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Discourses About Comfort Women in Japan, South Korea, and International Society

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This paper focuses on the discourse about the comfort women until the early 1990s, and analyzes it with the data from mass media articles and books about this issue, most of which have not yet been highlighted as targets for academic analysis. This paper also divides the public sphere around the comfort women into three areas: South Korea, Japan, and the international society, because the public sphere of each nation before the globalization of the 1990s was independent and only slowly did they influence one another. Before the issue was politicized and recognized by the mass media, it was not easy for people in one country to realize how people in another country understood and discussed this topic. As a result of analysis, this study has discovered several facts. First, the origin of the discourse on the comfort women can be found in the 1960s and looks back to World War II. At this time the comfort women were not regarded as an independent and important issue but only remembered in South Korea and Japan as a background to the war. Second, the situation changed with the publication of the book by Senda Kako and the beginning of the first in-depth arguments in Japan. Senda's book was very influential and fixed the later direction of the discourses in the two countries. We did not find an independent discourse about the issue in South Korea until the beginning of 1990s because the South Korean discourse was heavily dependent on Japanese materials. Third, the discourses of the two countries started to separate after the issue became diplomatically charged. South Korea took a critical stance against the issue and the Japanese gradually became unsure and worried about the repercussions from the 1965 treaty. Finally, the international media took a critical stance against the Japanese because they regarded the issue in the context of human trafficking of Asian women in the sex industry and regarded it as a typical example of "sex enslavement" by the Japanese. This discourse in the international media was originally established independently from the South Korean discourse, but later sustained by South Korea through the petition the victims submitted to the Japanese court. The discourses in the public spheres of South Korea, Japan and international society were formulated by these processes. They were then frozen and we have repeated the same arguments and remained in the same situation and for almost a quarter-century.

Keywords: comfort women, historical dispute, Japan, South Korea, international society, World War II

Introduction

Even though 70 years have passed since the end of World War II and the Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula, people in Japan and South Korea still have serious disputes regarding the past. The most important issue is that of the comfort women and both governments have had severe conflicts with different official stances.

However, this does not mean that Japan and South Korea have continued the same disputes over and over again for 70 years. As is well-known today, the subject of the comfort women was rediscovered and became a significant diplomatic problem between Japan and South Korea in the early 1990s, 45 years after the end of colonial rule. The rediscovery also means that their perceptions of the past were not the same as before the 1990s.

Why was the issue, which had been overlooked for 45 years, suddenly rediscovered in the early 1990s and how did we formulate our perceptions about it? These are very important keys to understanding how we later came to face serious disputes.

Despite its importance, most scholars have not analyzed this subject in detail. In other words, most of the works on the comfort women disputes between Japan and South Korea have mainly focused on the situation after early 1990s, when the issue became diplomatically important and we can learn how the disputes escalated from previous studies (Dudden, 2014; Lynd, 2011; Tanaka, 2001; Yamazaki, 2012). However, such studies never explained how South Korean, Japanese and people in the international society discovered the issue and what importance they placed on it. Without understanding this, we cannot know why the issue, which was almost completely ignored as a diplomatic issue until the early 1990s, could have come to be regarded as one of the most important diplomatic issues between the two countries.

This paper focuses on the discourse about the comfort women until early 1990s and analyzes it by means of mass-media articles and books, most of which were not highlighted as objects of academic analysis. It also divided the public sphere around the comfort women into three areas, namely South Korea, Japan, and the international society, because the public sphere of each nation before the globalization of the 1990s was chiefly independent and only slowly did they influence one another. Before the issue was politicized and mass media began to pay attention, it was not easy for people in one country to realize how people in another country understood and discussed this topic.

Discourse in South Korea

As mentioned, it was only in the early 1990s that the South Korean people began to realize the comfort women constituted one of the most important historical problems with Japan. However, it does not mean that they were not aware of the existence of the comfort women.

If we check South Korean newspapers, journals, literature, and movies, we can find many times when the comfort women appear (see Table 1) (Kimura, 2014). This does not mean that the South Korean people regarded the issue as important at the time. It is very clear that the comfort women were given only a small role as part of the background when describing scenes regarding World War II. People saw and remembered the women but did not regard them as being very important.

