

Worst Time since the End of WWII? -  
Toward Societal Reconciliation Between  
Japan and Korea

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# Abstract

This article sheds light on how active engagement of societal actors have added new dynamism to “comfort women” activism, which has brought de-territorialization of the issue with the spread of the “comfort women” statues beyond Korea, and transformed the issue from national tragedy to a universal human rights issue. Though “victimhood nationalism” is still strong in Korean society today, which prevents Korean people to come to terms with its dark history of victimizing the others, there has been an emerging trend toward transcending simple victimhood narratives related to the “comfort women.” In mutual visits of the victims between Korea and Vietnam commemorating seventy years of Korea’s liberation and fifty years of Korea’s sending soldiers to Vietnam, we can see that memories of victimhood do not necessarily lead to a perpetual cycle of hate and anger. Since 2019, Japan-Korea bilateral relations have deteriorated to the point called “the worst in the post-war period.” Still we can find many grassroots efforts to maintain people-to-people’s ties between the two countries, especially revived feminist networks pushed by the rise of the #MeToo movement amidst heightened diplomatic tension in the summer of 2019, which could pave the way for societal reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Korea-Japan relations, reconciliation, civil society, “comfort women,” gender, victimhood

# 1. Asian Paradox Situations

East Asian countries are now facing a situation often called the “Asian paradox,” in which deepening economic interdependence *coexists with* historical and territorial conflicts and mutual suspicion. Until recently, there had been an optimistic view that deepening ties of trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges between the two countries in the last decade would lead to improvement in diplomatic relations between the two countries. Among Japanese teenagers, there has been “love all things Korean” boom, evidenced by the fact that the Japanese hashtag #IWantToBeKorean has recorded over 7,000 hits on Instagram, while #KoreaLoversUnite has racked up over 360,000 hits. Debuted in Japan in June 2017, TWICE, a nine-member Korean girl group immediately gained popularity among Japanese teenagers, and attended Japan’s popular year-end music festival, NHK’s *Kohaku Uta Gassen*. Previously Japan had another “Korean Boom,” called *Kanryū* in the 2000s. The South Korean government banned the importation of Japanese popular culture to South Korea between 1978 and 1999. When this ban was lifted in 1999, rather than a one-way flow of Japanese popular culture inundating South Korea, Korean popular culture also flowed into Japan. The Korean Wave called *Kanryū* created interest among Japanese in learning about Korean culture. By the end of 2004, Japan became the biggest importer of Korean films and dramas in the world, accounting for an estimated 70% of all Korean film exports (Creighton 2016). Witnessing the unprecedented rise of cultural interaction, some people optimistically argued that the Korean Wave would bring more mutual understanding between Japanese and Korean people, and improve Japan-Korea relations. Nevertheless, when it comes to wartime history, the picture of the two countries has been completely different. Diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea have been increasingly tense over the issue of “comfort women,” young females of various ethnic and national backgrounds, with the majority being Korean, who were forced to offer sexual services to the Japanese military before and during WWII.

For a long time, the “comfort women” issue has been a primarily historians’ concern, yet recently more and more political scientists have argued about the problem, realizing that the issue has been a serious impediment to security cooperation between the two countries. While sharing these IR scholars’ concerns for Korea-Japan rapprochement, this paper questions their assumption that the “comfort women” issue could be “solved” by governmental initiatives. Today, the “comfort women” issue is no longer purely a bilateral issue of Japan as perpetrator and South Korea as victim. Rather, it has increasingly been recognized as a universal human rights issue (Mikyoung Kim 2014). In this sense, as this paper later discusses, the 2015 Japan-Korea “comfort women” deal between Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and South Korean President Park Geun-hye, which aimed at providing a “final and irreversible” solution to the “comfort women” issue, was doomed to failure in its wrong assumption that the problems could be “solved” by top-down initiatives.

Mostly, political scientists provide a gloomy vision for future reconciliation between the two countries, as they pay too much, sometimes only attention to governmental initiatives, especially official apology. Jennifer Lind argues that a state’s policy of apologizing for past misdeeds does not always promote its relationship with former enemies, emphasizing that Japanese leaders have in fact acknowledged responsibility for its past wrongdoings through a series of official apologies, yet failed to improve its diplomatic relations with the former victim countries (Lind 2008, 2009). Thomas U. Berger tries to reveal under what conditions symbolic acts of reconciliation could succeed through examining how governments in post-WWII Austria, Germany, and Japan have dealt with its wartime wrongdoings, and concludes that under certain conditions states’ reconciliation policy may have greater costs than is commonly realized, and it cannot be simply said that it is always right and just to apologize (Berger 2012).

