

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, MAR 7 2019

This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*. Get your free copy here.

After WWII, allied tribunals convicted numerous Koreans of participation in war crimes. More recently, however, a Korean group called the “Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism,” formed under Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, examined those convictions and announced on November 13, 2006, that “83 of the 146 Koreans convicted of war crimes were victims of Japan and should not be blamed.” Michael Breen, *Korea Times* contributor and author of the popular text *The Koreans* (2004) reacted critically. Breen pointed out that the international tribunals that rendered the convictions had reached their judgments based on a review of the available evidence, and persons who were merely doing their jobs were acquitted. As to those convicted, Breen comments:

They were not tried as soldiers or POW camp guards who had done their jobs. They were tried for overzealousness, for decisions and actions over and above the call of duty. They were the thugs, the brutes, the monsters, the most horrible... Breen describes atrocities committed by Korean camp guards that represented indignities that no human being should suffer. He chastised the commission for its political correctness: “The Commission should know that those rounding up comfort women were Koreans and those torturing people in police stations were mostly Koreans.” He added that “people who committed crimes against humanity are not innocent by virtue of being Korean any more than Japanese who brutalized Koreans are innocent by virtue of being Japanese.” Breen’s father had a close friend who had been a prisoner of war and suffered under Korean guards. Breen offers poignant insight into the only path to genuine clemency and rebuked the Korean officials who reversed the convictions of Korea’s war criminals:

So Truth Commissioners, who’s the victim, my father’s friend or the camp guard? Ultimately we can say with distance that both were. But there is a process to get there. First the criminal must acknowledge his crimes, and only then can he be forgiven. The Truth Commission had no right to intervene in the process and forgive Korean war criminals. That is for their victims to do. How many of their stories has the Commission examined? As it goes about addressing issues from the Japanese period, modern Korea owes it to the victims – in this case, the prisoners brutalized by those convicted war criminals – to tread with sensitivity on their graves.[1]

The Truth Commission’s handling of convicted war criminals of Korean ethnicity is in stark contrast with the way in which the United States and Europe treat alleged non-German Nazi war criminals even today. It does not matter if such individuals were or were not German nationals. Innocence or guilt is determined based on an examination of facts. John Demjanjuk, a naturalized American citizen of Ukrainian descent, was stripped of his U.S. citizenship and deported first to Israel and then to Germany for alleged war crimes. He spent the final decade of his life in courts until his death in 2012 without a definitive resolution of his guilt or innocence for crimes he allegedly committed as a very young man. Should Demjanjuk have been pre-emptively declared innocent because he was not an ethnic German and a victim of what the Korean Truth Commission referred to as “forced mobilization” because Germans Nazis forced him to function as a prison guard?

Another example of selective exoneration involves the post-WWII continuation of a Korean comfort women system for the benefit of the U.S. military. Little is said of the social attitudes and financial expediencies in Korea that made it possible that “for more than 50 years after the Korean War, hundreds of thousands of young South Korean women

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

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continued to endure sexual exploitation and violence as they labored in camp towns serving the U.S. military.”[2]

The Korean Role in the Recruitment and Conscriptioin of Comfort Women

Yuki Tanaka also points out that Koreans acted as subcontractors for the Japanese comfort women procurers in WWII and “targeted young daughters of poor peasant families, knowing that it was relatively easy to trick them”[3] and that “many young women were sold to brothels in return for an advance payment to their families.”[4] Tanaka cites an article that appeared in the *Dong-ah Ilbo* newspaper in September 1927 with the headline “Poverty makes prostitutes,” recognizing that Korea’s economic and social conditions were pushing some young Korean females to prostitution. [5]

Tanaka maintains that Koreans were not only involved in the recruitment of women but also in the management of the comfort stations themselves. He gives the example of the city of Jiujiang in China’s Jiangxi Province, where “16 comfort stations opened in 1940 and half of these newly opened comfort stations, and two of the restaurants, were run by Korean proprietors.”[6] Tanaka adds that “by the early stages of the Asia-Pacific War many Japanese and Korean proprietors who had been operating prostitution businesses in Korea had moved to China due to economic problems in the colony and had started operating there for the Japanese troops and the military’s civilian employees.”[7]

Sarah Soh charges that “[f]ew are willing to consider the unsavory fact that, accustomed to ‘customary’ public institutions that grant men a sex-right to satisfy their carnal desires outside matrimony, few Koreans opposed, and many collaborated in recruiting and running comfort stations by trafficking girls and young women.”[8] Testimonies from the Korean comfort women themselves also confirm that Koreans participated in the recruitment of comfort women.[9] Soh further maintains that “Koreans actually outnumbered civilian Japanese among those seeking profit by human trafficking, forcing prostitution and sexual slavery upon young female compatriots.”[10] Soh feels that the Korean redress movement allegedly supporting the comfort women lost its bearing. Instead of defending and standing up for the female victims, the movement has allowed the cause of the comfort women to be supplanted by Korean nationalism. Soh is sharply critical of the politicized rhetoric used by an American in one major report on the comfort women and states that “categorically defining the Japanese comfort stations as ‘rape centers’ – as the United Nations special rapporteur Gay McDougall did – is a political act in support of the redress movement.”[11]