After the 1970s, people gradually paid more serious attention to the women. The first occurrence took place in the early 1970s, when the issue of the South Korean population in Sakhalin became politicized.¹ It is recognized that South Korea could not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, hence thousands of South Koreans were left in Sakhalin without a way to return to their country (Arai, 2004). At the time, most of the people were thought to be male workers mobilized and moved by Japanese at the time

¹ Typical examples are *Joongang Ilbo* (1973, June 19) and *Chosun Ilbo* (1971, August 11; 1973, July 3). For news articles from *JoongAang Daily News* (Joins PDF, <http://pdf.joins.com/joongang/>) and *DB Chosun*, http://db1.chosun.com/pdf/i_service/.

of war (Joongang Ilbo, 1971, July 4)², but after the investigation by the Korean Japanese in 1970s, they found that thousands of Korean women were also left. The South Korean people and media believed that these were the women mobilized by the Japanese as comfort women (Joongang Ilbo, 1973, December 10).³

Table 1

Joongang Ilbo Articles Until the 1980s That Mention Comfort Women

	<i>Wuianbu</i> (comfort women)	<i>Jeongsindae</i> (women's corps)	Overlapping	Total
1965-1969	0	2	0	2
1970-1974	2	17	1	18
1975-1979	3	6	1	8
1980-1984	15	50	10	55
1985-1989	3	11	1	13

Source. Joins PDF, <http://pdf.joins.com/joongang/>

Note. The figures in the table show the number of articles, as of August 31, 2015, containing the words *Wuianbu* (comfort women) and/or *Jeongsindae* (women's corps) in the context of South Korean comfort women during the colonial period. Some articles include both words.

The next chance for the comfort women to attract people's attention came in two waves in the early 1980s. The first wave involved the textbook dispute in 1982, which was the first intense dispute about Japanese history textbooks and some people criticized the textbooks as lacking a description of comfort women (Joongang Ilbo, 1982, July 24, 26, 29; August 4, 6; September 17).⁴ Even more important was the second wave that came from the old comfort women outside South Korea. In particular, the story of Roh Buk-sus, who came forward in Bangkok in 1984, was sudden and dramatic and her account attracted attention on a national level. Joongang Ilbo carried a series on the victim's story for two weeks and the state-run broadcast center, KBS, made a live report connecting Bangkok and Seoul to the "historical reunion" of the victim and her family in Korea (Joongang Ilbo, 1984, March 17).⁵

The South Koreans' attention to comfort women gradually increased and they finally began to publish books and papers about them in the 1980s (Kimura, 2015a). What type of information did such Korean authors depend on during the early period? Table 2 contains a reference list used by the author to compile the earliest books about comfort women written by Korean authors in South Korea.⁶ This list has two characteristics. The first is the obvious fact that all the materials the authors used were Japanese. This means that the early discussions about the comfort women in South Korea were heavily dependent on Japanese discourse. The second is that they used a lot of the memoirs of retired Japanese soldiers. As in South Korea, facts regarding the comfort women were often mentioned in such memoirs as a part of the scenes of war.

However, information about the comfort women in such memoirs contained material that could not have been found in the Korean accounts. First, it was not easy to publish such memoirs in South Korea until early 1980s, not just because they were much poorer than the Japanese but because the memory of the Japanese soldiers was detested. Second, a huge number of memoirs were written by retired Japanese soldiers (Yamada, 1978) and the comfort women victims (Ajisaka, 1953; Kindaishi, 1965). There was a booming market in Japan

² For news articles from *JoongAang Daily News*, see Joins PDF.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Though sometimes the book by Lim (1980) is referred to as the earliest book about comfort women written by a Korean author, it was actually a translation from Kim (1976). Lim pretended it was a book he edited. Including Korean in Japanese (Kim, 1976) was the earliest though it is written in Japanese and published in Japan (Kimura, 2015a).

for such publications and thousands of memoirs were published from the 1950s to the 1970s (Kamitachi, 2014). Finally, since Japanese soldiers were in a position to control and organize the comfort system established by the Japanese military, South Korean authors were able to find much more general information about this issue in the memoirs of these retired Japanese soldiers.

