

Japan's World War II "Comfort Women" Revisionism Comes to the U.S

Symposium on The Revisionist Film Screening Event at Central Washington University

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This article is the first of a three-part symposium. See parts [two](#) and [three](#) here.

Perhaps it should have been foreseen, but it was not evident in 1995 just how farcical, tragic, and alarming the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII would look in Japan. Then, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, the Socialist politician in an extraordinary coalition, to put it politely, with the Liberal Democratic Party, issued a [statement](#) acknowledging that his country, "through its colonial rule and aggression, [had] caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations."

That followed upon a declaration two years earlier by the then chief cabinet secretary, Kōno Yōhei, which states, "Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere." This remarkably straightforward observation from what is known as the "Kono Statement" exists in ["unofficial"](#) translation on the site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The statement remains, at present, the official stance of the Japanese government, hard as it may be to keep that in mind in the era of the second Abe administration. In his April [address](#) to both houses of Congress,¹ Abe managed only to acknowledge that "armed conflicts have always made women suffer the most," pointedly avoiding reference to the former "comfort women," which led Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) to find the speech "shocking and shameful" for its failure to take advantage of the opportunity to offer a sincere apology.² Rep. Honda, of course, is the author of [House Resolution 121](#) that called on the Japanese Government to "acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces' coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as 'comfort women'" That was in the summer of 2007. Passage of the nonbinding resolution was apparently abetted, ironically enough, by a lengthy paid advertisement in the *Washington Post* titled "The Facts,"³ a compendium of rightwing revisionist talking points on the "comfort women." The resolution was one of

Revisionist forces were undeterred by what they could have construed as a misstep in publishing “The Facts.” They have redoubled their determination to set the historical record straight and redeem their country’s tarnished honor. And certainly they feel a strong wind in their sails under the current Abe administration, whose members, beginning with the prime minister himself, are a strong presence in the [Nippon Kaigi](#) (the “Japan Conference,”) along with nearly 40% of parliamentary representatives and numerous members of local government.⁴ Abe’s defiant commitment to Yasukuni visits, the passage of the State Secrecy Act (2013), the uncompromising stance on building a humanly and environmentally devastating US Marine base in Henoko in the face of overwhelming local opposition in Okinawa, and the insistence on disregarding popular opposition to nuclear restarts have accelerated and intensified the crescendo effect of the conservative agenda to undo the “postwar order.” This movement may be traced by such markers as the conferring of legal status as national flag and national anthem to the Rising Sun flag and the “Kimigayo” (1999), the revision of the Fundamental Education Law (2006) and, of course, the gradual but determined dismantling of the substance of the postwar Constitution, most notably, Article 9, the so-called “no-war” clause.



Against this background, the revisionist right is apparently so confident of its domestic standing that it has moved its “major battleground” to the U.S., where memorials to comfort women are being erected, and a world history textbook by a major publisher includes a reference to military sexual slavery.⁵ This is the development elucidated by Emi Koyama in her piece, “The U.S. as Major Battleground for ‘Comfort Woman’ Revisionism: The Screening of *Scottsboro Girls* at Central Washington University.” However cogent Koyama’s exposition, it falls short—properly so—of providing a rationale for the invitation to the director, one Taniyama Yūjirō, let alone the actual screening of his film on a U.S. campus. Koyama therefore goes on to give us her eye-witness account and analysis of the event.

In “Responding to ‘Comfort Woman’ Denial at Central Washington University,” Mark Auslander and Chong Eun Ahn reflect on the process by which a response to the screening was developed, from the early debates as to whether to attempt to block it, followed by whether to withhold attention, culminating in a full fledged communal effort to learn and think about the history of comfort women. The process is not over yet, as the piece makes clear. Or rather, it shows that any serious attempt to address a profound historical injury, compounded by a concerted effort to deny it altogether, is likely to direct us to look close to home with the new eyes gained from looking far, temporally as well as geographically.⁶

Invocations of “American freedom and democracy” by foreign and American politicians are too often devoid of meaning at best, more likely gestures that cover over the denial of the same to numerous others not in the room. Abe’s recent performance and its reception are no exception. What the CWU experience suggests, however, is that the arrival of comfort woman revisionism on these shores can become the occasion of a pedagogical experience that puts these notions to the test and in so doing, infuse them with life.

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Notes

¹ See Kerry Smith's [analysis](#) of the speech on this site.

² [USA Today](#), 29 April 2015.

³ See [here](#) for text in English and Japanese.

⁴ For more information on Nippon Kaigi, see "Nihon Saidai no Uha Soshiki, Nippon Kaigi o Kenshō (Japan's Largest Right-wing Organization: Examining Nippon Kaigi." *Tokyo Shimbun*, July 31, 2014, and ["Chihō kara Kaiken no Koe Enshutsu: Nippon Kaigi ga Anbun, Giin ra Koou"](#) (Voices for Constitutional Revision from the Provinces: Nippon Kaigi Prepares the Draft, and Assembly Members Respond." *Asahi Shimbun*, August 1, 2014. Also see Narusawa Muneo, ["Japan's New Prime Minister a Far-Right Denier of History."](#)

⁵ See [interview](#) with Herbert Ziegler, the historian responsible for the passage in the McGraw Hill textbook.

⁶ As of this writing, Michael Yon, an American writer recently recruited by the revisionists, has [made explicit](#) his objections to Taniyama's film for its lack of understanding of American values, and his criticism of Sakurai Yoshiko, a towering figure in the revisionist movement, for promoting it. Mariko Okada-Collins, the Japanese language instructor who initiated the invitation, [has written to affirm](#) Yon's intentions in voicing such criticism.

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