

Controversies over Park Yu-ha's Book
Another Twist in the Comfort Women Redress Movement

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The most brutal crime committed by the Japanese military during the Pacific War (1932-1945) was the forced mobilization of a large number of Asian women (80,000-200,000) to military brothels to sexually serve Japanese soldiers as “comfort women.”¹ Koreans are believed to have been the largest group of comfort women victims, due mainly to the fact that the Japanese military was most effectively able to recruit women and girls from its own colonies.² The majority of these women died of physical abuse, malnutrition, illness (including sexually transmitted diseases), bombings, or other tragic circumstances. Many others are presumed to have committed suicide or been killed by Japanese soldiers. Most Korean survivors returned home after Japan was defeated in August 1945, while others remained trapped in sexual servitude.

Due to patriarchal norms stigmatizing sexual victims, Korean survivors kept silent about their brutal experiences in Japanese military brothels for almost half a century. However, the active feminist movement in Korea helped them to come forward with their stories in the early 1990s. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter referred to as the Korean Council) has helped about 240 women to come forward with their stories since 1991. Moreover, in January 1992, Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki located documents in the Japanese Defense Agency’s archives that verified the Japanese military government’s planning, construction, and operation of “comfort stations.” Testimonies by the victims and the release of historical documents accelerated the activities of the redress movement. The movement has gained support in Japan, the United States, other Western countries, and in the

¹ The term “comfort women” is a euphemism typically used in Japanese and international discourses. Many Korean scholars and the Korean Council put the term inside quotation marks because the term is not accepted as accurate or respectful to the victims. Throughout the rest of this article, typical American style is used, which excludes quotation marks, although I agree with Korean scholars that the term is a poor representation of the victims.

² Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military*, trans. Suzanne O’Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 91-95.

United Nations.

Despite the global support for the redress movement, the Japanese government has not yet made a sincere apology, dealt compensation to victims, or taken other measures to resolve the comfort women issue satisfactorily. Thus, the redress movement for the comfort women victims that started in Korea in 1990 is ongoing. The twenty-seven-year movement has had many twists and turns; naturally, many people of Korean ancestry in Japan and the United States have been actively involved in the redress movement, partly due to “long-distance nationalism” and partly due to concerns for women’s human rights.³

Park Yu-ha’s 2013 Book Defaming Comfort Women

In the midst of this progress, the comfort women’s redress movement has also experienced setbacks. In 2013, Park Yu-ha, a third-generation Korean-Japanese professor of Japanese literature at Sejong University, published a controversial critique of the Korean Council’s redress activities that defames many Korean surviving victims. Her book, entitled *Cheguk-ŭi Wianbu: Singminjijibae-wa Kiök-ŭi T’ujaeng* (Comfort Women of the Empire: Colonialism and Struggles of Memory), was criticized in Korea yet received extremely positive reviews in Japan, adding another twist to the redress movement.⁴

The central theme of her book is that Korean comfort women and Japanese soldiers felt camaraderie and sympathy for each other because both groups were citizens of the Japanese Empire.⁵ She admits that Korean comfort women were victims of sexual abuse, but simultaneously claims that they were willingly working to enhance the morale of Japanese soldiers in order to help the Japanese empire. While allowing that Korean and other Asian women were “semi-involuntarily” sent to Japanese military brothels, she advanced the notion that Koreans were more responsible for the victimization of Korean comfort women by emphasizing the abuse of girls in poor Korean families and the participation of many Koreans as recruiters of comfort women.⁶ She further claimed that many Korean comfort women had romantic relationships with the Japanese soldiers they served.⁷ In addition, Park argued that anti-Japanese nationalism and the propaganda campaigns of the “left-leaning Korean Council” had become the main hurdle to resolving the comfort women issue between Japan and Korea.⁸

Park’s book has been severely criticized by advocacy organizations, scholars, and social

³ Benedict R. Anderson, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso), 58-74.

