

# Human Rights, Memory and Reconciliation: Korea-Japan Relations 人權、記憶、和解一韓日關係

**Mikyong Kim**

## Introduction

The new Abe administration in Japan plans to re-examine the 1993 Kono statement in which Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei, apologized and admitted the Japanese government's responsibility for the comfort station operations. If it proceeds with this plan, the Abe government is likely to whitewash or revoke the Kono statement, which has been the consistent object of resentment and criticisms among neonationalists. Mr. Abe has been arguing that no historical documents exist to support the claim of forcible recruitment of girls and young women into wartime military sexual slavery. Suga Yoshihide, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, has stated that the government will invite a group of historians to study the warfront brothel operations (Morris-Suzuki 2012).

The timing of the Abe administration's moves to reinvestigate the comfort women issues causes concerns in South Korea where the first female President, Park Geun Hye was recently inaugurated. Park, known for her adamant stance on Japan-Korea historical reconciliation, has reiterated the need for Japan to sincerely confront the unresolved historical issues in order to move forward in bilateral relations. This article analyzes the dynamics of memory politics involving the two neighboring countries by examining the establishment of and reactions to two comfort women memorials in Seoul, Korea, and Palisades Park, New Jersey, USA.

## *Memory, Apology and Compensation: Japan-Korea Relations*

In April 2012, then Japanese prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko, sent a letter to the South Korean president in response to Seoul's requests to resolve the comfort women issue (Dong-A Daily, December 18, 2011; Yonhap News, April 20, 2012). Prior to that, on August 30, 2011, the South Korean Supreme Court handed down a ruling that effectively reversed clause 2, article 1 of the 1965 bilateral agreement which established Japan-ROK relations, which stated that the compensation to Korea from Japan for wartime injustices was "completely and finally resolved." The decision reflects two considerations. First, the Japanese government's systematic involvement with comfort stations was not known at the time of 1965 bilateral treaty, and it is wrong, in light of the new knowledge, to deprive the former comfort women of their right to claim lost wages and other rightful compensation. Second, it is questionable whether the state has the exclusive right to ban its citizens from seeking compensation without their explicit consent. The ruling paved the way for Korean atomic bomb victims and comfort women, for example, to sue the Japanese government for medical treatment and compensation for unpaid wages and suffering. The ruling also opens a new venue for citizens to file lawsuits against corporations such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for unpaid conscripted workers' wages and the Kitakyushu Mining Company for unpaid miners' wages (see Totsuka 2013).

It is difficult for Koreans to let go of the past, both because of their deep sense of

victimization as a result of four decades of colonial rule, and Japan's ambiguous apologies and unconvincing claims of responsibility (Dudden 2008: 33). A government may deliberately attempt to use apology as a tactic to avoid or mitigate the consequences of its wrongful conduct. That is, it may decide to risk doing what it wants, then say it is sorry, and hope to get away with it, assuming that the wronged or injured party will find it difficult to justify retaliation in the face of even a hypocritical apology. Korea-Japan relations are a case in point considering Japan's extension of limited apologies often followed by retractions or inflammatory remarks by politicians and others.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Japan has been ambiguous in its apologies, so some Japanese are ambivalent concerning responsibility. When a sample group of 423 Japanese college students was asked to name events in Japanese history that provoke a sense of shame, an absolute majority of them named war-related events. The list includes "Japan's war in Asia" (54.4 percent) and "Japan's Pacific War/World War II" (24.6 percent). They also mentioned "discrimination against Koreans in Japan" (5.7 percent) and "Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Korea invasion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century" (4.3 percent). All these shame-provoking events are related to Korea in one way or another (Schwartz, Fukuoka and Takita-Ishi, 2005: 259). But when they were asked whether "My generation is [or I personally feel] morally responsible for the so-called Comfort Women issue during the War years," only 9.6 percent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement; 13.7 percent agreed; 18.7 percent somewhat agreed; 17.7 percent replied in neutral tone; 11.9 percent somewhat disagreed; 12.5 percent agreed; and 13.3 percent strongly disagreed. When those who felt no responsibility were asked for their reasons, the majority replied that the shameful past had nothing to do with them because it happened before their birth and they should not be held accountable for the sins of their

ancestors (Schwartz, Fukuoka and Takita-Ishi, 2005: 261).

