

# An Introduction to the "Comfort Women Issue" for The New York Times

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## **The Comfort Women Issue has been Taken Up By The New York Times Since The Beginning Of This Year**

On January 2nd of this year, The New York Times digitally published an editorial article entitled, "Another Attempt to Deny Japan's History." It is odd that The New York Times has commented on this issue, as America has almost nothing to do with Japanese-Korean relations. The article itself is written in a tone so strong that you wouldn't even get to read it in Japanese newspapers.

"Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, seems inclined to start his tenure with a serious mistake that would inflame tensions with South Korea and make cooperation harder. He has signaled that he might seek to revise Japan's apologies for its World War II aggression, including one for using Koreans and other women as sex slaves.

In 1993, Japan finally acknowledged that the Japanese military had \*raped and enslaved thousands of Asian and European women in army brothels\*(emphasis added), and offered its first full apology for those atrocities...It is not clear how Mr. Abe, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, might modify the apologies, but he has previously made no secret of his desire to rewrite his country's wartime history. Any attempt to deny the crimes and dilute the apologies will outrage South Korea, as well as China and the Philippines, which suffered under Japan's brutal wartime rule.

Mr. Abe's shameful impulses could threaten critical cooperation in the region on issues like North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Such revisionism is an embarrassment to a country that should be focused on improving its long-stagnant economy, not whitewashing the past."

In Japan, nowadays, there are very few media outlets which insist on discussing the controversial issue of whether or not those women were forced to accompany Japanese soldiers. The Asahi Shimbun, which triggered this whole issue, even withdrew a previous editorial article in which they acknowledged the existence of forced company, expressing that modifying the Kono Statement announced in 1993, in which the government had apologized for the issue of comfort women, is equivalent to "seeing only a branch and not the whole stem."

In the mean time, the comfort women issue has persistently been taken up in the United States, with such examples as the New York State Legislature submitting a resolution which asks the Japanese government to apologize to former comfort women. Most of the language surrounding the issue features absurd expressions, describing the event as "the biggest instance of human trafficking in the 20th century." It is disappointing that even The New York Times has made claims that the Japanese military raped and enslaved those women.

It is impossible to convince most Koreans on this issue, and America plays a big role in that. It would be ideal if the United States were willing to be the bridge between Japan and Korea, but the Department of State has expressed their opinion that if Japan modified the Kono Statement, it would complicate problems between Japan and Korea. The editorial in The New York Times is most likely a reflection of American government policies like this.

Politically speaking, this might be a reasonable judgement. On this issue, it is impossible to correct Korea's misunderstanding. However, at least there is a desire on behalf of westerners to understand the issue of comfort women. This is why, even though it may take a long time, we must look back and confirm the facts of which western media is fundamentally unaware, or perhaps, has misinterpreted.

### **The Comfort Women Disturbance All Started From A Con-man's Lies**

Since long ago, there has been an urban legend which tells of the Japanese military having served "comfort women", however, even the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965 doesn't claim any associated reparations. The expression, "military comfort women", was created by a Japanese reporter, and what's more is, there is no proof that such a phrase was ever used during the war.

However, in 1983, a former Japanese army soldier, Seiji Yoshida published a book entitled, "My War Crimes." In his book, Mr. Yoshida claims that he went to Jeju island, and that he went on a "comfort women hunt" to draft a lot of women into the women's volunteer corps and to take them to the battle fields. This was proclaimed by a lot of media outlets as a "courageous testimony," despite the fact that his statements about time and place were vague, and didn't declare who did the hunt and where. Because of this, the local newspaper publishing company of Jeju island went on an investigation and discovered that there was no such village which appeared in the book, nor proof that the Japanese army had ever come to that place.

Since there were no other persons who shared this kind of testimony, there arose suspicion that his statement had been fabricated and he was interrogated by Japanese historians like Ikuhiko Hata. He ended up confessing in 1996 that the story was fictional. Ordinarily, it might be hard to believe that someone would announce that they had committed crimes, but as for war experiences, there are some "con-men" that try to make money with their books and lectures, using an exaggerated account of "repentance" in order to get attention.

Usually, this would be the end of the story, but since the story of Yoshida was taken up by the Korean media as well, in 1990, "The Conference of Countermeasure Against the Volunteer Corps" was formed to ask that Japan pay reparations for the comfort women. In response to this movement, lawyers in Japan such as Kenichi Takagi and Mizuho Fukushima looked for an accuser with the intention of bringing a lawsuit against the Japanese government. The woman who turned up was Kim Hak-sun.

Coming to Japan in August, 1991, she got the attention of the media for being the first case in which one of the legendary "comfort women" brought herself into the public light, as well as for being the accuser in a lawsuit. I was working on a TV program about the anniversary of the end of the war at the NHK TV station in Osaka, but it was Ms. Fukushima who came there to sell Kim out.

