

# Key Mileposts and Actors in Settling the Comfort Women Impasse

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, FEB 10 2019

**This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*.  
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When examining competing narratives regarding the comfort women system, it is important to have an awareness of key mileposts and actors in the efforts to find a settlement of this issue. Korea was not a signatory to the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951.[1] Furthermore, following the Japanese surrender in 1945 and the San Francisco Treaty of Peace of 1951, anti-Japan sentiment continued in Korea under Korea's first President Syngmun Rhee, an early leader of the Korean independence movement. In 1965, four years after Korean Army General Park Chung-hee seized power from the civilian leadership, Japan and Korea established formal diplomatic relations through the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea.[2] (Park himself had previously been an officer of Japan's Manchukuo Imperial Army.) These deliberations provided the South Korean government with a forum to address wartime compensation and colonial reparations. Although critics may argue that the 1965 Treaty was between "military men at the helm of repressive regimes"[3] and should not bar claims by the comfort women, Japan has long held that all WWII-related claims by Korea against Japan were settled through a separate accord (the 1965 Economic Settlement signed at that same time on property claims and protocols.

Japan agreed at the time to provide Korea with the equivalent of \$300 million in goods and services plus \$200 million in low interest, long-term loans based on the understanding outlined in the document that "the Contracting Parties confirm that [the] problem concerning property rights and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals (including juridical persons) and concerning claims between the Contracting Parties and their nationals, including those provided for in Article IV, paragraph (a) of the Treaty of Peace with Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on September 8, 1951, is settled *completely and finally* (emphasis added).[4] Japan thus maintains that state liability for WWII misconduct involving Korea was settled by the bilateral treaty of 1965.

### Seiji Yoshida, the Bearer of False Testimony

Seiji Yoshida, a Japanese national with Japanese Communist Party ties, gained attention both in Japan and Korea by bringing the comfort women issue to the forefront in the late 1970s through his inculpatory and inflammatory text *Korean Comfort Women and Japanese People* (1977), which was followed up in 1983 by *My War Crimes—The Forced Transport of Koreans*. Yoshida "confessed" to helping to round up some 212 Korean women who were then dispatched from Korea's Cheju Island to China's Hainan Island to serve as comfort women under the guise of joining the Japanese Volunteer Corps.[5] Yoshida's work was translated into Korean and he was a key witness in confirming Japan's official role in deceptively recruiting Korean women and girls into the comfort women system.

Koreans who were in Cheju during the period that Yoshida describes in his writing denied Yoshida's allegations, and he was eventually exposed as a fraud.[6] After spending years as a "media magnet" which earned him invitations to Korea and speaking engagements in Japan to apologize for his "crimes," Yoshida finally admitted in 1996 that his accounts were fabricated. He, nevertheless, defended his actions by explaining that "hiding the facts and mixing your

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own assertions into the story is something that newspapers do, too.”

Many Japanese felt vindicated because of Yoshida’s retraction. *Asahi Shimbun*, a respected and popular left-leaning Japanese daily that had served as a mouthpiece for Yoshida’s assertions, was forced to recognize its role in propagating Yoshida’s lies and in exacerbating tensions in Korea-Japan relations. The paper allegedly timed breaking Yoshida allegations to maximize embarrassment to Japan. They published them just prior to Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa’s 1992 visit to Korea, which made that visit an awkward one.[7]

No one wishes to be misrepresented, but those who know Japanese culture understand that such a loss of face because of Yoshida’s lies was especially painful and offensive to the Japanese. Certainly, the exposure of Yoshida as a fraud was a relief for most Japanese, and Japan’s denialists make much of Yoshida’s fall from grace to support their position that Japan did nothing wrong.