The phenomena cited above defy a strong sense of responsibility for a shared history. Japanese acceptance of the past as a "burden" of moral accountability is relatively weak, and that helps to explain the continued tensions in Korea-Japan relations. Furthermore, this relatively weak sense of responsibility has a bearing on the character of Japanese democracy, for it would be healthier for a society to remember its collective wrongs, a sign that a society is not afraid to confront its own injustices. The act of remembering affirms a society's positive identity in the world of globalizing memory and human rights discourse (Misztal 2001: 146).

### *Memory, Human Rights and Reconciliation: The Comfort Women Monuments*

Memory becomes institutionalized in part through cultural media such as rituals, monuments and museums (Assmann 1995). The recent movement to build comfort women monuments both in Seoul and in the U.S. deserves careful analysis because it sheds important light on two distinct paths of memory and reconciliation.

#### *The Peace Monument in Seoul*

To commemorate the 1,000<sup>th</sup> weekly demonstration demanding Japan's apology, compensation and punishment of responsible parties, the NGO group of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan opened the Comfort Women Peace Monument on December 14, 2011.<sup>3</sup> The location of the monument was controversial from the beginning, for it is placed in front of the Japanese embassy in the capital city of South Korea, in violation of Korean traffic laws (see Figure 1).

It is instructive to watch the varied reactions of visitors to the monument. One Western visitor, for example, found the blank, submissive face

of the statue “confusing” (Interview, June 26, 2012).<sup>4</sup> A Korean visitor, on the other hand, stated that she had “never seen such sad eyes in her entire life” (Interview, June 26, 2012). The message of the monument varies according to the meanings viewers bring to it, which in turn change with changing times. But although wider interpretations may differ, one meaning of the memorial is quite clear: it is intended to shame. The statue of a girl, her fists clenched and placed solidly on her knees, staring at the diplomatic mission, a symbol of Japan’s nationhood, is meant to reproach the nation for its refusal to address moral issues and lack of remorse. She is waiting for Japan to reflect deeply, accept responsibility and compensate her for her suffering. The statue also displays the spirit of continuing resistance against the wrongs committed by the Imperial Japanese Army and the denials and deceptions of ensuing administrations since its defeat. The inscription on the ground states: “December 14, 2011 marks the 1000<sup>th</sup> Wednesday Demonstration for the solution of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery issue after its first rally on January 8, 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy. This peace monument stands to commemorate the spirit and the deep history of the Wednesday Demonstration.” By no means is the monument reconciliatory or merely aesthetic. Rather, it is purposefully performative.



The Japanese government has opposed the monument since its unveiling, arguing that it violates the Vienna Convention’s clause 22, article 2, on respect for the dignity of a foreign diplomatic mission (Kukmin Ilbo, June 10, 2012).<sup>5</sup> This appeal to international law is not likely to succeed because the monument lacks a hostile message and explicit threat content: it is called the “Comfort Women Peace Monument,” after all (Interview, June 26, 2012).

The monument’s saga continues to unfold. A Japanese right-wing extremist group, the Yushin Seito-Shinpu, mounted a small pole with a banner on the empty chair next to the seated girl on June 19, 2012. The banner reads “Takeshima is Japanese territory,” a reference to the contested Dokdo/Takeshima islets. The Korean commemorative action thus produced a counteraction intended to show Koreans that the sacred site could be invaded and defiled by dissenting forces. Dark memories and injustice can provoke a neonationalist revolt that may undermine a fragile democracy (Herf 1997: 7).<sup>6</sup>

A commemorative site can invite conflict or negotiation between competing narratives. Commemoration may be an attempt at mourning and an effort to repair the psychological and physical damage of war (Misztal 2003: 127-8). Kobayashi Yoshinori, the author of *Sensoron (On War)*, writes of the

comfort women “because it was a war zone and dangerous, the money was great. There were lots of them who earned more than 10 times what a college graduate did in those days and 100 times more than a soldier. In 2-3 years they built houses back in their hometowns” (cited in Dudden 2008: 60). In this way, Kobayashi conceals the frequently coerced nature of the wartime sexual services. Since the money was good, the girls must have volunteered out of greed, he implies. This line of argument is rebuffed by the Korean side with historical evidence that suggests deception, violent imposition and exploitation at work (Chung 2007).

Absorbed in their own sense of victimhood associated with the atomic bombing and firebombing of Japanese cities, many Japanese long remained oblivious to their country’s past transgressions vis-à-vis neighboring Asian countries. Since the 1980s, China’s economic rise and Korea’s democratization coincided with growing awareness of the lingering grievances. A series of history textbook controversies coincided with construction of commemorative war sites for the Nanking Massacre and Unit 731 experiments in China since the 1980s. In this milieu, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei issued a statement in 1993 that some of the comfort women were deceived or forcibly recruited.