Table 2

Han's Reference List From 1982

Book	Author	Publisher	Place published	Year published
<i>Taiheiyo Senso (1, 2)</i>	Kojima, Yuzuru	Chuokoronsha	Tokyo	1974
<i>Kantogun: Rikugun no boso</i>	Shimada, Toshihiko	Chuokoronsha	Tokyo	1965
<i>Nicchu Senso: Wahei ka Sensen Kakudai ka</i>	Usui, Katsumi	Chuokoronsha	Tokyo	1967
<i>Tokyo Saiban (1,2)</i>	Kojima, Yuzuru	Chuokoron-sha	Tokyo	1971
<i>Kahoku Senki</i>	Kuwashima, Setsuro	Toshoshuppansha	Tokyo	1978
<i>Kachu Senki</i>	Morigane, Chiaki	Toshoshuppansha	Tokyo	1976
<i>Bukan Heitan</i>	Yamada, Seikichi	Toshoshuppansha	Tokyo	1978
<i>Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin Ianfu</i>	Kim, Il-byeon	Sanichishobo	Tokyo	1976
<i>Chosenjin Ianfu to Nihonjin: Moto Shimonosekirohodoimbucyo no Shuki</i>	Yoshida, Seiji	Shinjinbutsuoraisha	Tokyo	1977
<i>Shogen Kiroku Jugunianfu, Kangofu: Senjo ni Ikita Onnna no Dokoku</i>	Hirota, Kazuko	Shinjinbutsuoraisha	Tokyo	1975
<i>Okinawa no Harumoni: Dainihon Baishunshi</i>	Yamatani, Tetsuo (ed.)	Banseisha	Tokyo	1979
<i>Serebesu Senki</i>	Higashimura, Akira	Toshoshuppansha	Tokyo	1974
<i>Shisetsu Yamashita Tomoyuki</i>	Kojima, Yuzuru	Bungeishunju	Tokyo	1979
<i>Kiku to Ryu: Sokoku heno Eikono Tatakai</i>	Sagara, Shunsuke	Kojinsha	Tokyo	1972
<i>Okinawa no Rekishi</i>	Miyagi, Eisho	Nihonhosokyokaishuppan	Tokyo	1968
<i>Sanko: Nihonjin no Chugoku niokeru Sensohanzai no Kokukhaku</i>	Kamiyoshi, Haruo	Kobunsha	Tokyo	1957
<i>Tokumuchohokoakutai: Hiroku Unnan no Tora to Hyo</i>	Marubayashi, Hisanobu	Banchoshobo	Tokyo	1971
<i>Jugo tai Ichi: Biruma no Shito</i>	Tsuji, Masanobu	Harashobo	Tokyo	1968
<i>Kakaru Gunjin Ariki</i>	Ito, Keiichi	Kojinsha	Tokyo	1979
<i>Harukana Senjo</i>	Ito, Keiichi	Kojinsha	Tokyo	1978
<i>Sosakutai Sankyo wo Iku</i>	Ito, Keiichi	Kojinsha	Tokyo	1980

Source: Han, 1982, p. 300.

Note. The years of publication were confirmed by CiNii, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/books/>

Discourse in Japan

As the South Korean situation in 1980s suggests, the argument regarding comfort women in Japan started much earlier. In Japan, there were huge numbers of memoirs and books related to the issue, and it was not taboo for people to discuss the matter.

However, it does not mean that the comfort women were regarded as an important issue regarding Japan's past. Again, even in Japan, the stories about the comfort women were similar kinds to stories of women who had suffered terribly during the war.⁷

As is well-known, this situation changed dramatically after the publication of *Jyugun Ianfu: Koenaki Onnna Hachimannin no Kokuhatsu (The Comfort Women: The Accusations of 80,000 "Voiceless Women")* by

⁷ In fact, the earliest memoir of a Zainichi Korean comfort woman was published as a book in a series called *Onna no Senki (Women in War)*, Kindaisensi Kenkyukai (1965).

Senda Kako (1973). In this book, Senda, a journalist from the Japanese Mainichi newspaper, wrote that he first became aware of the existence of comfort women in 1964, during the process of editing a photo album, *Nihon no Senreki (The Record of the Japanese War)*, which was published by Mainichi (Mainichishinbunsha, 1965).

This means that, in Japan, the topic of the comfort women was re-experienced during the process of the retrospection of World War II. As already mentioned, the boom of publications by retired Japanese soldiers started in 1950s, particularly after the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951. In the background, there was the complicated situation of the Japanese people concerning the post-war process directed by the Allied Forces.

People could find much information regarding comfort women in such books, and Senda's book was not the first book nor a source of information about the comfort women in Japan. However, Senda's book played a crucial role in the development of discourse regarding comfort women in Japan because previous Japanese articles and books treated the stories of comfort women merely as "interesting secret stories" for fun and did not contain any political messages. Compared with such articles and books, Senda's book pointedly criticized the past and condemned the Japanese government for its irresponsible attitude against the victims. Senda was the first person to treat the subject as an independent and important political issue regarding the Japanese past.