### **Yoshimi Yoshiaki’s Pivotal Role in Confirming the Existence of the Comfort Women System**

The Japanese categorically denied that any government-supported system of indentured sexual servitude ever existed within the military until January 1992, when Chuo University history professor Dr. Yoshimi Yoshiaki revealed evidence to the contrary. Through his research, Yoshiaki uncovered official Japanese and American government archives documenting the existence of a massive military comfort women system that Japanese officials had not managed to destroy during the period between Japan’s surrender and the United States’ occupation of Japanese territory in August 1945. [8] The evidence uncovered by Yoshiaki confirmed Japan’s official, substantive role in the creation, staffing, and oversight of the comfort station system. The documents proved that the Japanese military had set forth clear guidelines on the comfort women system and had acted upon them. Key figures reported to the Ministry of War on the system’s development and progress and outlined the protocols of conduct for the comfort stations. The documents uncovered by Yoshiaki confirmed the pivotal role played by the Japanese government in establishing and implementing the system as the Japanese Empire expanded in the 1930s.[9]

Professor Yoshiaki also compiled oral histories, interviewing both comfort women and former Japanese wartime officials, and again confirmed the involvement of the Japanese government, notably through its Ministry of War, in building and maintaining the comfort stations. The documentary evidence collected by Yoshiaki also confirmed that the Japanese government understood that such stations violated international law and they took the necessary steps to conceal such violations.[10] Because of Yoshiaki’s work, we know that Japan’s military and police forces, with the support of the imperial government, oversaw efforts to build comfort stations and on some occasions even helped to identify and recruit the women who could populate them.[11]

### **The Kono Statement: Japan’s First Official Admission of the Existence of the System**

As a follow-up to the evidence provided by Dr. Yoshiaki and based on further government investigation, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary and the official spokesperson for the government of Japan, Yohei Kono, acknowledged on August 4, 1993, the active role that the government of Japan played in the implementation and oversight of the comfort women system. The Kono Statement recognized that the comfort women’s involvement in the system, in many cases, had not been voluntary and that they had been conscripted “generally against their will through coaxing, coercion, etc.” Secretary Kono then went further and stated:

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. It is incumbent upon us, the government of Japan, to continue to consider seriously, while listening to the views of learned circles, how best we can express this sentiment. We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.[12]

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## **The Role of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan**

The Korean Council, as indicated in sections above, is one of the most influential actors in the comfort women issue. The Korean Council is, among other things, responsible for the demonstrations pressuring the Korean government to not accept various deals reached with Japan, hosted outside of the Japanese embassy in Seoul every Wednesday since January 8, 1992, as well as many demonstrations against the comfort women statues that have been erected in Korea and the United States. For an in-depth examination of the Korean Council including its founding, its past and present roles, and the impact it has had on the comfort women issue at large, see Chapter 5 “Korean Civil Society Organizations: Accomplishments and Expectations.”

## **Asian Women’s Fund: Japan’s First Attempt to Reconcile with Victims**

Following the Kono Statement, Japan created the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) in 1995, described as a “joint project of the ‘people of Japan’ and the government.”[13] The fund offered a symbolic compensation to comfort women of approximately \$18,000 for each confirmed victim. It recognized Japan’s role in the comfort women system and it oversaw a documented compilation of the historical record of the wrongs that Japan had committed, which remains available on the AWF website through its Digital Museum.[14] Former comfort women from several countries, including the Philippines and Indonesia, as well as allegedly some 60 Koreans that had been recognized at that time, eventually accepted AWF payouts from the fund.[15]

Japan’s AWF, while a private fund, received strong moral and substantial financial support from the Japanese government, especially in documenting Japan’s role in the comfort women issue through its Digital Museum and in providing compensation to the surviving victims of the system. The President of the AWF for many years was Tomiichi Murayama, the Japanese Prime Minister who, on August 15, 1995, issued the first official apology to Korea for Japan’s colonial rule and for its wrongful treatment of Koreans, without specifically mentioning the recruitment and exploitation of Korean women and girls as sex slaves during the 1930s and 1940s.[16]