Because Japan’s comfort women system had its foundation in a public prostitution system organized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese conservatives have claimed that the wartime system was simply a continuation of a state-regulated enterprise (cited in Ueno and Sand 1999). But before Japan’s invasion of China, Japanese prostitutes had voluntarily migrated from Japan and Korea to China and Southeast Asia. From the Japanese military invasion of China in the early 1930s, the full-fledged, systematic operation of “comfort stations” began. By 1938 the comfort stations had spread across East and Southeast Asia (Kim 2011:

170-71). As Japan’s war with China escalated, the pool of voluntary prostitutes was insufficient to meet the demands of the military, and the Japanese army became actively involved in the procurement of comfort women (Watanabe 2007).

Trying to portray the comfort stations as a vestige of an old system, did not soothe public anger and resentment, especially in Korea and China. The establishment of an Asian Women’s Fund in 1995, and the Fund’s offer of 5 million yen to each former comfort woman, did not improve the situation. The plan backfired because the Tokyo government only indirectly funneled resources into the fund (which was partly financed by public donations), leaving the impression that it was trying to evade legal accountability rather than confronting the past in an honest and sincere fashion. The contrasting approaches of Germany and Japan in their handling of the grievances of former victims have left lingering suspicion in Korea.

Given the current debate over the comfort women in Korea-Japan relations, “making public the truth is itself a form of justice” (Misztal 2001: 152). In other words, South Korean efforts to acknowledge memories and the creation of the comfort women peace monument are meant to correct unilateral assertions from Japan that the women were voluntary prostitutes and that the Japanese government played no role in the operation of the comfort stations.

### *Comfort Women in Korean Diasporic Memory: Human Rights Monument*

When people move around, their stories travel with them. When the Jews began their diaspora during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., they brought along the narratives of the Old Testament. “Storied community” defines their existence and cohesive identity. For many other diasporic groups, historical memory is also a key source of identity. Overseas Koreans now account for 15 percent of the total Korean population at 7



million people, and they, too, have carried with them stories internalized from their homeland. It is not surprising that two monuments dedicated to the comfort women have been built on U.S. soil, since the United States is a major destination for Korean emigrants. The sites are located in Palisades Park, New Jersey, and Nassau County, New York; this paper focuses on the former.

The monument built in a Korean section of the borough of Palisades Park (see Figure 3) has the following inscription: 'In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of imperial Japan 1930's-1945 known as "comfort women." They endured human rights violations that no peoples should leave unrecognized. Let us never forget the horrors of crimes against humanity. Dedicated on October 23, 2010.'



One notable difference between the peace monument in Seoul and its New Jersey counterpart lies in their different framing strategies: "the former highlights the word 'peace' in its title, while the latter's inscription highlights the words 'human rights'."<sup>7</sup>

This difference reflects the predominant paradigm of the locale and target audience: postwar Japan in its pacifist identity vs. the U.S. as the torchbearer of human rights advocacy in global affairs. The activists used

tactical innovation to further their commemorative enterprise.

In the case of the New Jersey monument, the Korean activists worked within a broad national political and social consensus. In 1997 Congressman William Lipinski (D-Illinois), first proposed a bill denouncing Japan's wartime brutalities and the coercion of comfort women; Lane Evans (D-Illinois) submitted further such bills in the House for five consecutive years, until 2006, when the House Committee on Foreign Affairs passed House Resolution 759. Michael Honda (D-California), a Japanese American, took up the effort in January 2007, submitting the resolution to the subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment of the House. A public hearing was held on February 15 of the same year. On June 26 the House Committee on Foreign Affairs passed House Resolution 121 39 to 2. Congress unanimously passed the bill on July 30, 2007 (Chung 2007: 400-1; Dudden with H.R. 759 2006; Morris-Suzuki 2007).

The Japanese government followed these legislative moves carefully and responded with indignation. In January 2007, around the time Congressman Honda submitted the resolution, the cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo asserted that there was no evidence of forceful recruitment of the comfort women by the Japanese military. During a visit to the U.S. Congress on April 26, 2007, Abe stated that he felt "a sense of apology" and "sympathy" for the women's hardships. A group of Japanese politicians, professors, commentators, and journalists, most of them members of the Liberal Democratic Party, took out a full-page advertisement under the title "The Facts" in the Washington Post on June 14, 2007. The advertisement again denied the Tokyo government's involvement in the coercion of comfort women. Upon Congressional approval of the resolution, they protested that it was based on ungrounded facts (Chung 2007: 402-3).