⁴ Park Yu-ha, *Cheguk-ŭi Wianbu: Singminjijibae-wa Kiök-ŭi T’ujaeng* [Comfort Women of the Empire: Colonialism and Struggles of Memory] (Seoul: Dosöch’ulp’an Ppuri-wa Ip’ari, 2013).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61, 65, 75, 79, 137, and 205.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-27, 40, 41, 52-53, and 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-70, 72, and 77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204-222.

media users in Korea. On social media, she has been vilified as a “pro-Japanese traitor.” In addition to dozens of magazine and journal articles, two major books—one an edited volume featuring critical essays and the other a monograph—that criticized her various arguments were published in 2016.⁹ Moreover, in April 2014, the House of Sharing (a home for surviving comfort women victims in Korea), along with nine comfort women residents who lived there, submitted a civil suit against Park and the publisher and a criminal suit against Park for defaming the victims. The civil suit asked for a provisional injunction to force Park and the publisher to stop printing, publicizing, and selling the book. It also demanded compensation for each plaintiff for defamation. The Eastern Seoul Civil Court accepted the plaintiffs’ request for the provisional injunction in February 2015. In January 2016, the civil court rendered a judgment, asking Park to pay each of the nine survivors ten million won (about \$9,000).¹⁰ Park rejected the verdict and appealed to the Supreme Court. Although most people in Korea expressed satisfaction with the courts’ decisions, nearly two hundred progressive politicians and intellectuals in Korea opposed the indictment of Park through a public announcement emphasizing freedom of expression. For the criminal suit, at the end of January 2016 the verdict from the judge was not guilty, indicating that the thirty paragraphs from Park’s book the plaintiffs claimed defamed them reflect the author’s personal opinions rather than factual information. The plaintiffs did not accept the verdict and announced that they would appeal to the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, the attitude towards Park in Japan is very favorable. Fifty-four eminent Japanese politicians and intellectuals, including liberals, signed a public statement opposing Park’s indictment in Korea. In their view, Park’s book emphasized the diversity of Korean comfort women victims’ experiences, both in their mobilization to comfort stations and how they were treated there, yet her book did not exonerate the Japanese government from its responsibility. Japanese media presented Park as an innocent victim of Korean nationalism and harshly criticized the Korean attorney that indicted her. Park’s Japanese-language book became extremely popular in Japan, receiving widespread praise and several awards.

As Young Hwan Chung, the author of *Reconciliation for Whom?*, correctly pointed out in his critique of Park’s book, the unusually enthusiastic acceptance of the academically controversial book in Japan reflects the right-leaning nationalist movement of Japanese society over the last ten years or so, epitomized by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Japanese politicians and intellectuals seem to especially like Park’s claim that the “very

⁹ The edited Korean-language book, *Cheguk-ui Pyöhoin Park Yuha-ege Mutda* [We Ask the Empire’s Spokesperson, Park Yuha] includes nineteen critical essays by Korean literary critics, sociologists, historians, and legal scholars. Young Hwan Chung, a third-generation Japanese-Korean, wrote the monograph in Japanese. The Korean translation of the title is *Nugu-rül Wihan* “Hwahae”Inga?: *Cheguk Wianbu-üi Banyöksasöng* [Reconciliation for Whom?: Comfort Women of the Empire as Invented History], published by Blue History Publishing in Korea. In the book, Chung systematically criticized many of Park’s arguments and historical data.

¹⁰ Director Ahn of the Korean Council said that the attorney gave a three-year sentence at the end of 2016, and that the judge will render a sentence in January 2017.

nationalistic attitudes” of the redress movement leaders in Korea have become the major hurdle to the resolution of the comfort women issue between Japan and Korea. They also welcome Park’s book because her claims that many Koreans engaged in the mobilization of Korean women support their image of the comfort women issue.¹¹ The UN, the United States, and other Western institutions have pressured these nationalistic Japanese politicians to acknowledge the crimes of their predecessors and accept responsibility, but intellectuals like Park confirm their preferred views.