Critics in Korea, especially the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, strongly opposed this initiative. The Korean Council made clear that it would not settle for less than a full and official apology at the highest level of the Japanese government (from the Prime Minister, if not the Emperor), as well as government-funded direct compensation to the comfort women.[17] The Korean Council also insisted that the enslavement, abuse, and torture of comfort women by Japan constituted a “crime against humanity.” As a crime against humanity, the Korean Council held that Japan’s 15-year statute of limitation would not shield the perpetrators. Beyond compensation and apology, the Korean Council thus insisted on the arrest and prosecution of those surviving Japanese war figures who played major roles in the creation and implementation of the comfort women system. AWF maintains that, when Japan first introduced its plans for the AWF to the Korean government, the Korean government “initially showed a favorable stance,”[18] but subsequently reversed themselves due to the lobbying efforts of the powerful Korean Council. The AWF persisted in offering compensation to the victims until 2007 when it ceased operations. Its website recognizes that, in the case of Korea, many of its efforts had been thwarted.[19]

## **The Role of U.S. House Resolution 121: Bringing the Issue to the American Public**

In the United States, the 110<sup>th</sup> session of the House of Representatives passed House Resolution (H. Res.) 121 on July 30, 2007. The main sponsor of the resolution was Congressman Mike Honda, who served as the representative for California’s 17<sup>th</sup> District from 2001 until 2017. Although of Japanese-American heritage, Congressman Honda has been and remains outspoken in stressing the need for Japan to face and take responsibility for this disgraceful chapter of its history. H. Res. 121 was not the first such proposed bill. As early as 1997, bills addressing the wrongs of Japan’s colonial past had been introduced. The earlier bills had called upon Japan to compensate Koreans forced to serve as workers and soldiers in the Japanese military. They only included the Korean comfort women issue as one of a broader series of demands regarding injustices stemming from the 1905–1945 period of Japan’s occupation of Korea.

Beginning in 2000 there was an initiative to promote political discussion in the United States on the comfort women

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issue. These lobbying efforts by Korean-American CSOs were strongly opposed by the Japanese government, which utilized both diplomatic channels and professional lobbyists to deter the passage of bills concerning comfort women. Over a period of several years, however, political support grew, resulting in comfort women-focused resolutions being introduced in the House of Representatives in 2005 and again in 2006. These resolutions called upon the government of Japan to recognize its role in the forced mobilization of women into a system of sexual slavery. H. Res. 121, which followed the two earlier bills, passed in 2007. It called upon the government of Japan to recognize its responsibility and provide compensation to the surviving victims of the comfort women system.[20]

The 2007 H. Res. 121 attracted 165 co-sponsors and led to a non-binding “sense of Congress” resolution that won unanimous House support. The bill gained momentum in 2007 largely due to diplomatic insensitivity and to the political clumsiness of newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

On March 2, 2007, Abe denied that the comfort women system was involuntary and he publicly stated that Japan needed to re-assess the 1993 Kono Statement:

There was no evidence to prove there was coercion as initially suggested. That largely changes what constitutes the definition of coercion, and we have to take it from there. [21]

Korean-Americans and Korean comfort women mobilized to express their outrage towards Abe’s statement and lent their total support to lobbying in favor of a House resolution pointing to Japan’s guilt. In April 2007 Korean-Americans placed an ad in the *Washington Post* advocating for H. Res. 121’s passage.[22] In response, Japan hired a lobbying firm and ran a counter-advertisement in the *Washington Post* on June 14, 2007. The Japanese ad had a distinctive “rightist” flavor and backfired politically. Although a number of Congressmen and key leaders in the Bush Administration indicated a willingness to support Japan in the past, Abe’s March 2007 comments questioning the Kono Statement, as well as the rightist advertisement, eroded U.S. support.[23]

Although Abe later rescinded his statement questioning the Kono Statement, it was not possible to reverse the damage caused by it and H. Res. 121 passed unanimously. Korean supporters of the proliferation of comfort women memorials frequently and understandably use H. Res. 121 as official U.S. government recognition of the existence of a Japanese government-supported comfort women system during WWII and of Japan’s continuing failure to be forthright in accepting responsibility, apologizing, and providing reparations to the victims.