The response of Japanese media to the bill varied widely, a combination of strategizing, excuses and resentment: “Why does the U.S. target only Japan?”; “Those who carried out the project are no longer alive. Nobody is responsible for the mistakes made by their ancestors”; “It is beyond stupid to teach an ally about appropriate ways to apologize”; “The Koreans are enjoying a nationalistic overdrive by launching attacks against Japan”; “Why is Japan apologizing to the U.S. [about the comfort women]?”; “Japan should not make an adversary out of the U.S. over the comfort women issue” (cited in Chung 2007: 404).

Japan’s reactions toward the comfort women monument in Palisades Park showed both differences and similarities to its reactions to the 2007 comfort women resolution. A campaign began to collect signatures to pressure U.S. President Barack Obama to remove the statue, calling on the President to intervene in order to stop the “international harassment” of Japanese people. As of June 7, 2012, the Internet campaign had collected more than 28,243 signatures on the White House website. The White House specifies that any petition with more than 25,000 signatures within 30 days of the beginning of a campaign will receive an official response. The public campaign was strongly endorsed by Tamogami Toshio, a former Air Self-Defense Force official who was fired after having stated that “Japan was not an invading country in World War II.” Most of the signatories seem to be Japanese citizens or their descendants living in the U.S. A person identifying herself as Yasuko R on the White House petition site commented that “many lies have been manufactured about the comfort women, and Japanese people have been feeling dishonored because of them. In recent times, the lies have become clear.” The signatory asserted that “the monument not only adds more weight to the lies, but also will further deteriorate racial conflict and put the Japanese ancestors to the shame.” The allusions to racism and shame are a noteworthy

framing tactic, considering not only the multiracial, multiethnic makeup of the U.S. but the racial identity of President Obama himself, to whom the appeal is addressed.

Japan’s lobbying served had the effect drawing renewed attention to an issue that had gone without extensive notice in the U.S., and in fact it backfired in that it spurred a movement to build more monuments. Jongchul Lee, a Korean American Palisades Park City Council member, for instance, announced that 22 other comfort women monuments would be built in other parts of the U.S. using the extensive networks among the Korean American population with the support of American citizens. The involvement of citizens on both sides creates new dynamics in the bilateral memory wars.

The Japanese government’s reaction to the Palisades Park statue was much like its response to the 2007 bill. On May 1, 2012, the Japanese consul general, Hiroki Shigeyuki, visited Palisades Park and offered the mayor financial assistance in exchange for the removal of the monument. On May 7, 2012, four Diet members of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, all members of the Diet Committee on North Korean Abductions and Other Issues, visited the city to protest against the monument construction in New Jersey (The Daily Dong-A).<sup>8</sup> Korean politicians confronted their Japanese responded by issuing a statement, escalating the spiral of conflict.

The comfort women monument in New Jersey is a site to remind visitors of a shameful past. The message is clear: now it is the victims’ turn to demand justice, and it is a matter of human rights protection. Adorno argues that the culture of forgetting ultimately threatens democracy, because democracy requires a self-critical working through of the past (Misztal 2003: 145). Koreans in their homeland and in the diaspora are pushing Japan to remember its past. It is a message that holds important implications for its future as a democratic

nation as well as for its relations with Korea, China and other neighbors.

### Conclusion

Reconciliation can be a messy process. So can democracy. When memory discourse is shaped by victimhood, as it is throughout East Asia, diverse identities are bound to clash, undermining constructive dialogue (Huyssen 1995: 5). Japan and Korea are caught up in just such a tangled process. Korea blames Japan for its past aggression and colonial rule, while Japan in turn blames Korea for its past weakness (Kim 2010). The Korean people blame their former royal rulers of the Choson dynasty who slighted external threats, and the Japanese people blame their former military leaders for warmongering which ended in disaster for Japan and the empire. This creates an endless cycle of finger pointing. The ongoing controversies over comfort women monuments suggest that both countries must transcend the status quo of memorializing.

Current vibrant paradigms of human rights and reconciliation call for the democratization of memories, with former victims interjecting their interpretations of the past, challenging the versions recollected by the powerful. Korean leaders had buried the comfort women issue until 1991 when Kim Hak-soon, the first comfort woman who went public with her experiences, spoke up. The trajectory of comfort women issues, therefore, has implications not only for Japanese democracy, but also for Korean democracy. The shifts in memory concern respect for human rights and the possibilities of a reconciliatory journey between former enemies.

