

Some Thoughts Concerning the Issues Surrounding “Comfort Women”

Kang, Seong Eun*

Korea University of Japan

Abstract

In this report, I address some of my observations of and reflections on the issues surrounding Japanese military sexual slavery and its victims, the “comfort women.” First, I seek to focus on the problem inherent in the process of remembering Pong-ki Pae. In 1991, Hak-sun Kim, an elderly woman residing in South Korea, came forward to recount her experience as a “comfort woman,” commonly understood to be the first such public acknowledgement. Even though Mrs. Pae, a resident of Okinawa, had already offered her testimony regarding her own experience as a Japanese military sex slave in 1975, her story was not known in South Korea. Mrs. Pae, a victim of colonialism and war, was effectively silenced, and her experience obfuscated, by the ideological polarity born of the division of the Korean peninsula. Second, I discuss the deeply moving encounter between Pok-tong Kim, another victim of Japanese military sexual slavery, and the students of the Korea University of Japan in Tokyo in 2014. Third, I seek to bring to the fore key discussions of the concept of war-dependent democracy. In the midst of the complete, conspicuous unveiling of the propensity of the Japanese right toward historical revisionism, the decline of the left has been intensely pronounced, rendering post-war democracy in Japan utterly impotent. The present conditions of such historical understanding in Japanese society necessitate an intricate re-examination of the understanding of modern Japanese history that has continued to exist until today; the concept of war-dependent democracy serves as an effort toward achieving such an end.

Key words: Pong-ki Pae, Korea University of Japan, “War-Dependent Democracy”

* k-songun@korea-u.ac.jp

Received January 16, 2017; Revised version received February 21, 2017; Accepted March 02, 2017

1. Representation and Recollections of Pong-ki Pae's Experience

a) Act of Remembering in Japan

The search for the truth of and the movement to garner reparations for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery, or “comfort women,” began in 1991 with the courageous testimony of Hak-sun Kim, an elderly woman residing in South Korea. Her attestation empowered the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery within as well as outside Korea who had been marginalized and effectively rendered voiceless.

In actuality, however, there was an elderly Korean woman who had forwarded a statement regarding her experiences as a comfort woman before Mrs. Kim; the “Report on the Veracity of Forced Mobilization and Massacre of Koreans in Okinawa during the Second World War,” a collaborative project conducted by the Korean-Japanese and the Japanese teams published on October 30, 1972, contains a reference to a statement made by an unidentified Korean woman residing in Okinawa that she was a comfort woman:

A woman who was forced into sexual slavery as a “comfort woman” by the Japanese slavery had kept her experience a secret. When we visited her, she looked at us with fear, defensiveness, and suspicion. At the time, she was unaware of not only Korea’s independence from Japanese colonial rule, but also its rapid development as a industrialized socialist nation. Even before she came of age, she had been forcibly moved to places such as Saipan and Rabaul; she knew neither her birthplace nor her real name. Sobbing as she recounted her tragic past, she said, “At first, I thought you also had come to deceive me so that you could take me somewhere.” Because Okinawa was under U.S. control for twenty-seven years following Korea’s independence from Japan, she had no opportunity for catharsis of her unbearable, indescribable suffering she had endured as a “comfort woman.”

Subsequently, Pong-ki Pae, a fellow resident of Okinawa, also proffered her

testimony. Mrs. Pae had been forced into sexual slavery as a "comfort woman" on Okinawa's Tokashiki Island and met the demise of the Japanese Empire at a POW camp run by the U.S. military. After she left the camp, she lived quietly in various parts of Okinawa. Facing deportation as an illegal resident, Mrs. Pae submitted her accounts to the immigration bureau of Okinawa Prefecture, and with her tragic past recognized, was able to obtain a special resident's permit; rather than a voluntary action, her decision to disclose her long-held secret had essentially been forced by the Japanese immigration policy.

In October 1975, Pong-ki Pae's traumatic experience became public knowledge as the *Okinawa Times*, *Ryukyu Shimpo*, and *Kochi Shimbu* reported her story. Around the same time, Mrs. Pae met Su-seop Kim and his wife, Hyön-ok Kim, both active in the Okinawa Prefecture bureau of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. With their support, Mrs. Pae made her account public, this time voluntarily, in the *Choson Sinbo* on April 23, 1977.