Kim testified that she was sold by her parents and became a gi - saeng, and that her father-in-law took her to the comfort women brothel of the Japanese military. The military scrip with which she was paid lost its value as soon as the war had ended, and it was this event which prompted her to ask for compensation from the Japanese government for damages.

We decided to go on location to investigate the actual conditions, dividing into two groups. My team interviewed males and the other team was in charge of the comfort women. We were guided by a Korean who was involved in the reparations process, and we ended up interviewing around 50 people in total—both males and females altogether. However, to my surprise, not one person said, "I was captured by the Japanese military," or "I was forced to work."

In those days, it was during the period of Korea's annexation, but the pay was about half that of the interior, which kept the people there poor. Therefore, a lot of them would go to the mainland to work. The mainland is where Korean employment agencies would go to make money by mediating to get such people a job in a coal mine and so on, for its brokerage.

The ships that carried such laborers belonged to the military. As for comfort women, it was often the case that the military conducted hygiene management for the comfort women brothels. There were certainly affairs where comfort women had been deceived and couldn't escape from the business, but it was the traders that would imprison them. It is not a desirable thing, but those were commercial transactions made by traders, and the nation owes no responsibility for that.

No matter how much I investigated, there appeared to be no case of forced conditions, and so the TV program didn't have an impact. It did draw attention to the fact that a comfort woman had come forward for the first time, but it was little more than the story of a licensed prostitute. Afterward, NHK did not chase the story.

### **The "Forced Company" Of Comfort Women Was A Huge False Report by Asahi Shimbun**

Interestingly, when Kim Hak-sun came forward, Asahi Shimbun published an article of the "scoop" by Takashi Uemura, which reported, "It turns out that one of the 'Military Korean Comfort Women' who were forced to the battle field to engage in prostitution activities with the Japanese soldiers, lives in Seoul."

Following that, in January, 1992, the newspaper published an article that revealed a notification concerning the management of comfort women brothels submitted by the Japanese military, claiming, "The material shows the military's involvement." Since the Asahi explanation of comfort women at this time had claimed that those women were forced to accompany the military as a volunteer corps, the Prime Minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, apologized to the Korean president, Roh Tae-woom, when he visited Korea right after the article had been published.

However, in actuality, that notification was a message to traders: "Do not kidnap the comfort women". In fact, there is no hard evidence, nor any document, which suggests that the military had abducted those women. Though, because the Korean government had asked for reparations from the Japanese government, it became an issue between the two.

In 1992, the Japanese government announced the result of an investigation which revealed that the former Japanese military had been directly involved with hygiene management for the comfort women brothels, but that there were no materials to prove the theory that the comfort women were forced to accompany Japanese soldiers. However, Korea's criticism would not cease. For this reason, in 1993, the Japanese government announced the so-called Kono Statement. The issue is described as follows in the written statement.

"As for the recruitment of comfort women, the traders that received such requests for it were in charge, and in this situation also, there were many cases in which these women were gathered against their will via honeyed words, pressure and so forth. In addition to that, it turns out that \*government officials had directly assisted in this at times as well\*(emphasis added). Moreover, it was a painful way of living, to have been forced to be at the comfort women brothels."

It became the cause of later problems that, for no reason, such nonsense words as, "government officials had directly assisted in this", had been inserted. In regards to this issue, in 2007, Abe's Cabinet had made a cabinet decision over the written answer, which clearly states that among the materials which the government had found at the time of the investigation's announcement, \*there is no written description to directly show that military or government officials had supposedly forced the women to accompany soldiers\*(emphasis added).

Therefore, the government's dictum was that "there was no forced company." However, because the written answer said that the "Chief Cabinet Secretary Statement is right," the government ended up following the Kono Statement, which says that "government officials had directly assisted in this." At this time, the branch manager of The New York Times, Norimitsu Onishi, took up the comfort women issue and reported the testimony of "former comfort women." Due to this publication, Prime Minister Abe was forced into a situation that required him to apologize for Japan when he visited the United States.

### **Misunderstanding And Confusion Piled Up And Expanded The Problem**

As I witnessed the simultaneous process, I got a strong impression that misunderstanding had piled up and the flame spread unexpectedly. First of all, if it is the case that laborers from the Korean Peninsula were exploited, the issue of the male laborers is, by far, a much bigger, more serious problem than that of comfort women.

For example, towards the end of World War II, Chinese laborers had revolted against the severe labor environment of Hanaoka mine in Akita prefecture, which resulted in the death of over 400 people due to violence and slaughter. This case is a testament to the fact that there was forced labor. However, even in this case, as you can see from the family of the deceased asking Kashima for indemnification after the war, it was private-sector corporations that were in charge when it came to forced labor.