Here is the reason that this paper focuses on reconciliation initiatives at societal level. Successful reconciliation should be a multi-layered process that involves various actors—not only governments and high officials, but various civil society actors

playing a catalyst role for official initiatives. Especially, this paper sheds light on new developments of “comfort women” activism, which has brought de-territorialization of the issue with the spread of the “comfort women” statues beyond Korea, and then examines what kind of understanding and efforts we should develop toward historical reconciliation between the citizens in both countries.

## 2. The “Comfort women” Issue as a Human Rights Issue

Though the existence of the “comfort women” has long been known, it was only in the 1990s that the “comfort women” issue was recognized as a serious war crime requiring Japanese governmental acknowledgement of Japan’s responsibility. From 1946 to 1948, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the Tokyo tribunal, did not punish any Japanese leaders for the sexual violence committed by Japanese military personnel. Neither the Japanese nor the Korean governments raised the issue of “comfort women” during fourteen years (1952–1965) of negotiations to conclude their normalization treaty.

In the 1990s, pushed by the changing international trends of the post-Cold War period, democratization in South Korea gained momentum, which empowered civil society and provoked renewed attention to Japan’s wartime atrocities. In August 1991, Kim Haksŏn became the first former comfort woman to testify in public about her suffering during WWII. In December 1991, supported by South Korean and Japanese feminists, the first suit by three Korean former “comfort women” was filed against the Japanese government. In 1993, the Japanese government conducted a hearing of testimonies given by fifteen Korean former “comfort women” in Seoul, which ultimately led to a historical statement by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono. In this statement Kono acknowledged the Japanese military’s involvement in setting up wartime brothels before and during WWII, and apologized to the former “comfort women.” In 1995, a

Japanese government, led by Socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, expressed its “deep remorse” over colonialism and aggression and specifically apologized to the “comfort women.” It set up the Asian Women’s Fund, with public donations and state funds, to offer monetary compensation and welfare support to the surviving victims from South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia and the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The official website of the Asian Women’s Fund explains its purpose, history and activities comprehensively. See, <http://www.awf.or.jp>.

However, the issue flamed up again in December 2011, when a statue symbolizing “comfort women” was erected by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery near the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. On December 28, 2015, Abe and Park agreed to resolve the thorny decades-old “comfort women” issue “finally and irreversibly.” The agreement commits Japan to provide ¥1 billion to a South Korean fund to compensate the victims and their families, while it urged Korea to acknowledge Japan’s concerns about the “comfort women” statue in Seoul, and to strive to solve the issue in an “appropriate manner.”

As expected, the two governments’ deal on “comfort women” statue immediately sparked anger among the “comfort women” supporters, who insisted that the Korean government has no authority to remove a privately erected statue, and pledged to continue to erect new “comfort women” statues throughout the country. In December 2016, one civic group placed a bronze statue of a girl in front of the Japanese consulate in the southern port city of Busan. Criticizing the installation of the statue as the violation of the 2015 agreement to resolve the “comfort women” issue “finally and irreversibly,” the ambassador, Yasumasa Nagamine came back to Japan as an expression of protest.

Inaugurated in May 2017, the government of President Moon Jae-in, launched the task force to review the negotiation process that led to the deal on the “comfort women” issue with the Japanese government. In December 2017, the task force finally issued the report critically analyzing the Park government’s failure to gather adequately the opinions of the former “comfort women” before reaching the agreement. The report also details a previously undisclosed request by the Japanese government that the South Korean government should persuade victims’ support groups, which were likely

to oppose the deal, to accept it. O T'ae-gyu, Head of the task force, insisted that, "A victim-oriented approach, which has been accepted as a norm of the international community for human rights of wartime women, has not been fully reflected in the deal." Immediately, the Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono issued the statement that he saw no problem with the process leading to the agreement and called on Seoul to steadily implement it. Also, the Japanese government required South Korea to make an effort toward removing the statues outside its consulate in Busan as well as the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, claiming that they violate the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which requires a host state to prevent any disturbance of the peace of a diplomatic mission or impairment of its dignity.