Thereafter, Pong-ki Pae's experience became widely known through Fumiko Kawada's *House with the Red Tile Roof: The Tale of a Military Sex Slave from Korea*, published by Chikuma Shobo in 1987, and Tetsuo Yamatani's *An Account of an Elderly Woman in Okinawa: Comfort Women*, a documentary released in 1979. Moreover, at the entrance to the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo is an exhibition of photographs and narrated experiences of the women who gave their statements on their past as "comfort women." Beginning the exhibition is the theme "Women Who Opened the Doors to Memories" that encompasses the following narratives: "Left in Okinawa: Pong-ki Pae," "The Birth of Everything: Hak-sun Kim," and "As the Only Korean-Japanese: Shin-to Song." It is through such means that Pong-ki Pae came to be remembered in Japan.

b) Act of Remembering in South Korea

How is Pong-ki Pae remembered in South Korea? In 1980, Professor Jung-ok Yun of Ewha Woman's University who had been personally gathering documents concerning Japanese military sexual slavery and meeting with the surviving "comfort women," went to Okinawa to meet Mrs. Pae.

Regarding the meeting, Professor Na-young Lee wrote as follows in her “History of Korean Movements to Promote the Interests of ‘Comfort Women’” published in the October 2016 issue of *Sekai*:

Meeting with Pong-ki Pae, whose life was wholly supported by the people of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, was extremely risky under the autocratic Yushin Constitution, but Professor Jung-ok Yun did not fear consequences. Her meeting with Mrs. Pae who was deeply traumatized by her experience as a “comfort woman” provided the *raison d'être* of Professor Yun’s work *Alongside the Victims* as well as her establishment of the Korean Council of the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

Following her meeting with Pong-ki Pae, Professor Yun wrote in her article published in *The Hankyoreh* in January 1990, “Mrs. Pae suffers from not only ill physical health, but also sociophobia; she responds only to the requests of Mrs. Kim, a member of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan.” Consequently, Mrs. Pae’s story remained in obscurity in South Korea.

When I attended the Third East Asia International Symposium, “The Cold War Policies of the U.S. and Japan: Peace and Human Rights in East Asia,” in November 1999 in Okinawa, I had the opportunity to participate in a discussion with scholars and civilian activists from South Korea. At the symposium, the issues of “comfort women” as well as those of the women on the U.S. military bases were at the forefront. Surprisingly, however, Mrs. Pae’s story was not familiar to the South Korean participants. I believe that the extreme politico-ideological divergence between the two Koreas and the ensuing contradictions effectively silenced Mrs. Pae, a victim of colonialism as well as the Korean War.

I do not believe that the South Korean media’s active dissemination of Mrs. Pae’s story would have effected much difference; Mrs. Pae resided in Okinawa, not South Korea, and until the late 1980s, the South Korean military junta strongly oppressed any efforts toward promoting the interests of the victims of forced mobilization and their families vis-à-vis the Japanese government. In fact, Hak-sun Kim’s courageous testimony was made possible only after the June Democracy

Movement in 1987, which created a social milieu that enabled the voices of the victims of Japanese colonialism to be heard. It was in such an environment that Mrs. Pae’s story finally became widely known in South Korean society, through the article “The Forgotten First Witness of ‘Comfort Women’—Pong-ki Pae,” published on August 8, 2015 in *The Hankyoreh*.

The month and date of the forty-ninth day funeral ceremony for Mrs. Pae—December 6, 1991—coincided with those of the day on which Mrs. Kim submitted to the Tokyo High Court her intent to pursue litigation for “comfort women” reparations. I do not know how Mrs. Kim discovered that the forty-ninth day ceremony was taking place, but Mrs. Kim sent 10,000 JPY as a solatium for bereavement. In effect, Mrs. Pae died, having passed the historic baton to Mrs. Kim.

c) Act of Remembering in North Korea

Opened in June 2016, the DPRK Central Class Education Agency is an organ of indictment for the crimes of American and Japanese imperialists as well as other enemies of class struggle; a separate section has been assigned to issues surrounding “comfort women.” Though it narrates the stories of numerous victims including Hak-sun Kim, it excludes Mrs. Pae’s account. I believe that such exclusion is the result of the lack of relations between North Korea and Japan, which prevented information regarding Mrs. Pae from being disseminated to North Korea from either Japan or South Korea.

2. Studies of “Comfort Women” at the Korea University in Japan

a) Experiential Learning of History

From 1987, Korea University in Japan has required all sophomores to take history courses. And for a week every year, studies on and trips to the sites of

the massacre of Koreans following the Great Kantō Earthquake in Honjo, Saitama Prefecture, as well as the forced mobilization of Korean laborers in the copper-mines of Ashio, Tochiki, and for the construction of the Matsushiro Underground Imperial Headquarters in Nagano are conducted.