Compared to the supposed 600,000 forced male laborers, the tally of comfort women is said to be around tens of thousands of workers, being much smaller in scale. It is also said that they were receiving pay equal to more than twenty times that of private soldiers. The only reason why comfort women received so much attention was because Seiji Yoshida had written of these cases in a manner which presented them as bizarre rapes. It seems that he wrote about such events in order to make extra money, but because Japanese lawyers wanted to take advantage of it by making a class suit out of it, the issue escalated.

When I first heard the story of Kim Hak-sun, she was saying that she was "sold by her parents," and it was written so on the petition as well. Even today, no one knows the process of how her testimony was replaced to reflect that she had been "abducted by the military" after the report by Asahi Shimbun.

There is suspicion that the article of the reporter, Uemura, had been fabricated, as the leader of the plaintiff party was the mother-in-law of Uemura. On the other hand, considering that he had accepted the lies told by Yoshida, of the "women's volunteer corps," he might have simply believed Yoshida's testimony, convinced that he had "gathered the evidence."

It was Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a professor of Chuo University, who cooperated in the interview for Asahi Shimbun. His book, "Military Comfort Women"(Iwanami Shoten Publishers), has been published in English, and this is another cause for further misunderstanding, as it is the only source of reference for populations overseas.

It was only after the forced company report of Asahi Shimbun that Yoshiaki started to investigate this issue. Therefore, from the beginning, his input on the matter was biased in that it sought to find proof for forced company. Even though the previous notification was meant to prohibit abduction, Mr. Yoshimi had wrongly interpreted the message, reading it as if it had been an order to abduct. This caused more confusion.

Last year, the mayor of Osaka city, Hashimoto, stated that "Mr. Yoshimi has admitted that there was no forced company," and yet in his protest note, he wrote, "Even in those days, it was a crime to sack, abduct, and engage in human trafficking and take women from Japan, Korea and Taiwan. I have said that abduction and human trafficking also mean forced company."

This means that he has acknowledged the fact that in Korea, there were no cases in which the Japanese military had drafted women to be their comfort women, yet he is calling the acts of

abduction and human trafficking by non-governmental people "forced company." If he defines such terms in this way, the obvious implication is that there had been forced company, and that the government has admitted to it from the beginning. In this way, Mr. Yoshimi and Asahi Shimbun replaced the issue of the nation's responsibility with women's rights.

### **The Ill - managed Correspondence Of The Government Spread Misunderstanding Throughout The World**

It was the ill-managed correspondence of the government that played a crucial role in making what Asahi Shimbun had started, worse. According to the briefing of Mr. Kono, the reason why he wrote in his statement that "government officials had directly assisted in this at times as well," was because of a matter involving violations of military discipline which happened in Indonesia (Pertempuran Lima Hari). This was the case of rape that private soldiers had participated in, and their leaders were executed as class-B and class-C war criminals.

However, there was no clear description of this in the Kono Statement, which resulted in the misunderstanding that government officials forced company even on the Korean Peninsula. Nobuo Ishihara, the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary at that time, elaborated on the reasons as to why they had chosen to make such a misleading expression in the interview by Sankei Shimbun.

"At that time, while the Korean side was persistently appealing for the inclusion of comfort women recruitment and forced company in the statement, they were unofficially proposing that the "comfort women issue is a matter of their fame, and therefore, they won't request compensation at the personal level." The Japanese side had anticipated that if Japan admitted to acts of forced company, the Korean side might lay down their arms. It was this strategy which led the Japanese side to convey to the Korean side that they would admit to the acts forced company before their announcement."

There was no document which proved such enforcement, but by using the vague expression that there might have been some acts of forced company, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to bring forth a political settlement with the Korean government. As a result, however, this action was taken to mean that "Japan has admitted to the acts of forced company," and the Korean government made a big spectacle of it and spun the issue out of control.

Even after that, the report arranged by Ms. Coomaraswamy, a member of the UN Human Rights Commission, pressured the Japanese government for compensation and the execution of the people

involved, defining comfort women as "sex slaves". Her report, however, was based on the Kono Statement.

The Japanese government established an incorporated foundation called, "The National Fund For A Peaceful Asia for Women (The Asian Women's Fund)," and paid about 1.3 billion yen as "indemnification" for former comfort women. Additionally, successive prime ministers sent out "a letter of apology". And thus, the government kept portraying an attitude that said, "There was no forced company, but we are sorry." This repeated message served to firmly establish misunderstanding about the issue all over the world.