In July 2017, South Korea's new Minister of Gender Equality and Family, Chung Hyun-back, announced a plan to construct a new museum in Seoul to commemorate former Korean women forced into Japanese wartime brothels, which would remind people of the "human rights violations caused by war," insisting that the so-called "comfort women" issue is "no longer an issue between South Korea and Japan but an international one." While the Japanese government still regards the "comfort women" issue primarily as a bilateral diplomatic issue between Japan and South Korea, the issue has increasingly been recognized as a universal human rights issue, and has already developed well beyond the control of the two governments.

"Comfort women" statues have continuously been erected by local activists not only in South Korea but abroad since the first installation in Seoul in 2011. In 2013, a local city council in Glendale California erected a replica of the Seoul statue in a local public park. Subsequently, other cities across the United States installed memorial statues, including Palisades Park and Union City, New Jersey; Southfield, Michigan; and Fairfax County, Virginia. In November 2017, San Francisco Mayor Edwin Lee signed a document formalizing the city's acceptance of a statue that symbolizes Korean "comfort women," set up by a local private organization, and became the first major U.S. city to install a "comfort women" memorial. There are "comfort women"

statues in Canada, Australia, and China, too. In May 2016, civic groups from eight countries, including South Korea and China, made an official request for the UNESCO listing of documents on wartime “comfort women,” though in October 2017 UNESCO decided to postpone its review because of its politically sensitive character. In December 2016, a museum dedicated to the Taiwanese victims of sexual violence opened in Taipei. In March 2017, the first “comfort women” statue in Europe was erected in Germany’s southeastern municipality of Wiesent. In December 2017, a statue symbolizing the “comfort women” statue was installed in Manila, the first such statue in the Philippines, with the inscription that, “This monument is a reminder of the Filipino women who were victims of abuses during the occupation of the Japanese forces from 1942–1945.”

Scholars have differed on whether erecting the “comfort women” statues could promote reconciliation or not. Regarding the 2015 agreement on the “comfort women” as a product of political wisdom of Abe and Park, security experts have regarded the statues as one of the major potential sources of future conflict. Scott A. Snyder referred to the “comfort women” statue as one of the “immediate challenges” to Korea-Japan rapprochement (Snyder 2016). Looking back to the agreement two years later, Brad Glosserman emphasized that the 2015 deal was “the high point of bilateral reconciliation,” which “signaled the readiness of leaders in both countries to make real their oft-stated desire to build a more positive relationship, and the agreement, if implemented, will be a cornerstone for genuine partnership.” Then, Glosserman expressed his regret over the “comfort women” statue outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul which was not removed accordingly (Glosserman 2017).

In contrast to these security experts who are primarily concerned about reconciliation at the governmental level and regard negatively the “comfort women” statues as a potential source of disturbance, scholars who take more sociological approaches have regarded the “comfort women” statues as a catalyst to bring a deep and broader reconciliation. Focusing not only on the activists who have erected the “comfort women” statues but active interaction and participation from

the viewers of the statues, Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon emphasizes that the “comfort women” statues have manifested a way of empowering women and generating solidarity among global subalterns, who had been silenced by patriarchal nationalism (Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon 2019). Jihwan Yoon points out that the “comfort women,” who had been located at intersectional margins during both Japanese colonialism and the postcolonial era in Korea, and long deprived of opportunities to represent their memories, could finally overcome their vulnerable status, using sensory information produced by symbolic meanings of the “comfort women” statues constructed first in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and then spread all over the world (Jihwan Yoon 2017).

We should also be aware of the global context of the rise of “comfort women” activism since the 1990s. The renewed attention to the “comfort women” in East Asia in the 1990s coincided with a global shift in attitudes towards sexual violence (Mimaki 2016). Only relatively recently has rape been recognized as a grave violation of human rights and as a crime against humanity (Oosterveld 2004; Halley 2008). Large-scale sexual violence in the Yugoslav conflict, which lasted from 1991 to 2001, created international awareness of the need to build a prohibition regime against rape as soon as possible. The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR), which were established in 1993 and 1994 respectively, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), all prosecuted rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity. The UN Human Rights Committee increasingly emphasized that the wartime system of sexual enslavement is an issue of universal human rights present in almost every battlefield today, and that, therefore, the “comfort women” issue should not be relegated to history. These norm changes on sexual violence and increasing demand for historical justice for unnamed rape victims have also been an important background of the rise of “comfort women” activism all over the world.