The issue of “comfort women” was excluded from the curriculum in 1987, however; many objected to its inclusion based on the perceived possibility that male students might focus only on the sexual aspect of the issue as well as the conviction that the issue must be approached with utmost caution as it is directly related to the dignity of the Korean people. Fortunately, we did eventually include “comfort women” as a theme within our curriculum and invited researchers such as Rumiko Nishino to delve in-depth into the subject.

Our history curriculum has produced a student who chose to analyze the issues of “comfort women” as part of the senior thesis. This particular student eventually presented at an international conference on “comfort women” held in Geneva and is now working as a human rights advocate at the Human Rights Association for Korean Residents in Japan.

b) Meeting Pok-tong Kim

On June 3, 2014, Pok-tong Kim gave her testimony at a meeting in the auditorium of Korea University in Japan; it was the first time a “comfort woman” had personally visited our campus. After the introduction, Mrs. Kim relayed her experience and proceeded to declare as follows:

Currently, Korea is divided in two, and Koreans are fighting among themselves. However, the unification of the two Koreas will enable families separated by the division to re-unite, and you students will be able to freely roam the peninsula. We have to create a society without wars so that there will be no more victims like us. Though it must be really difficult for you to study in a foreign country, you have a motherland. So, do not despair, and pour your all into your academic endeavors.

Then, Mrs. Kim made a donation to be used as scholarships:

Many, many people have helped me and supported me in my fight. But there are countless people, victims of the same horrendous crime, who are suffering in silence. So, I gathered a group of friends, and we created the Butterfly Fund with what little money we had available; this is why the college students in Seoul call me Butterfly Grandma. As a fellow victim, I know how indescribably difficult the other victims' suffering is.

After her talk, Mrs. Kim joined the students for a meal and genuinely connected with them. When a female student asked her if she knew the song "Spring Time in my Hometown," Mrs. Kim replied, "Of course! I also have a song that I still remember, though I only know the first verse. It goes, 'Ravens flying over the hill / do not cry at the dead / though the bodies have perished / their revolutionary zeal is still alive.'" The song Mrs. Kim sang was "An Elegy for the *Partizan*."

A female student who had held a long conversation with Mrs. Kim said:

Mrs. Kim is going to the protest tomorrow. I deeply admire her will to action and mental strength. I wanted to console her, but it was actually I who was empowered by her because I felt that she embodied the true spirit of an activist for human rights and Korean re-unification. I only hope that I can continue her fight as her comrade to bring some semblance of a closure for those who came before us.

The students had thought of Mrs. Kim as a pitiable creature, but the meeting that day proved otherwise. In fact, it was the students who were deeply inspired by Mrs. Kim and her courage to bear witness to an unspeakable tragedy to promote truth, peace, and human rights.

3. Seventieth Anniversary of WWII, Post-War Democracy, and War-Dependent Democracy

a) Discourse of the Seventieth Anniversary of WWII

The Japanese efforts toward reconciliation and settlement have included the Women's Fund, Hanaoka Settlement, Nishimatsu Settlement, and Mitsubishi Materials (previously Mitsubishi Mining) Settlement. However, all of these pose the same problem—that is, they failed to forward an apology on a national level, avoiding legal responsibility by treating Japanese war crimes as mere historical contingencies. Moreover, said efforts effected a division among the victims, between those who agreed to the settlements and those who refused to do so.

Subsequently, some members of investigation team of the two Koreas objected to the decision rendered by the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on the grounds that it forwarded a weak acknowledgement of Japanese colonialization of Korea. The decision used the term “merge” to depict the colonialization and proffered the harsh colonial conditions of Korea and Taiwan as the factors that forced women into mobilization.

The year 2015 was the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and discourses abounded as to the characteristics of this period. Among the more renowned are as follows: Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's “Statement Commemorating the Seventieth Anniversary of WWII”; “The Report on the Twenty-First Century Planning Meeting: The Scholars' Round-Table on Abe's Statement on the Seventieth Anniversary of WWII”; “On the Prime Minister's Statement Commemorating the Seventieth Anniversary of WWII” signed by seventy-four international legal scholars and political scientists; and “Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy's (SEALD) Declaration on the Seventieth Anniversary of WWII.”

Though these arguments appear to be in conflict with one another, they in fact espouse similar historical perspectives; focusing on the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, they either take a light-handed approach to the violent colonial rule and the inflicted injuries during the colonialization of Korea prior to 1931

or ignore them altogether, viewing only the period post-1931 as bona fide wartime.

b) Post-War Democracy and War-Dependent Democracy

In *The Past and Present of Post-War Democracy in Japan: Reflections on the Political and Intellectual Community*, Taichirō Mitani, Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, writes:

All forms of democracy throughout Japanese history can safely be characterized as post-war democracy. The discourse of "public opinion" in Yukichi Fukuzawa's post-Boshin War democracy, the Freedom and People's Rights Movement as post-Seinan War democracy, the vitalization of party politics following the Sino-Japanese War, and Taisho democracy in the period following Russo-Japanese War leading up to post-WWI all served as the predecessors to the current post-war democracy.