This was around the time when the overseas media started to show an interest, but more importantly, it meant that they were not aware of the process by which the issue of comfort women had begun to be regarded as "slave hunting by the military." For them, the issue of comfort women became a issue of women's rights from the beginning, and therefore, the idea of "no forced company" appears to be merely an excuse. Despite there being no proof to support claims by former comfort women, that "I was forced to accompany soldiers," the overseas media continue to believe this statement, something Kim was told to say by her lawyer.

It was surprising that during a conversation I had with a reporter of the Tokyo branch of The New York Times, Hiroko Tabuchi, when I told her that "There is no proof to support the testimony of the former comfort women," she responded with, "So, do you think that they're liars?" For them, comfort women are the victims, and the Japanese military is the criminal, which only leaves them with the belief that such poor victims can't lie.

This type of psychological tendency that causes people to only see those facts which corroborate their prejudice, is called \*confirmation bias\*. It's because the overseas media started to treat this issue with the misunderstanding that "The Japanese military had participated in human trafficking on such a big scale," that they misinterpreted the issue of whether or not it was done by government officials as the issue of the "comfort women = human trafficking = forced company" equation. And so, they kept reporting it in this way.

### **What's Needed Isn't Criticism, But Rather, A Cure.**

Thus, depending on what perspective the "comfort women issue" is viewed from, the answer varies. At first, the focus of the issue was on the abductions carried out by the military, the so-called "comfort women hunts". Consider this example: in the last years of World War II, the Nazis are said to have

had government managed prostitution facilities for the bodyguards and concentration camp guards. This is what the leader of the bodyguards, Hitler, had founded for the enhancement of a fighting spirit, and it is said that there were such facilities within twelve concentration camps, like Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria.

If Japan had had this type of systematic governmental prostitution, and forced those women to accompany soldiers and be imprisoned, the Japanese government would have to apologize to the Korean government regardless of any indemnity liability provided by law. Since what Asahi Shimbun had first reported was similar to the kind of image portrayed by the Nazis, the issue developed into a major problem.

However, even with the governmental investigation, proof of forced company by the military never seemed to come out. Not only are there no documents, but aside from the stories of the self - professed former comfort women—which have changed again and again—no soldiers that were alleged to have participated in the forcing of company, nor any witnesses of that, have ever surfaced. The majority of comfort women were Japanese, but even their testimony has not surfaced.

Recently, Mr. Yoshimi has admitted that he cannot factually confirm that women from Korea and Taiwan, under the control of Japan at the time, were abducted and taken overseas by the military. He says, "There was forced company in China and Eastern Asia," but the only proof of that is the judicial report of *Pertempuran Lima Hari*. That report was executed in response to a violation of military discipline, which means that this is rather proof of the Japanese military prohibiting forced company.

Thus, at least for Korea, historians have agreed that there is no proof of the Japanese military forcing women from Korea to accompany soldiers. The the problem now is resolving the facts. If you conclude that "the abduction or human trafficking by traders are also considered to be forced company," it is only recognition that such things happened. Yet, those matters are not the responsibility of the Japanese military.

However, in The New York times article, it says, "The Japanese military raped and enslaved thousands of Asian and European women in army brothels." The subject is the Japanese military, but the expressions used are not very clear, and seem to view the matter as the Japanese military having forced Korean women to become their "sex slaves."

At first, according to Yoshida's story, the claim was that there was a "slave hunt" for Korean women. Yet, as soon as this was revealed to be a lie, Asahi Shimbun, Mr. Yoshimi, and others, distorted the

issue by reframing the argument with vagueness. This was accomplished by stretching the meaning of the issue by saying that "the human trafficking by the traders is also forced company". In turn, overseas media outlets such as The New York Times followed this movement; this is the source of all this confusion. There are contradictions within the resolutions of the American Congress, which highlight the problem of forced company while criticizing human trafficking. If the Japanese military had abducted women using violence, there would have been no need for human trafficking.

It is an irreparable mistake that the Japanese government has apologized for such events without clarifying where the responsibility lies. It sounds like nothing more than an excuse to say that this was all the "enforcement of narrow sense and broad sense" at this late point, and it's difficult to think that the world will take that explanation seriously. The recognition of the state of affairs by the State Department, in a statement saying, "Japan defending itself won't improve its position," is sad but true.

As a first step in finding a way out of this deadlock, it is essential to have the overseas media understand that this issue was born from lies and misunderstanding. However, if such entities are haunted by the obsessive idea that "the Japanese military is a vicious sex offender," it is no use to criticize by saying, "you're wrong."

What is needed now is a cure which helps the overseas media to become aware of their bias. The first step to a mutual understanding is to explain how the comfort women issue occurred, where the misunderstanding happened, and what kind of misinterpreting has expanded the problem, in order to remove the preconception that's been imprinted in their minds.