### The 2014 Omnibus Legislation That Ended U.S. Neutrality on the Comfort Women Controversy

Korean groups were delighted with the passage of H. Res. 121, even if it was non-binding. They also moved forward vigorously with an effort to promote memorials to the comfort women in the United States starting in 2010. On more than one occasion, those promoting the memorials have referred to H. Res. 121 as official recognition by the United States of Japan’s culpability and public irresponsibility.[24] The 2007 H. Res. 121 was later attached to the 2014 United States federal budget, which was passed by both Houses and signed into law by President Barack Obama. [25]

Congressman Michael Honda skillfully engineered the addition of the 2007 H. Res. 121 non-binding resolution as an addendum to the 2014 federal budget. After this happened, Honda assured comfort women supporters that, due to this development, the resolution would be brought to the attention of the United States Department of State.[26] Just three months after President Obama signed the 2014 budget with H. Res. 121 as an addendum, the President of the United States found himself in Seoul, Korea in a press conference with Korean President Pak Geun-Hye. Mr. Obama took the unprecedented step of insisting that Prime Minister Abe and Japan address the injustices that Korean women, and comfort women in general, had suffered:

Finally, with respect to the historical tensions between South Korea and Japan, I think that any of us who look back on the history of what happened to the comfort women here in South Korea, for example, have to recognize that this was a terrible, egregious violation of human rights. Those women were violated in ways that, even in the midst of war, was shocking. And they deserve to be heard; they deserve to be respected; and there should be an accurate and

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clear account of what happened. I think Prime Minister Abe recognizes, and certainly the Japanese people recognize, that the past is something that has to be recognized honestly and fairly. [27]

The rallying of the Obama administration in apparent support of the Korean position on the comfort women (and the dismissal of the contrarian Japanese view) in April 2014 represented a leap forward for Korean-American CSOs in the United States. Korean lobbying efforts were certainly not hurt by the memorials to the comfort women that had been set up across the United States between 2010 and 2014.

Following President Obama's April 2014 statement calling on Japan to accept responsibility and address the comfort women issue, *Japan Daily Press* assessed the Japanese response and reaction as follows:

The Japanese government downplayed the prediction that the comments would trigger a new outrage. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato urged the public to be cautious in their opinions, as Prime Minister Abe has already expressed regret and apology for WWII victims and their plight. He added that the remarks "should not develop into a fresh political and diplomatic issue." [28]

Less than a year later, Prime Minister Abe received an invitation to address a Joint Session of the United States Congress where he received a warm welcome. Nine months after his speech, Japan and Korea announced that they had come to a "final and irreversible" settlement of the comfort women issue, even if bickering continued. However, with the impeachment of Korean President Park Geun Hye, the Korean government has signaled strong reservations regarding the agreement.

### **Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor Official Commemorations in 2016**

Increasingly aggressive actions by China in the South China Sea as well as the nuclear threat posed by North Korea require a united U.S.-Japan-Korea front. When President Obama held his 2014 press conference in Seoul with President Park Geun-hye where he expressed empathy for the Korean position on the comfort women, [29] he also took steps behind the scenes to bring Shinzo Abe to address a joint session of Congress. This was followed by President Obama traveling to Hiroshima to pay his respects there in May 2016. Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to empathize publicly with the victims of the August 6, 1945 nuclear attack by U.S. forces on Hiroshima. Although he did not apologize, he expressed remorse:

We stand here in the middle of this city and force ourselves to imagine the moment the bomb fell. We force ourselves to feel the dread of children confused by what they see. We listen to a silent cry. We remember all the innocents killed across the arc of that terrible war and the wars that came before and the wars that would follow. Mere words cannot give voice to such suffering. But we have a shared responsibility to look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again. [30]

This was an important symbolic gesture to Prime Minister Abe and to the people of Japan. It was followed up in December 2016 on the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe joined President Obama in Hawaii and expressed his sympathy to the victims of that attack without apologizing for Japan's actions:

As the prime minister of Japan, I offer my sincere and everlasting condolences to the souls of those who lost their lives here, as well as to the spirits of all the brave men and women whose lives were taken by a war that commenced in this very place, and also to the souls of the countless innocent people who became victims of the war. [31]

### **The Status of the December 2015 Japan-Korea Settlement of the Comfort Women Issue**

The chances that the December 2015 agreement would resolve the controversy were hindered by the 2017 impeachment and jailing of Korean President Park Geun-Hye, who had latched her political legacy to the December 28, 2015 "final and irreversible" bilateral settlement. [32] That settlement, following on Japan's earlier payments to comfort women in Korea and elsewhere, provided an official fund amounting to 1 billion Japanese yen or \$8.3 million to create a foundation in Korea that provides assistance, solace, and healing to the 38 remaining Korean survivors