Certainly, the fact that the “comfort women” issue has been increasingly recognized as a universal human rights

issue and shared globally does not necessarily guarantee de-nationalization of Korean collective memories of the “comfort women.” Mary M. McCarthy points out that though transnational advocacy groups seeking historical justice for the “comfort women” have successfully transformed the international discourse surrounding the plight of these women by reframing the issue as a women’s rights and human rights issue, these NGOs ultimately have chosen to work with the state to achieve their goals, which has allowed state actors and their allies put it back in its box (McCarthy 2018). Nevertheless, as shown in the next section, there has been an emerging trend toward transcending simple victimhood narratives related to the “comfort women.”

### 3. Overcoming “Victimhood Nationalism”

So far, the “comfort women” statues have been built mostly to commemorate the victims of sexual violence by Japanese soldiers, yet there are other “comfort women” statues, which make the issue universal in a true sense. In October 2016, the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Foundation presented fifty-two documents and items to Da Nang Museum as an apology for atrocities committed by soldiers from the Republic of Korea during the Vietnam War. Prominent among the items was the “Vietnam Pieta,” created by the two Korean artists, Kim Sŏ-gyŏng and Kim Ŭn-sŏng, who are known for creating controversial art addressing war-time atrocities, most notably the famous “comfort women” statues that were erected across South Korea as well as in the United States. One of the artists, Kim Sŏ-gyŏng, said, “Just as ordinary Japanese civilians’ willingness to care about “comfort women” induced more Japanese to become aware of the issue, we need to start the movement to see what was done and how some Koreans once victimized others” (Maclellan 2016). In April 2017, another Vietnam Pieta was installed in the village of Kangjŏng- on Jeju Island, “island of peace,” to console the souls of mothers and their nameless babies tragically slain in

civilian massacres by South Korean forces during the Vietnam War (Ho-joon Huh 2017).

Certainly, with regard to East Asian history problems, the onus is primarily on Japan as the former perpetrator country. However, it is also true that reconciliation is a fundamentally reciprocal act between former adversaries. Lily Gardner Feldman, who is known for her comprehensive study on postwar Germany's reconciliation policy with the neighboring countries, emphasizes that not only perpetrator countries but victims could take initiatives in promoting reconciliation, and that victims need to be magnanimous and open to reconciliation (Feldman 2012, 2015). In the German cases not only political leaders in the victim countries, such as Robert Schuman in France and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, but civil society actors made overtures concerning reconciliation. For example, in case of Polish and German reconciliation, the initiative came first not from the perpetrator country, but from the victim country. It was the Polish Catholic bishops that first appealed to the Germans in 1965, when the hatred toward German people was widely shared among the Polish, through issuing the message, "We forgive and ask for forgiveness," with the conviction that the only way to stabilize a peaceful relationship between Poland and Germany was through reconciliation. These bishops' efforts were supported by the sympathetic media, which not only allowed the civil society to openly discuss their shared past in public sphere, but also affected the state leadership (Heo 2012). Germany's case tells us the importance of victims' active commitment toward breaking the impasse and pushing forward reconciliation under difficult situations.

Indeed, in case of Korean "comfort women" issue, the victims themselves have already acted to seek global justice beyond redress of their personal grievances. The *Hankyoreh* newspaper covered an interesting story which happened on April 4, 2015, commemorating seventy years of Korea's liberation and fifty years of Korea's sending soldiers to Vietnam. On that day, at the House of Sharing in Gwangju, Gyeonggi Province, Yu Hünam, 87, a former "comfort woman" for the Japanese imperial army, met with the survivors of civilian massacres during the Vietnam War.

Yoo said, “It’s shocking to think that South Korean soldiers did those things while they were in Vietnam. I want to apologize on their behalf,” “There is hardly anyone who truly understands the sadness and suffering of victims of war. I am really happy to meet another victim like myself. We both had the good fortune to make it out alive, so let’s not waste the time we’ve been given.” At around the same time, Nguyen Tan Lan and Nguyen Thi Thanh, Vietnam War victims, and Huynh Ngoc Van, Director of the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, visited South Korea for the opening of a photo exhibition titled “One War, Two Memories,” the exhibition to mark the seventieth anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese control and the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. At the opening ceremony, seven former “comfort women” from the House of Sharing, and three Vietnamese women placed some flowers at stone memorials for the “comfort women” who have died (Ki-young Park 2015).