Senda's book also contained important elements that strongly led the direction of the discourse about the comfort women. First and most importantly, Senda treated this issue within the context of Japanese-Korean relations. He was also the first person to conduct research, even though it was not academic and included some fatal mistakes about South Korea from today's point of view. At the same time, he virtually ignored comfort women outside Japan and South Korea and because of his point of view, many people have the impression that this issue is relevant only to these two countries.

Second, Senda (1973) regarded this phenomenon in the context of war mobilization during the entire war. He understood that the recruitment of comfort women was a part of the systematic mobilization of women by the Japanese empire and insisted that it should be understood in the context of the empire's mobilization of other women, especially the *Teishintai* or women's corps. The confusion that has resulted in the discussion about the *Teishintai* and comfort women in South Korea at that time has made the discourse more complicated.

Lastly, Senda is the first person to bring attention to this concern from the point view of the human rights of women. His work differs from previous articles written by retired male soldiers or comfort women victims who related the stories as the "sad but beautiful story of love between soldiers and women". Senda tried to convey the voices of "voiceless women" directly. As a result, he successfully reported the situation of the victims and his book became sensational and influential in Japanese society.

With this work as a turning point, many books and articles about the topic were published in Japan by two kinds of people. The first were historians who wrote papers mainly in the context of war mobilization (Kurahashi, 1989; Geum, 1992). The second were South Koreans in Japan, whose books and articles were aimed at condemning the Japanese government's post-war process (Kim, 1976). As a result of their efforts, Japan compiled basic information about the issue, and this was used to formulate the later discourse about the issue not only in Japan, but also in South Korea.

However, this does not mean that the publications attracted a large Japanese readership. Even in the 1980s, the comfort women situation was not familiar to the Japanese and it was rare for the Japanese media to carry articles about it (Kimura, 2015a). It was only after the situation of the victims in South Korea and the diplomatic dispute became known that the Japanese media started to give sensational reports.

The Discourse About Comfort Women in South Korea, Japan, and the International Media in the Early 1990s

How was the discourse formulated after the outbreak of the diplomatic disputes? On this point, South Korea and Japan shared the same basis. When the diplomatic dispute broke out in 1991, after the “coming out” of Kim Hak-soo, the South Korean public arena had been dependent on the Japanese. At the time, there were only a few academic articles published in Korean and most of them were heavily dependent on the writings that came from Japan.⁸ Yun Jeong-ok, the founder of The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, had to use an introduction from Yayoi Mastui of Asahi newspaper in order to meet victims outside South Korea (Yun, 1990). South Korean activists were also dependent on Japanese information. Yun later confessed that she was greatly influenced by Senda’s book when she started the movement.

At the same time, the start of the diplomatic dispute came at a moment when the discussions between the two countries started to separate as a result of the outbreak and the argument about compensation for the victims. At the beginning of the dispute in South Korea, public opinion said the Japanese government had a legal responsibility and the South Korean government concurred after a summit meeting of the leaders from both countries in January 1992 (Asahi Shimbun, 1991, August 11)⁹.

In contrast, Japanese public opinion was reluctant to admit that the subject of the comfort women was an exceptional case of the Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation of 1965, which declared “the problems concerning property, rights, and the interests of the two High Contracting Parties and their peoples... have been settled completely and finally (MOFA, 1965)”. It appears, in fact, that even the liberal Asahi newspaper did not insist that legal compensation should be given directly to the victims (Asahi, 1992, April 29).¹⁰ They shared the concern of the Japanese government that if they admitted it as an exception of the treaty they might have to admit other exceptions and the treaty system, established in 1965, would collapse.

Interestingly, during the dialogue process between the two countries, international society took a more severe stance against the Japanese government (Kimura, 2015b). This was not because their understandings were directly influenced by South Korean understandings, but by the following reasons, if we check the reports of international media at that time closely. First, the international media took a very strong stance against the Japanese from the beginning of the dispute, and their position looked fixed from the very early period when the South Korean people began to discuss it eagerly. Since it was only after 1992 that South Korean activists started to appeal this issue to the international society, it was impossible to see the international societies’ earlier attitude as a result of the South Korean activities (The Guardian, 1988, October 12; The Economist, 1990, January 3).¹¹

Second, most of the articles were written in Tokyo, not Seoul. It was difficult to access Korean materials because most of the international media did not have branches in South Korea in the early 1990s and their news sources were heavily dependent on the Japanese (UPI, 1992).