Critique of Park’s Book

I have critical views of many of Park’s arguments, but in this piece I will critique just four of her major points. First, Park highlighted the Korean Council’s anti-Japanese “nationalistic and left-leaning propaganda” as a major hurdle to resolving the comfort women issue dividing Korea and Japan. I strongly disagree with both the claim about the nature of the Korean Council and the claim that it created a major stumbling block in the progress of resolving the issue. Staff members of the Korean Council have indeed used nationalistic narratives to lead the redress movement in Korea since the forced mobilization of so many young Korean girls to Japanese military brothels was inseparably linked to Japan’s colonization of Korea. However, to encourage Korean comfort women victims to come forward with their stories and join the redress movement, the Korean Council has also fought against Korean patriarchal norms that stigmatize sexual victims. The redress movement started in Korea, rather than in China or Japan, because the Korean women’s movement progressed earlier. Moreover, throughout the movement, the Korean Council greatly contributed to challenging norms by shifting the focus from stigmatizing victims to punishing perpetrators of sexual violence.

As already pointed out, it was the Japanese right-leaning nationalist movement and the emergence of historical revisionists in the late 1990s, rather than the “left-leaning” Korean Council, that has become the main hurdle to resolving the comfort women issue. In 1993, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei acknowledged the forced mobilization of comfort women and made a formal apology to the victims and the Korean government. As a result of the redress movement in Japan and abroad, the first references to the comfort women issue appeared in most Japanese middle-school history textbooks in 1997.¹² These were positive responses to the undeniable facts, but today’s Japan is very different from the Japan of the early 1990s. However, since 2006, the Abe administration has consolidated the historical revisionist position of denying Japan’s responsibility for comfort women. Park’s book further empowers the position of Japanese nationalists who deny responsibility.

Park challenged the widely accepted view of the forced mobilization of Korean comfort women by emphasizing the active role of Koreans in the comfort women system.

¹¹ Chung, *Reconciliation for Whom?*, 5.

¹² Jordan Sand, “Introduction to Historians and Public Memory in Japan: The ‘Comfort Women’ Controversy,” *History and Memory* 2 (1999): 120.

She argued that the subordinate position of women in Korea was as much responsible for their mobilization to military brothels as was the Japanese military. She indicated that Korean parents' abuse and even sale of their daughters as well as the role of Koreans in recruiting women and managing comfort stations greatly contributed to the comfort women system. I can make two major points in response to these arguments. First, the establishment of so many military brothels in such a short period of time was contingent upon the forced mobilization of large numbers of local women and Japanese colonial subjects. Moreover, testimonies of over 108 Korean comfort women victims taken by the Research Association for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan indicate that about one-third of them were mobilized to military brothels by coercive methods, while the other two-thirds were mobilized through false promises of meaningful jobs. The two types of recruitment are clearly forced, not voluntary. Park's claim that only a few Korean victims were mobilized to Japanese military brothels by coercive techniques distorts these facts. Japanese nationalist historical revisionists do not recognize testimonies by comfort women as historical evidence; yet, dismissing eyewitnesses and participant accounts conflicts with the legal and academic investigations of historical events.

My response to Park's argument about many Koreans' participation in the recruitment of Korean comfort women and operation of military brothels is that we should focus on structural factors—rather than patriarchal customs—that led many Korean young women to leave their homes in pursuit of employment and many Korean adults to participate in the recruitment of Korean comfort women and the operation of comfort stations. The economic policy of the Japanese colonial government was to use Korea as a source of food and war materials for Japan, which resulted in extreme poverty in Korea.¹³ As a result, many poor Korean families tried to simultaneously reduce the number of dependents and increase family income by sending girls out of the home to work. Poor Korean parents initially sent their daughters to other Korean families, restaurants, or drinking places for money, and subsequently some of the girls were mobilized to military brothels through coercion or deception. No Korean parents seem to have sold their daughters directly to Japanese military brothels. Two interrelated structural factors—Japan's economic exploitation of Korea and Koreans' extreme poverty—rather than Korean patriarchal traditions, affected Korean parents' neglect and abuse of their daughters that ultimately exposed them to the Japanese military brothels.