As Jie-Hyun Lim, who introduced the concept of “victimhood nationalism” argues, the strong victimhood consciousness crystallized deeply in Korean society has so far prevented the Korean people to come to terms with its dark history of victimizing the others (Jie-Hyun Lim 2010). Certainly, “victimhood nationalism” is still strong today in Korean society, as shown by the fact that the expected visit of Vietnam War victims mentioned above immediately evoked a storm of protests among the members of the Korean Victims of Agent Orange Veterans Association (KAOVA). Criticizing the planned photo exhibition as an insult for Vietnam War veterans, among them were victims of Agent Orange, a powerful herbicide used by U.S. military forces during the Vietnam War to eliminate forest cover and crops for North Vietnamese forces and Viet Cong, about 300 veterans held a demonstration in order to prevent a reception for a photo exhibition. Eventually, the event was cancelled, fearing a backlash from the veteran groups (Kyu-nam Kim 2015). Still, in the interaction between Korean “comfort women” and Vietnam War victims, we can see that memories of victimhood do not necessarily lead to a perpetual cycle of hate and anger. The experience of suffering could enable people to sympathize with the suffering in other countries.

In contrast to Korean situations, there are many victims of wartime sexual violence whose suffering has not yet gained public attention in Japan. It is a well-known fact that following Japan's surrender in August 1945, Soviet Red Army soldiers entered and occupied Manchuria (present northeastern China), and captured Japanese soldiers, many of whom were to be engaged in forced labor in Siberia. However, the fate of the women in Manchuria has been kept relatively untold until recently. From the 1920s to 1940s, as a national policy to reduce the populations, a lot of Japanese settlers were sent to Manchuria. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the community created by the immigrants from Kurokawa village (some parts were now renamed Shirakawa village) in Gifu Prefecture were being attacked by Chinese bent on revenge. With the aim of protecting the settler community, the leaders of the community asked a group of Soviet soldiers for protection, and decided to provide "sexual entertainment" for them to get their military support in return. Among the approximately 400 villagers who survived, approximately fifteen unmarried women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one were gathered for this purpose. During the subsequent months, the girls were raped repeatedly, often at gunpoint. Some women died after violent rape. Some died of sexually transmitted diseases and typhus (Ito 2018a). In the summer of 1946, the community finally returned to Japan. Since then, the surviving Japanese "comfort women" have been forced to be silent about their rape due to community pressure and gender discrimination toward rape victims widely prevailing in Japan, during which the majority of the rape victims passed away. The involvement of the community members and families in the case have also complicated the situations. According to Inomata Yūsuke, a researcher who had interviewed with the former members of Kurokawa Settler Community, the members shared a strong sense of "the community's shame" toward the rape victims, and were determined that their experience should be kept secret permanently.

Even after former Korean "comfort women" finally came forward publicly and testified their wartime experience in the 1990s, these Japanese rape victims still kept their

silence. Eventually, it took more than half a century until these remaining victims, realizing that their sacrifice and pain should be remembered, began to confess their rape experience in the public. One article published in the *Tokyo Shimbun* on July 2, 2017, highlighted the confession of the women who were forced to provide sexual services to Soviet Red Army soldiers. Subsequently, on August 8, 2017, NHK, Japan's public broadcasting station aired a documentary entitled "Kokuhaku: Manmō Kaitakudan no Onna Tachi (Confession: Women of the Settler Community of Manchuria and Mongolia)." The central figure of the NHK documentary was Harue Satō, aged 92. Discriminated as a "damaged property," she had to leave the village and finally settled in the mountain, where she spent years to clear inhospitable land and started her own dairy farm, and found her husband who understood everything (Sato 2017; Inomata 2018).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sato's article is based on the report of *Tokyo Shimbun* (July 3, 2017).

In 1982, "*Otome no Hi* (a monument to the maiden)" was erected in Shirakawa village as a memorial for these rape victims, yet without any inscription explaining the background. In November 2018, pushed by a series of women's brave confessions, a new explanation board with lengthy inscription was added to the monument, explaining the experience and feeling of the women in vivid terms. "It is life or death." "The women could not say, 'No.'" "Even after the repatriation, the horror burned in my mind" (Ito 2018b).

## 4. Reconciliation Efforts at the Societal Level

Recently, Japan-Korea diplomatic relations have been even more tense over history problems. In November 2018, the South Korean government announced that it was entering legal proceedings to dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which had been established in 2016 in order to compensate the former "comfort women" and to which the Japanese government had contributed one billion yen. The Japanese government vehemently criticized President Moon's decision to dissolve the Foundation, regarding it as

being contrary to a “final and irreversible solution” agreed in 2015 between the two governments. Since then, the dialogue between the two governments has been in limbo. The foundation was officially dissolved in July of the following year.