Reconciliation involves multiple stages of self-reflexivity (entailing a sense of morality and justice), acknowledgment (of past wrongs committed and suffered), redistributive justice (in the form of apology, compensation, restitution, pedagogical revisions, etc.), corrective mechanisms (such as legal reform,

rehabilitation programs, criminal punishment, communal sanctions, etc.), and a final movement of forgiving. In contrast to Western Europe, East Asia is yet to undertake an effective reconciliation process.<sup>9</sup> In order to transcend the counterproductive blame games, memory and reconciliation need to be interwoven. This interactive orientation opens up a self-reflexive and deliberative engagement with history.

The rising global awareness of human rights helps to highlight the accountability of the individual, once largely overshadowed by groups, political leaders, and nation-states. The reparations movements by the Chinese and Korean people against their own governments as well as Japanese corporations indicate an emergence of new international and domestic moral regimes (see Baker 2010; Xu and Spillman 2010). Memories are no longer confined within national borders. As the US comfort women monument particularly shows, they become increasingly cross-border and even global.

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**Mikyoung Kim** is associate professor at the Hiroshima City University-Hiroshima Peace Institute, Japan. She was a Fulbright visiting professor at Portland State University and served with the U.S. State Department in Seoul as a public diplomacy specialist. She has published widely on memory, human rights and pacifist movements in East Asia. Kim is coeditor of *Northeast Asia's Difficult Past: Essays in Collective Memory* (Palgrave Macmillan) and the *North Korean Review*. She is the author of *Securitization of Human Rights: North Korean Refugees in East Asia* (Praeger). She is a guest editor of *Memory Studies Journal* for a special issue on Korean memory (April 2013, Vol. 6, No. 2).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Mark Selden and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on previous drafts.

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, the French and German governments took strong initiatives to atone for their racist and anti-Semitic histories. By contrast, not only did Japan fail to come to terms effectively with historical issues such as the comfort women, but it inflamed South

Korean public opinion by designating February 22 as "Takeshima Day" to claim the disputed islets of Dokdo/Takeshima located between Korea and Japan as their sovereign territory.

<sup>3</sup> The protest rallies continued for the past 21 years. For more details, see Okano (2012).

<sup>4</sup> The author conducted open-ended interviews with 11 visitors to the monument during 4 site visits between June and July 2012. The interviewees were thus not randomly selected: Seven of the 11 were women; 10 interviewees were Korean, and 1 was American. Such open-ended interviews are of course different from opinion polls, which require a minimum of 150 participants to have statistical significance, yet the verbatim data from field visits and interviews do not necessarily violate the scientific spirit of social science research. For more on the issue, see David Silverman (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Policies to redress past injustices are confusing and costly and moreover always raise as many objections as supportive voices (Huntington 1991; Holms 1995; Elster 1998). The controversies over the peace monument's (il)legality are a case in point, for the law also states that as long as an edifice does not pose a safety hazard or obstruct traffic, it can be permitted. The monument straddles legal boundaries, with both the central government and the local ward office refusing to issue the permit, a decision to evade the possible ramifications in either scenario (Ob News June 16, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> This leads to questions on the nature and origin of Japanese democracy, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Despite differences in framing strategies of the two commemorative sites, both cases emphasize human rights in the insistence that Japan recognize its wrongdoing, fully apologize, and compensate the comfort women who were its victims. Both celebrate the comfort women movement.

<sup>8</sup> These acts drew harsh criticism from observers of Japan. The local paper, for instance, quotes Mindy Kotler asking, "Is the Japanese right so strung out, so unpopular that it is reduced to these silly international stunts to get attention? Have they become so irrelevant that they have to prop up Comfort Women and Abductees of the North Koreans for attention? They have become as pathetic as their ideas." She went on to say that "one part of the problem is the failure of the U.S. government to connect its human rights and women's rights policies to Japan" (Star Tribune,

(<http://www.startribune.com/opinion/commentaries/158162865.html> accessed June 16, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> This observation is not to deny the slow and yet meaningful reconciliation efforts at the civilian level in both countries. Examples include the role of Japanese scholars in researching comfort women issues; the insertion of comfort women and Nanjing Massacre in textbooks before the beginning of right-wing backlash; citizens' movements on behalf of comfort women and forced laborers, among others. However major difficulties in resolving the issues such as interpretation of the dark past seem to remain the norm.