Moreover, the Japanese Army seems to have preferred to use the Korea Army (the Japanese Army in Korea) or the (Japanese) Government-General in Korea for the recruitment of comfort women and managers of comfort stations.¹⁴ The Korea Army located Japanese or Korean recruiters of Korean comfort women and managers of comfort stations with assistance from the Government-General in Korea. The Government-General may have arranged for the local Japanese police to support the Japanese and Korean

¹³ Yun Myong-Suk, *Chosonin Kunwianbu-wa Ilbongun Wiansochedo* [Korean "Comfort Women" and Japanese Military "Comfort Women" System] (Seoul: Ihaksa, 2015), 303-365.

¹⁴ Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military*, 107-115.

procurers of comfort women in close coordination with the Japanese military police in rounding up comfort women. Testimonies by Korean victims often mentioned a Japanese or military police officer who supported Korean or Japanese recruiters. The Korea Army, at the request of the Japanese Army in China and in other Asian countries, also recruited Japanese or Korean managers of comfort stations. In fact, the diaries by a long-time anonymous Korean manager of a few comfort stations in China suggest that the Japanese Army systematically mobilized Koreans for the management of the stations, just as it mobilized the Korean work force for the war.¹⁵

The central theme of Park's book is that Korean comfort women and the Japanese soldiers they served felt camaraderie with each other since both groups were citizens of Japan who undertook difficult services on behalf of the empire. The title of her book, *Comfort Women of the Empire*, reflects this theme well. She also pointed out that many Korean comfort women maintained affectionate relationships with the Japanese soldiers they served. Park's claim that Korean comfort women felt comradeship with Japanese soldiers is similar to the claim made by some Japanese ultranationalists that colonization was helpful to Korea in its industrial development. Precisely because of their status as Japanese colonial subjects, more Korean women, especially girls, were selectively mobilized by force for Japanese military sexual slavery. It is highly unlikely that any Korean victim would have had positive feelings about forcibly providing sexual services.

A small number of Korean victims seem to have established affectionate relationships with Japanese soldiers. Of those women, most had loving relationships with officers because they were ordered to sexually serve the same officer individually for six months or so. However, they did so as a temporary survival mechanism because they were powerless within barbed-wire military brothels. Those few Korean women who established loving relationships with Japanese soldiers still endured beatings and other forms of brutal treatment by other soldiers and brothel staff members. Moreover, because of the stigma and medical problems related to their sexual slavery, they could not restore their normal family lives after returning to Korea.

Effect of Park's Book on the Redress Movement

Park's misrepresentations and distortions of Korean victims' experiences have helped the cause of Japanese nationalist revisionists who deny Japan's responsibility for the comfort women issue. However, perhaps more significantly, the book has damaged the honor and dignity of the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery. I cannot say whether her research deserves criminal punishment or not. But I believe that it is morally wrong for her as a scholar to inflict harm with her book upon powerless victims. No scholar should justify research activities that defame others, especially the powerless, in the name of freedom of expression.

¹⁵ *Ilbongun Wianso Kwanliin- üi Ilgi* [*Diaries of Japanese Military Comfort Stations*], ed. Byong-jik Ahn (Seoul: Isup, 2013).

Park's book, which puts much of the responsibility for the recruitment of comfort women and operation of comfort stations on Koreans and the responsibility for the stagnated resolution of the comfort women issue on the Korean Council, seems to have bolstered the position of the Japanese government and Japanese nationalists. The government's position is well reflected in the resolutions between the Japanese and Korean governments from 28 December 2015. The resolutions included an ambiguous apology for the victims' suffering without clearly indicating the source of the suffering. It also included a promise from the Japanese government to give one billion yen to the Korean government to compensate the forty-six surviving victims. However, Abe should have made a more specific apology and agreed to pay the compensation directly to the victims rather than through the Korean government. Moreover, the Korean government did not ask the Korean Council or the victims whether the resolutions were acceptable. The resolutions also did not include measures to educate Japanese citizens about this dark part of their history. Finally, the resolutions included a statement indicating that the resolutions are final and irreversible. The Japanese government has not only the legal but also the moral obligation to express a sincere apology for this grave crime against humanity.