The two governments have also disputed over the compensation for Korean wartime laborers forced to work in Japan. In the prewar period, thousands of Koreans were recruited from the Korean Peninsula to work in munitions factories and coal mines in Japan in order to make up for the labor shortage that worsened during the Sino-Japanese War. Until recently, the South Korean government has accepted the Japanese government’s position that all reparations related to the colonization were solved by the 1965 state-to-state treaty to normalize diplomatic ties. However, in May 2012, South Korea’s Supreme Court ruled that individual right to claim damages caused by anti-humanitarian torts under Japanese colonial rule had not been extinguished by the 1965 agreement, and sent the case back to the High Court. In the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s decision, there was a flurry of judgments ordering Japanese companies to pay for individual damages. On January 10, 2019, during his New Year’s press conference at Cheong Wa Dae, President Moon maintained his position of non-intervention in the court’s ruling that Japanese firms pay damages for the suffering of the former wartime forced laborers, saying that, “Like all developed countries, including Japan, Korea has three branches of power and thus the Korean government needs to respect the judicial decision.” In February 2020, President Moon again emphasized that, “A victims-centered approach is a principle agreed in the international community, including the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.”

The confrontation between the two countries subsequently expanded into the economic sector, as in July 2019, the Japanese government imposed economic measures to tighten controls on exports to South Korea for three semiconductor-related goods. Semiconductors are an important industry that have supported Korea’s exports, and this measure was meant to strike at Korean relatively fragile materials and components industry. Subsequently,

the Japanese government excluded Korea from the list of the “white countries” that are subject to preferential treatment in export procedures. Although the Japanese government stressed that these measures were for security reasons, and had nothing to do with the wartime forced laborer issue, Korean and many overseas media saw Japan’s measures as a *de facto* countermeasure against Korea over the rulings on the wartime forced labor issue. Subsequently, President Moon decided to scrap the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which was signed to strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries, though the scrapping was suspended in November 2019. In this way, Japan-ROK conflict was expanded from historical issues to the economic field, and finally to the security field. This is how diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea deteriorated to the point called “the worst in the post-war period.”

A series of export control measures by Japan had a profound and enduring impact on the economic relations between the two countries and also on citizen-level exchanges. Since then, there has been a massive boycott of Japanese products and travel to Japan in South Korea. Sales of Japanese products plummeted to record levels. The tourism has also been stagnant. In Hokkaido, Korean Air decided to suspend operations on the route between Busan and Sapporo. Before the deterioration of the relations in the summer of 2019, the number of Koreans visiting Japan and Japanese visiting Korea were both on the rise. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of foreign visitors to Japan in 2018 hit a record high of 31,902,000, of which South Korea accounted for 7,539,000 visitors, second only to China’s 8 million, an increase of 5.6 percent from the previous year. The number of Japanese visiting Korea was also on the rise, with about 375,000 people visiting the country in March 2019, the highest monthly figure ever since the normalization of diplomatic relations. Those numbers, however, have seen a shocking drop since the summer of 2019, when the number of Korean visitors to Japan in August 2019 stood at 308,700, down 48% from the previous year.<sup>3</sup> Exchanges between local governments have also been severely affected. In July 2019, the city of Busan announced that it would suspend support

<sup>3</sup> Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) website, [https://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/statistics/data\\_info\\_listing/index.html](https://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/statistics/data_info_listing/index.html).

for exchange projects with its Japanese sister cities. Dozens of other local governments also notified their sister and friend cities in Japan of the cancellation of their exchange programs.

Nevertheless, they are not the whole picture. While 2019 was a year of heightened diplomatic tensions and frictions between Japan and South Korea, on the literary front it was a year of increased familiarity with Koreans among Japanese people. The Japanese edition of *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, a feminist novel published in 2016 by South Korean author Cho Nam-joo, has become an extraordinary hit in terms of translated literature. The novel exposes South Korean society's systematic sidelining of women in ways that are almost identical in Japan, where women are discriminated against in employment, and are paid lower salaries than their male colleagues. When her husband tells *Ji-young* that they should start a family, she says that having a child may cause her to lose her health, colleagues and even her future. And she snaps, "What are you, a man going to lose?" Since then, many journals and articles have shed light on a new wave of Korean feminism. The fall 2019 issue of *Bungei*, published by Kawade Shobō Shinsha, which featured "Korea, Feminism, and Japan," sold out instantly and went through edition after edition.