⁸ According to the Korean Studies Information Service System (KISS) and DbPia, the two largest academic databases in South Korea, the first academic article about the issue of comfort women in Korean was published in 1992, after it was politicized. However, it was written by Yuko Suzuki, a Japanese leading scholar.

⁹ For Asahi Shimbun articles, see *Kikuzo II Bijuaru*. Retrieved from <http://database.asahi.com/library2/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For articles from the English media, see *Lexis*, <http://www.lexis.com/>

Why did the international media reports take a strong stance against Japanese? The reasons can be known if we analyze their articles closely. They reported this issue in the context of human rights of women in Japan of the time and not from the distant past. In the 1980s, the human rights of women in Japan were sometimes severely criticized by the international media and they wrote critically about the human trafficking of Asian women in the sex industry (*The Toronto Star*, 1989). They regarded the issue of the comfort women as an earlier example of the human trafficking of women by the Japanese and criticized it in the same context. In other words, they reported the issue not in the context of war or colonization but in the context of the problems of Japanese society. This is a reason why the international media used the term “sex slaves” much earlier than the Japanese and South Korean media (IPS-Inter Press Service, 1991, December 6).¹² Since they had already referred to Asian women in the Japanese sex industry as sex slaves, they used the same words when they talked about the comfort women.

The stance of international media had to be changed since the diplomatic dispute about this issue escalated after the victims’ coming out because they also had to report it in a diplomatic context. Even in this situation, most of the international media maintained a strong position against the Japanese (Reuters, 1991, December 12).¹³ The point here is how they obtained the information to criticize the Japanese, even though most of them reported from Tokyo. Of course, some of the possibilities are reports by Japanese scholars and activists. If we were to see the details of the media reports, we would discover that their perceptions and wording about comfort women differed from those of the Japanese scholars and activists. For example, most of the international media reported the possible number of comfort women as 100,000, though it was common at that time in Japan to regard the number as 80,000 or 200,000 according to Senda Kako. They also used “battlefield comfort women” as a translation of the Japanese *Ianfu*, though those words are never found in the Japanese media or in academic articles (The Adviser, 1991, December 7; Reuters, 1991, December 12).¹⁴

What then was the source of their reports? Again, most of the reports were written in Tokyo and there were no correspondents of the non-Korean international media who could understand Korean in Tokyo. In spite of this, their understanding was similar to the South Korean activists. Many South Korean activists used 100,000 as the total number of the mobilization and it was clear that “battlefield comfort women” was a translation of *Jeonjang Wuianbu*. How did they gain such an understanding, even though there were no books or articles about comfort women written by Koreans and translated into foreign languages, including Japanese and English, at that time?

The answer is simple. They were dependent on the materials that formed the petition the victims submitted to the Tokyo Local Court in December 1991 (Park, 1991), which was well-known and reflected the Korean understanding that was easily accessible in Tokyo. The international media formulated and sustained its understanding, which was originally critical of the Japanese by the information on the petition.

Conclusion

In summary, the origin of the discourse on the comfort women can be found in the 1960s when looking back to World War II. At this time, the comfort women were not regarded as an independent and important issue but only remembered in South Korea and Japan as a background to the war. The situation changed with

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the publication of the book by Senda Kako (1973) and the first intensive arguments started in Japan. Senda's book was very influential and fixed the later direction of the discourses between the two countries.

It was not possible to find an independent discourse about the issue in South Korea until the beginning of 1990s because South Korean discourse was heavily dependent on Japanese materials. The discourses started to separate after the issue became diplomatically important. South Korea maintained a critical stance against the issue but the Japanese gradually became concerned about the repercussions from the 1965 treaty.

Finally, the international media chose to take a critical stance against the Japanese because they regarded the issue in the context of human trafficking of Asian women in the sex industry and regarded it as a typical example of "sex enslavement" of Asian women by the Japanese. This discourse in the international media was originally established independently from the South Korean discourse, but later sustained by South Korea through the petition the victims submitted to the Japanese court.

The discourses in the three public spheres of South Korea, Japan, and international society were formulated by these processes. They were frozen soon after and we have repeated the same arguments and remained in the same situation for almost a quarter-century.

How can we "defrost" this situation? The important thing is to objectively examine our discourses once more and consider why other people have had different understandings.

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