo			Kyunghyang Shinmun			Total from the four papers
	CW	Teishintai	Total	CW	Teishintai	Total	CW	Teishintai	Total	CW	Teishintai	Total	
45-49	0	1 (0)	1 (0)	0	1 (0)	1 (0)				0	1 (0)	1 (0)	3 (0)
50-54	0	0	0	1 (1)	0	1 (1)				0	0	0	1 (1)
55-59	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	1 (0)				0	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (0)
60-64	0	0	0	0	1 (1)	1 (1)				4 (2)	4 (3)	6 (5)	7 (6)
65-69	0	0	0	1 (1)	4 (1)	4 (1)	0	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (2)	5 (4)	5 (2)	10 (3)
70-74	0	0	0	4 (1)	11 (4)	14 (7)	3 (2)	15 (5)	16 (6)	5 (0)	6 (4)	11 (9)	41 (22)
75-79	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (1)	4 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	3 (1)	6 (1)	8 (3)	4 (1)	12 (5)	15 (8)	30 (17)
80-84	1 (1)	7 (6)	7 (6)	5 (3)	49 (14)	51 (16)	18 (14)	52 (31)	56 (35)	9 (7)	45 (17)	47 (19)	161 (76)
85-89	0	4 (3)	4 (3)	4 (2)	33 (8)	35 (10)	2 (1)	11 (8)	12 (9)	2 (0)	15 (6)	17 (8)	68 (30)
90-94	328 (150)	289 (259)	467 (437)	566 (298)	732 (668)	1000 (936)	380 (228)	492 (463)	644 (615)	383 (205)	536 (486)	714 (664)	2825 (2652)

CW = "Comfort Women" (Created by Yoshikata Veki)

Note 1. The figure in parentheses within the "comfort women" column indicates the number of articles using the term "teishintai" as well.

Note 2. The figure in parentheses within the "teishintai" column indicates the number of articles whose use of the term could be determined from the context as related to "comfort women" (minimum value).

Note 3. The figure in parentheses within the "total" column indicates the total number of articles that fit the definition in Note 2, above.

Note 4. The *Joongang Ilbo* was launched on September 22, 1965.

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Other relevant Asia-Pacific Journal articles:

Yoshiko Nozaki, [The "Comfort Women" Controversy: History and Testimony](#)

David McNeill and Justin McCurry, [Sink the Asahi: The "Comfort Women" Controversy and Neo-nationalist Attack](#)

Gavan McCormack, [Striving for Normalization: Japan-Korea Civic Cooperation and the Attempt to Resolve the "Comfort Women" Problem](#)

Uemura Takashi, [Labeled "the reporter who fabricated" the comfort woman issue: A Rebuttal](#)

Notes

¹ Hayashi Hirofumi, [Government, the Military and Business in Japan's Wartime Comfort Woman System](#).

² Jeff Kingston, [Testy Team Abe Pressures Media in Japan](#).

³ Arudou Debito, [Japanese Government Pressures American Publisher to Delete Textbook Treatment of Wartime Military Sexual Slavery: An Interview with Herbert Ziegler](#).

⁴ The *Asahi's* thoroughgoing repudiation is itself the subject of continuing controversy. See (especially pp. 2-6, in Japanese) of the [thoughtful reflection](#) by Uemura Satoshi (currently Secretary General of the [Center for Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility](#)), on the considerations historians need to keep in mind in interpreting the historical record, such as the "Yoshida Testimony."

⁵ For the significance of these observations as well as Yoshikata's research in general, see

Uemura Takashi with an introduction by Tomomi Yamaguchi, [Labeled "the reporter who fabricated" the comfort woman issue: A Rebuttal](#) on this site.

⁶ On Yoshida Seiji's role, see, for instance, ["Reexamining the 'Comfort Women' Issue: An Interview with Yoshimi Yoshiaki"](#) on this site.