The explosive sales of *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* in Korea coincided with the rise of the #MeToo movement, a movement aiming at abolishing any kind of sexual harassment and sexual abuse. A major turning point was the murder of a 23-year-old woman in a public toilet near the Gangnam subway station in May 2016. A 34-year-old criminal's statement that his motive was that he "couldn't stand being ignored by women on a daily basis" sparked fear and anger among Korean women as an indiscriminate murder based on sheer misogyny. In January 2018, a career female prosecutor made a public accusation of sexual harassment by her superiors, which had been going on since she entered the office. Since then, the #MeToo movement expanded in Korea. Ahn Hee-jung, a prospective presidential candidate, resigned as governor of South Chungcheong Province over allegations of sexual assault on his secretariat. The works of Ko Un, one of the front runners for the Nobel prize in literature, have been removed from textbooks after he was named in a sexual

harassment scandal in 2018.

Coincidentally, Japan also witnessed women's growing anger toward persistent discrimination against women, such as the systematic deduction of points by the Tokyo Medical University for female students taking entrance exams. However, the #MeToo movement in Japan has not been as widespread as it has been in South Korea, where protesters can number in the tens of thousands. Although #MeToo movement in South Korean was directly sparked by the 2016 Gangnam misogyny killings, its explosive spread could not be understood without understanding the long history of the Wednesday rally for the "comfort women" victims held on every Wednesday in front of Japanese Embassy in Seoul. In this context, the experience of "comfort women" has been revived and taken on a new significance, as patriarchal practices and sexual violence are still widely seen in Japan and South Korea today, both of which are known for its low ranking at the annual Global Gender Gap Report released annually by the World Economic Forum. Even though their respective governments are at odds, instilling ugly mutual feelings in citizens and deepening their rift over historical disputes, there should be a great deal of room for the citizens of Japan and South Korea to stand in solidarity for the realization of a society in which men and women can live equally.

In addition to women, the young generation could play a significant role in promoting societal reconciliation between the two countries. Recent sociological study has revealed that the main readers of the so-called "hate-Korea" books that have flooded in Japanese bookstores and internet, spreading hatred toward Korea in inflammatory terms, are middle-aged men who have experienced Japan's high economic growth from the 1960s to the 1980s. When they were in their prime, Japan was the dominant economic power in Asia, and they lived with such pride. The Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and Korea was signed in 1965, when South Korea's national power was still weak and its economic development was funded by Japan under the rubric of "economic cooperation." Their basic image of Korea is still that of this era, though Korea has achieved significant democratization and economic

development since then. By contrast, Japan has experienced a prolonged recession called the “lost decades.” “Hate-Korea” embraced widely by middle-aged Japanese could be regarded as their maladjustment to a changing balance of power between the two countries in the past decades (Higuchi et al. 2019).

By contrast, the young Japanese born in the late 1990s and 2000s do not suffer from such cognitive gap between the former and current Korea, nor have a sense of superiority over Korean society. Korea was already an emerging economy when they were born, and they have been familiarizing themselves with Korean culture through K-POP, Korean movies and dramas on a daily basis. Moreover, the situations surrounding young people in both countries have been increasingly similar, which have helped them to sympathize with each other. Both Japanese and Korean youth have been suffering from casualization of employment. In Japan, the liberalization of temporary employment in 1999 spurred an increase in the number of casual workers. Suffering from job instability, increasing number of young people now feel that they are unable to marry and have children. The number of domestic births in 2019 was 864,000, down 5.92% from the previous year and below 900,000 for the first time since the statistics began in 1899, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. In South Korea, too, the young people have been a victim of neoliberal economic policies implemented since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which have widened economic disparities among the people, and increased the number of irregular workers. The employment rate of humanities college graduates in Korea is 56%, and job hunting is harsh. A growing number of young people have been giving up on love, marriage, and childbirth; the birth rate in 2018 was the first in the world to reach zero. Facing the similar plights, young people of Japan and South Korea could strengthen their mutual ties and work together to come up with solutions of various social issues, through which they could build an important foundation for future-oriented relations between the two countries.