On the problem of the Japanese right of collective self-defense, Professor Mitani criticizes the position of the current administration that essentially negates post-war Japan. In so doing, Mitani effectively poses war and democracy as divergent entities in modern Japanese history, positively assesses post-war democracy, and depicts the Abe administration as one that denies post-war Japan.

Recently, nationalist discourse has abounded in academia as well as the press in Japan; though it may not be prudent to view such preponderance as reflecting a general vision held by intellectuals and members of the press, I believe that it indeed demonstrates an understanding of history commonly shared by a certain sector of Japanese society.

In fact, the positive reception of *Comfort Women of the Empire* by the South Korean scholar Yu-ha Park by the member of the liberal Japanese press as well as intellectuals is due to the work's alignment to and validation of the sentiments and perspectives held by such people. As critics of the work such as Professor Yong-hwan Chong have asserted, Professor Park's work upholds a positive view of colonial ideology; beneath the superficial problematization of colonialism lies

a distortion of the responsibilities of colonialism. In viewing the Kōno Statement and the Asian Women's Fund as de facto apology and reparation, and forwarding a positive assessment of post-war democracy in Japan, Park effectively elicited sympathies from the Japanese liberals.

Amidst the decline of Japanese liberalism, Tokio Nakano, Professor Emeritus at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, proposed a fundamental re-examination of the traditional perspectives on modern Japanese history during the symposium "War-Dependent Democracy and Post-War Japan as Viewed from the Perspective of East Asia" held on December 12, 2015. In so doing, Nakano asserted that the positioning of war and autocracy on one end and peace and democracy on the other within the framework of modern Japanese history has proved to be a false dichotomy—that neither fundamental nor historical axis of resistance was effected.

As Nakano pointed out, democracy in modern Japanese history has been understood to be tripartite, namely the periods corresponding to the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, Taisho democracy, and post-war democracy. However, the First Sino-Japanese War followed the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, with the Russo-Japanese War erupting only a decade later. Taisho democracy was marked by the Great Kantō Earthquake, and wartime continued after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Even in post-war democracy, wartime continued with the Korean War erupting in 1950. Taking such factors into consideration, Nakano posited that rather than viewing wars as discrete periods, as has traditionally been done, they must be understood as the protraction of the larger temporality to which they belong. The new perspective he aptly termed, "War-Dependent Democracy."

Nakano asserts that the violence of colonialism and exclusion within the process of war-dependent democracy has aggregated individuals under the concept of the nation and national subjects. He also argues that the nature of war-dependent democracy that reifies the nation has necessitated the parallel conjuncture of the internal, centripetal democracy and external, centrifugal violence and war. As the nation agglutinates the citizenry under its roof, it must draw a radical distinction between the "within" and "without" of democracy based on the divergence between citizenry and non-citizenry. Colonialism, on the other hand, enfolds the external

into the internal, but defines the internal on the basis of the distinction between that which enfolds and that which is enfolded.

Furthermore, Nakano posits that the post-war democracy in Japan was directly linked to post-war reconstruction effected by the Korean War. The Treaty of San Francisco and bilateral treaties invigorated the Japanese economy in what he views as a period of war in East Asia with Japan as the "base nation." Such factors, Nakano asserts, conjoined post-war Japanese democracy with war. That Deputy Prime Minister Tarō Asō and Prime Minister Shinzō Abe are grandsons of the colonial leaders and post-war politicians Shigeru Yoshida and Nobusuke Kishi, respectively, is, to Nakano, indicative of the current administration's perpetuation of the political path taken by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party that led post-war Japan.

In problematizing today's renewed war-dependent democracy, Nakano proffers the following as the means of reviving democracy: the dissolution of the entrenchment of war in the political economy of post-war Japan; reconciliation with modern Japanese history and recognition of responsibility; and the relativization of the essentialized concept of "Japan" based on demands for rights forwarded by Korean residents of Japan as well as Okinawans.

What the victims of Japanese colonialism and their progeny seek are the Japanese acceptance of responsibilities for the violence of the Japanese Empire, in addition to the recognition of post-war Japan's history of denial of responsibility in the infliction of harm on Asia amidst the Cold War; the issues of Japanese military sexual slavery, or "comfort women," are the symbol of such a quest. I believe that this roundtable, with participants from Japan, China, and South Korea as well as Korean residents of Japan, embodies immense significance for our efforts to move beyond historiography that situates the nation at the center of modern history.