Tanaka and Soh both point to a variety of factors that support the view that the current Korean narrative has been co-opted in favor of Korean nationalism. The denialists on the Japan side are also strongly motivated by nationalism rather than justice. Sarah Soh sums up the current debate in the following way:

...one nationally and internationally known Japanese feminist scholar has discerningly problematized, from the mid-1990s, the nationalistic discourses in Japan and Korea, that, respectively, represent comfort women either as “willing prostitutes” or “forcibly conscripted virgins,” and she has persistently stressed the need for feminism to transcend nationalism. [12]

Soh also reminds her readers that no attention was paid to the comfort women “before the transnational redress movement took off in the 1990s.” Rather, they had been largely “marginalized” until that time in both Japan and Korea. [13]

Post-World War II Korean Use of the Comfort Women System?

A comfort women operation was put into place by the Korean military during the Korean War. Soh contends that “[t]he fact that Korean military also availed themselves of the ‘special comfort unit’ during the Korean War has received little public attention, even since the Korean women’s movement in support of the comfort women began in the 1990s.”[14] Soh points out that not only Japan but also Korea has had a “long history of similar masculinist sexual mores.” [15]

The comfort units that South Korea put in place for its military operated until March 1954[16] or about nine months

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

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after the Korean conflict came to an end. The recruitment of Korean women for this task was justified because “both the imperial Japanese military and the postcolonial Korean army leadership shared the belief in men’s uncontrollable need for, and therefore right to, women’s bodies outside marriage, whether in war or peace.”[17] Soh notes that the Korean comfort unit system largely mirrored the Japanese system, and was equally dehumanizing of women, viewing them as commodities:

Korean records refer to the women as “fifth category supplies” – an addition to the four normal supply categories, reminiscent of the Japanese classification of women as “military supplies.” . . . The similarities in the pattern of operations include soldiers lining up in front of the tents, the women being classified according to the ranks of the men they served, and a hierarchical order of access to their sexual services.[18]

U.S. Soldiers and South Korea’s “Western Princesses”

When President Park Chung-hee seized power through a military coup in 1961, he initiated a “social purification drive” that included a “prostitution prevention law.” However, rather than eliminate prostitution, Park instead created 104 special prostitution districts, being desperate to retain the cash that American soldiers would otherwise spend in Japan.[19] Referred to as “Yankee Princesses” or “Western Princesses,” women who worked in these districts were lectured to by Korean university professors, who lauded them for helping to accrue “precious foreign currency for the nation’s economic development” and for performing “patriotic” work. [20]

The Korean narrative that American city officials are likely to hear conveniently avoids discussion of the social attitudes and financial expediencies in Korea that made it possible for hundreds of thousands of young South Korean women, for more than 50 years after the Korean War, “to endure sexual exploitation and violence as they labored in camp towns serving the U.S. military.”[21] The censored, carefully crafted Korean comfort women narrative that justifies the multiplication of memorials in Korea and in the United States has compromised Korean civil society’s advocacy for the victims of the comfort women system. Soh observes:

It is worth noting here that leaders of South Korea’s women’s organizations have been galvanized by a strong dose of postcolonial ethnic nationalism and have turned the redress movement into a righteous battle against Japan, demanding truth and justice for the latter’s historical wrongdoings perpetrated during its colonial rule.[22]

Koreans have continued until today to procure prostitutes under conditions of near-coercion for the use of their own troops and U.S. servicemen. In 2003, after informal and non-binding hearings instituted by the Philippine government, the Seoul District Court ruled that three night club owners near U.S. Camp Casey must compensate Filipina women who said they had been forced into prostitution at the clubs.[23]

In January 2009, a group of former prostitutes in South Korea accused some of their country’s former leaders of encouraging them to have sex with American soldiers, and taking a direct hand in the sex trade from the 1960s through the 1980s, including the building of a testing and treatment system to ensure that the prostitutes were disease-free for the American troops.[24] “Our government was one big pimp for the U.S. military,” one of the women, Kim Ae-ran, stated.[25]

Katherine H. S. Moon, a Wellesley College Professor, has written about such prostitution in her 1997 book *Sex Among Allies*. Moon states that there was “active government complicity, support of such camp town prostitution” by both the Korean government and the U.S. military, reflected in minutes of meetings between American military officials and Korean bureaucrats.[26]