In fact, we could see citizen’s efforts to restore people-to-people ties between the two countries even in the mid of

heightened diplomatic tension in the summer of 2019. On the Internet's Twitter, users in Japan and Korea created hashtags #Like\_Korea and #Like\_Japan in Japanese, Korean, and English and wrote their favorite parts of each other's country or their personal heartwarming episodes during their travels to each country. They were followed by the hashtag #Don't give up Korea-Japan friendship. According to *BuzzFeed*, the hashtag #I like Korea was created by Kisokan (@Kiso\_Korean\_bot), a male Japanese language teacher at high school in Tokyo. Asked about his intension, Kisokan emphasized,

It is true that the two countries have difficult political issues such as historical and territorial issues, but I don't believe that there is any fundamental confrontation between people of the two countries. I once received a message from a Korean friend saying, "Korea and Japan are a mess, but you and I are friends.....Then we created a hashtag for SNS to let Korean citizens know that what politicians are saying is not all, and there are always various, nuanced voices among citizens. (Tomita 2019)

Although Japan-Korea relations today are described as "the worst ever," people-to-people ties remain strong, or even is made stronger at local level. The 2019 Japan-Korea Exchange Festival, which started in 2005, took place without incident in August in Seoul and in September in Tokyo. Although attendance in Seoul was sparser than in previous years, the event in Tokyo attracted nearly 80,000 people, the second-highest figure in the event's history. Especially, students' ties between the two countries remain active in a time of political turmoil. Today, 350,000 Korean high school students study Japanese, and in Japan, 300 high schools throughout the country offer Korean language instruction to over 10,000 students. Nearly 200 Japanese high schools have established sister school ties with Korean counterparts or have regular exchange activities (Ikumi 2019).

Particularly, female students have been actively participated in Japan-Korea grassroots exchange programs. On January 17–20, the 19th Korea-Japan Youth Conference was held in Seoul, co-hosted between the YWCA of Korea

and the YWCA of Japan since 1993, where young people under thirty years old from Korea and Japan spent four days together, and shared a unique space for learning together and from each other, building friendship, and working together to create a movement for change. The 2019 theme was “Misogyny and #MeToo Movement in Korea and Japan-Towards Solidarity of Women in East Asia.” During the program, twenty-one Japanese and nineteen Korean students, generated a lively discussion on the “comfort women” issue and the persistent misogyny in their respective countries, listened to a keynote speech by a speaker from Korea Women’s Hotline, exchanged reports on the situation in their respective countries surrounding misogyny, visited Gender Equality Library “Yeogi,” the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum, and Korea YWCA’s History Museum”Ije,” and explored Seoul finding various manifestations of misogyny. After the program, one Japanese participant confessed,

From this program, I realized for the first time that the “comfort women” issue was a form of sexual violence, as well as a structural violence..... I felt that my struggle against powerful forces in Japan is in parallel with the struggles of the former “comfort women,” and felt deeply empowered by them. ....While studying feminism in Japan, I had felt I was a victim from misogyny. Through this conference, however, I realized the side of my country as the perpetrator, and the necessity to face this reality.....I also felt that our generation has a unique possibility of exchanging dialogue and building peace. (The Young Women’s Christian Association of Japan 2020, World Young Women’s Christian Association 2020)

## 5. Conclusion

In September 2019, Foreign Minister Mogi Toshimitsu held talks with Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha in New York, and agreed on the importance of building “future-oriented relationship.” Nevertheless, reconciliation

could not be achieved by the governments alone, as it is a multi-layered process that involves various actors—not only governments and high officials, but various civil society actors such as historians, educational specialists, journalists, churches, religious organizations, youth organizations, and philanthropic foundations. Diversity of actors means diversity of tactics. Reconciliation could be advanced through numerous tactics including official apology, compensation, commemoration, litigation, historical dialogues, joint textbook projects, cultural events, learning language, student exchanges, and twinning of cities and municipalities. The perspectives of societal reconciliation will open our eyes to new possibilities toward regional reconciliation. If we continue to look at historical reconciliation as a highly diplomatic and political action, compromise and reconciliation should be difficult. Yet, societal reconciliation can be processed even under political tensions, and would build a foundation of future official initiatives.<sup>4</sup> In this future-oriented endeavor, the youth of the both countries could play a central role. Even amid the diplomatic tensions, these youth differentiate state-to-state relations and people-to-people relations, and embrace cultural and social ties between the two countries, in which we could find a bright hope for a better future of Japan-Korea relations.

<sup>4</sup> About the concept of “societal reconciliation,” this article owes so much to Lily Gardner Feldman’s work on postwar Germany’s reconciliation, especially Feldman (1999, 2007).

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