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identified as comfort women.[33]

The settlement included Japan's official admission of responsibility for the creation of the comfort women system, as well as a public apology on behalf of Japan by Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio. Prime Minister Abe also recognized Japan's responsibility and expressed his apology on the same date during a 15-minute phone conversation with Korean President Park. Speaking publicly on behalf of Prime Minister Abe, Kishida denounced the comfort women system and the indignities that it had dealt its victims. While the December 28 statement did not attribute any responsibility to the Emperor of Japan, Kishida did acknowledge "involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time." He added that "the government of Japan is painfully aware of responsibilities from this perspective" and specified that Prime Minister Abe wished to express "his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women." [34]

In his response, Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se officially acknowledged Japan's position that the comfort woman statue [35] that has remained in front of Japan's Seoul Embassy since December 2011 could lead to a "disturbance of the peace of the mission" and that, from Japan's viewpoint, it represented an "impairment of its dignity." The official Republic of Korea statement read by Yun made a commitment to "taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue" [36] but did not specify the steps it proposed to resolve the outstanding differences.

Bilateral relations reached an impasse as the presidency of Park Geun-hye fell apart with her impeachment. On December 30, 2016, a Korean civic group received authorization to set up a comfort women statue directly outside Japan's consulate in Busan. This happened in response to Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada paying a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine immediately following Prime Minister Abe's and her return from Hawaii, where they had joined President Barack Obama at a ceremony at the USS Arizona Memorial. There at Pearl Harbor, Prime Minister Abe expressed his sincere condolences to the fallen. Abe reiterated that Japan's post-WWII constitutional commitment to peace was a "solemn vow" and he declared, "we must never repeat the horrors of war again." [37] Understandably, Koreans found that the visit to Yasukuni immediately following the return from the United States sent an unsettling message.

When the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked Busan officials to remove the statue, they retorted that they lacked jurisdiction because the statue had been placed there not by the government but by a citizens' group. [38] Japan reacted by recalling Yasumasa Nagamine, Japan's Ambassador to Korea, and Morimoto Yasuhiro, Japan's Consul General in Busan. The two remained in Japan until April 4, 1917. Japan's Foreign Ministry justified the timing of their return by citing the need for Japan's presence in Korea during the tumultuous period following the impeachment of Korean President Park Geun-Hye. [39]

On May 11, 2017, almost one and a half years after the "settlement" and following the impeachment and incarceration of Korean President Park Geun-Hye, the statue remained in place. The *Japan News* reported that, although Japanese Prime Minister Abe urged newly inaugurated Republic of Korea President Moon Jae-in to "steadily implement the 2015 bilateral agreement" on the comfort women settlement, President Moon conveyed certain reservations, explaining that because "some people in South Korea have cautious stances on the comfort women agreement, history issues need to be resolved in a wise manner for the development of both countries." [40] Moon referred to those reservations even though thirty-four of the forty-five comfort women still alive in December 2015 had agreed to accept the compensation provided by Japan. [41] President Moon did commit to continue to work with Japan in building a joint response to the threats posed by North Korea's build-up of its nuclear arsenal and missile delivery systems. He indicated that discussions regarding settlement of the comfort women issue would be addressed in a separate track of bilateral deliberations. [42]

## Notes

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[7] "Asahi Shimbun' Coverage of the Comfort Women Issue through the Years," *Nippon*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00074/>.

[8] Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 57.

[9] Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 42–75.

[10] Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 155–165.

[11] Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 60–65.

[12] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of 'Comfort Women,'" August 4, 1993, 2015, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>. Commonly referred to as the Kono Statement.

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[33] "'Footage of Korean Women Sexually Enslaved by Japanese Soldiers in WWII Revealed for the First Time," YouTube video, segment from Arirang News broadcast, posted by "Arirang News," July 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIC481VxVIE>.

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[37] Abe, "Rest in Peace, Precious Souls of the Fallen."

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