The U.S. military presence in both Korea and Japan, and the accompanying violence against women, has generated a multitude of legal actions involving American servicemen. One of the most notorious incidents was widely publicized and fueled anti-U.S. sentiment. Yun Geum-I, a “juicy girl” in a club in Dongducheon, Korea, just outside U.S. Camp Casey, was brutally bludgeoned, sodomized with a bottle and an umbrella, and murdered by U.S. Army Private Kenneth L. Markle on October 28, 1991. This particularly vicious crime touched off demonstrations against the U.S. presence in Korea. Markle was initially sentenced to life imprisonment, but his term was reduced to 15 years

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

because Yun's family was compensated by Markle's family and the U.S. government. He was released in 2006.[27] Similarly, the 1995 rape of a 12-year old Okinawan school girl by U.S. Marines sparked public sentiment against the U.S. presence in Japan, where the U.S. military is responsible for a disproportionate number of murders, rapes, and robberies.[28]

In August 1999 police issued an arrest warrant for Kim Kyong Soo, president of the Korean Special Tourism Industry Association, on suspicion that he had brought more than 1,000 Filipina and Russian women into Korea to work as bar girls around U.S. military bases. A judge cancelled the warrant for lack of evidence and closed the case.[29] Nevertheless, an American sergeant told *Time* magazine, in words chillingly similar to the Korean comfort women stories, that the Russian and Filipina women in the Dongducheon bars "are here because they've been tricked. They're told they're going to be bartending or waitressing, but once they get here, things are different." [30] In 2005 a former Filipina bar worker was awarded \$5,000 from a South Korean nightclub owner who forced her to have sex with U.S. soldiers for money, and a club owner was convicted of illegal brothel-keeping.[31]

In 2014, 122 former workers in brothels serving American troops in Korea filed suit in the Seoul Central District Court, claiming that the South Korean government controlled their activities and infringed on their human rights against their will.[32] On January 20, 2017, the court partially affirmed their claims, ordering the state to pay five million won each to 57 of the plaintiffs, ruling that the government had no legal basis to forcibly detain them for health reasons in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the court rejected their claims that the state violated the law by facilitating prostitution, because they could have exercised their "free will" and not participated.[33]

The Korean military who served in Vietnam has also been singled out for its mistreatment of Vietnamese women. Former U.S. Senator Norm Coleman, who has been associated with an American law firm representing Japanese interests, has called for the South Korean president to publicly apologize for the sexual violence of South Korean troops in Vietnam.[34]

Misogyny in Today's Korea and Japan

Korea and Japan still today number among the countries that have been most criticized for their mistreatment of women. A 1998 front page story in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof entitled "Do Korean Men Still Beat Their Wives? Definitely" highlighted the extent to which spousal abuse by Korean men remained a problem at the very time that the comfort women question had come to the forefront.[35] As recently as 2015 the *Korea Herald* posted a commentary on the "2010 Korea National Survey of Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence." It revealed that some 53.8% of Korean spouses claimed to have suffered some type of violence at the hands of spouses in the year prior to the 2010 questionnaire.[36] The *Korea Herald* lamented the ongoing complacency, perhaps because of cultural taboos, in addressing the problem.

The creation of 37 memorials to the comfort women in Korea apparently has not stopped this abuse of women, which, as per the *Herald*, has risen over the past decade. [37] Unfortunately, in the United States, domestic violence by Koreans is also a reality. Ironically, one of the enclaves highlighted in a recent *Voice of New York* article on domestic violence in Korean families was Palisades Park, New Jersey, the small northern New Jersey town where the first comfort women monument in America was dedicated in 2010.[38]

Japan, the guilty party in the creation of the comfort women system prior to and during WWII, still has its own problems with misogyny as well. In March 2017 the *Japan Times* published an article pointing to the need to stand up to domestic violence inside Japan. It indicated that one of every four Japanese married women reported that they had suffered spousal abuse.[39] These unrepentant trends in both Japan and Korea confirm the persistence of the misogynist views that led to the comfort women system in the first place. There is no evidence that the deploying of comfort women statues has lessened spousal abuse, domestic violence, or the abuse and trafficking of women in South Korea.