For these reasons, Korean advocacy organizations and Korean survivors did not accept the resolutions.¹⁶ The Korean government established the Hwahae-Ch'iyu Chaedan (Reconciliation-Healing Foundation) with the money given by the Japanese government in July 2016. The Korean Council has rejected the compensation money and services from the Foundation. However, the Foundation persuaded—with much difficulty—thirty-one of forty-six surviving Korean victims to accept each 120 million won (about \$100,000).¹⁷ It was difficult for the Korean victims to decide not to accept such a significant amount of the reparation money because many knew they would not live much longer, but were ultimately persuaded by their children.¹⁸ However, the fifteen victims who had actively participated in the redress movement rejected the money. The Korean National Assembly is likely to pass a bill to nullify the resolutions that the Park Geun-hye administration hastily agreed on without its permission.¹⁹

¹⁶For additional explanation of the resolutions' problems, see: The Research Association for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, *2015 Wianbu Hap'ui Idaeronün Andenda [The 2015 Comfort Women Resolution Not Acceptable]* (Seoul: Kyöngin Munhawsa, 2016).

¹⁷ One Korean victim rejected the compensation money, but she found that the money was deposited in her bank account anyway because one of her younger relatives gave her bank account information to the official of the Foundation. This indicates how aggressively the Foundation moved to get the surviving victims to accept the compensation money.

¹⁸ I use the term of "a large amount of money" because the Korean victims have largely maintained poor and frugal lifestyles, so this amount of money is comparatively large given their living conditions. However, considering the life-long suffering caused by their experiences, the compensation money is not great.

¹⁹ The possibility that the National Assembly will nullify the resolutions is very high, especially because an opposition party leader is most likely to be elected president immediately following the possible confirmation of Park's impeachment.

A final part of the comfort women agreement also invigorated the redress movement: the comfort women statues. Park had previously criticized the Korean Council for installing a Korean comfort girl statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in 2010, and Japanese officials unsuccessfully requested that the statue be relocated to another place in the resolution negotiations. In response, a young Korean group installed another Korean comfort girl statue in December 2016, this time in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan. Upset by the installation of the second comfort girl statue in front of the Japanese Consulate General, Abe recalled the Japanese consul general to Japan in early January 2017, and the Korean government did the same with their representative in Japan. Thus, the Japan-Korean relationship turned sour again. Neither the Korean government nor the Japanese government has thus far taken any initiative in mending the damaged relationship caused by the installation of the second comfort woman statue.

Park emphasized that she wrote her book to facilitate the reconciliation between Japan and Korea. On the contrary, her book has resulted in a deterioration of the relationship between the two countries. On the one hand, her book has ignited Koreans' submerged nationalistic sentiment by blaming Koreans for the inability to resolve the comfort women issue and by defaming the victims; one must remember that the modern form of Korean nationalism was developed in the process of Korean resistance to Japanese colonization. On the other hand, her book has encouraged Japanese nationalists to continue their untenable position by providing them with the comfort women stories they want to hear. Thus, Park's book and the passage of the unacceptable resolutions between the two governments have reinvigorated the redress movement for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery.

Park claimed that the installment of the comfort girl monument not only irritated rightist Japanese citizens, but also made pro-Korean citizens turn against Korea. However, it was Korean citizens who had the comfort girl statues installed in front of Japanese diplomatic buildings to remind Japanese officials of the tragic events that occurred seventy years ago. The Japanese government wants to eliminate the physical reminders of Japanese military sexual slavery embodied by the statues, but the government cannot simply erase this history. Another comfort woman monument, the tenth in the United States, will be installed in San Francisco in the fall of 2017. The comfort women Justice Coalition consisting of the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Jewish organizations selected the following inscription to be included in the monument: "Our worst fear is that our painful history during World War II will be forgotten."

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