Japanese Reactionaries and Korean "Hard-Liners"

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

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Korean hard-liners were angered by the book “Comfort Women of the Empire” (2013) published in 2013 by Park Yu-ha, a professor of Japanese literature at Sejong University in Seoul. [40] This anger manifested in the filing of civil and criminal complaints against her.[41] In her book, Park called “for a more comprehensive view of the women in the brothels,” and held that “there was no evidence that the Japanese government was officially involved in, and therefore legally responsible for, forcibly recruiting the women from Korea.” She stated that Korean collaborators, as well as private Japanese recruiters, “were mainly responsible for placing Korean women, sometimes through coercion, in the ‘comfort stations,’” and that some women developed a “comrade like relationship” with Japanese soldiers.[42]

Following publication of her book, Prof. Park was labeled a “pro-Japanese apologist,” and found liable for defamation damages in a civil lawsuit in 2016. In January 2017, she prevailed in the criminal case when a judge in the Eastern District Court in Seoul ruled that her academic freedom must be protected.[43]

For their part, partisans of the Japanese narrative have also not hesitated to attempt to marginalize those who question their position on the comfort women. For example, they were heartened in 2014 when they could pressure *Asahi Shimbun* to withdraw a series of articles on the comfort women that was based on the false testimony of Seiji Yoshida, who was discredited for fabricating a story involving the transfer of hundreds of Korean women and girls from Korea’s Cheju Island to Hainan Island to serve as comfort women. Subsequent to Yoshida’s admission of having invented his stories, 2,557 people living in Japan and the United States brought suit in a Tokyo District Court demanding that *Asahi Shimbun* run advertisements in major U.S. newspapers to apologize for the stories. Fifty of the plaintiffs live in the Glendale area. The suit was dismissed, however, on April 27, 2017.[44]

Notes

[1] Michael Breen, “Truth Commission Should Be Truthful,” *Korea Times*, November 16, 2006, <http://sakuramochi-jp.blogspot.com/2012/05/truth-commission-should-be-truthful.html>.

[2] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, xvi.

[3] Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 38.

[4] Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 35.

[5] Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 27

[6] Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 37.

[7] Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women*, 37.

[8] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 224.

[9] Howard, *True Stories*, 81, 89, 96, 106.

[10] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 139–140.

[11] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 235.

[12] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 237.

[13] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 224–225.

[14] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 215

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

[15] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 217.

[16] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 215.

[17] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 217.

[18] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 216.

[19] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 217.

[20] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 221.

[21] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, xvi.

[22] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 22–23.

[23] “Court Rules in Favor of Filipina Prostitutes,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, May 31, 2003, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=1987730>.

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[25] Sang-hun, “Ex-Prostitutes Say South Korea and U.S. Enabled Sex Trade near Bases.”

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[27] “U.S. Soldier Free after Brutal 1992 Murder,” *Hankyoreh*, October 28, 2006, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/167869.html.

[28] Andrew Pollack, “Marines Seek Peace with Okinawa in Rape Case,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/08/world/marines-seek-peace-with-okinawa-in-rape-case.html?pagewanted=all>.

[29] Donald Macintyre, “Base Instincts,” *Time*, August 5, 2002, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,333899,00.html>.

[30] Macintyre, “Base Instincts.”

[31] Seth Robson and Hwang Hae-Rym, “Ex-Bar Worker Who Was Forced into Prostitution Wins \$5,000 Judgment,” *Stars and Stripes*, August 6, 2005, <https://www.stripes.com/news/ex-bar-worker-who-was-forced-into-prostitution-wins-5-000-judgment-1.36633#.WRjehxPysUQ>.

[32] Larry Alton, “War and Women: The Korean War,” CNNiReport, December 11, 2014, May 14, 2017, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-1196572>.

[33] Jeff Kingston, “‘Comfort Women’ in South Korea Who Serviced U.S. Forces Seek Justice,” *Japan Times*, March 4, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/03/04/commentary/comfort-women-south-korea-serviced-u-s-forces-seek-justice/>.

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[35] Nicholas Kristof, “Do Korean Husbands Still Beat Their Wives? Definitely,” December 5, 1996,

Inconsistencies in the Korean Comfort Women Narrative

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/05/world/do-korean-men-still-beat-their-wives-definitely.html>.

[36] John Power, “[Voice] Is Domestic Violence Taken Seriously in Korea?,” *The Korea Herald*, May 5, 2012, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120507001291>.

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[39] Gilhooly, “Learning to Stand up.”

[40] Yu-Ha Park, [\[?\]\[?\]\[?\] \[?\]\[?\]\[?\]](#) (Seoul: Dosöch’ulp’an Ppuri-wa Ip’ari, 2013), https://cldup.com/upJTpO4a_q.pdf.

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[42] Sang-Hun, “Professor Who Wrote of Korean ‘Comfort Women’ Wins Defamation Case.”

[43] Sang-Hun, “Professor Who Wrote of Korean ‘Comfort Women’ Wins Defamation Case.”

[44] Shusuke Murai, “Tokyo Court Rules against Conservative Group Suing Asahi over ‘Comfort Women’ Articles,” *Japan Times*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/28/national/tokyo-court-rules-conservative-group-suing-asahi-comfort-women-articles/#.WpbgsE2pXVh>.

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