

Japan's World War II Crimes: Reexamining the "Comfort Women" Issue

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Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a leading historian of the Japanese military sex slavery system, stresses three points in an interview held in late October of 2014, as part of the Japanese weekly Shūkan Kin'yōbi's series of articles to counter-argue the prevailing trend in the Japanese mainstream media that inclined towards denying the history of the sex slavery itself, based on Asahi Newspaper's correction of one of the witnesses Yoshida Seiji's accounts in related articles published in early 1990's. One, Yoshimi reasserts that Yoshida's false accounts were not used at all in the making of [Kono Statement](#), the Japanese government's 1993 apology for and recognition of the Japanese military's involvement in the sex slavery system.

Two, the Japanese military was the main culprit in the crimes of mobilizing and confining women for forced sexual servitude. Three, the system was without a doubt one of sex slavery, as it deprived those women of the four kinds of basic freedom. The third point merits particular attention in light of the Yomiuri Newspaper's [November 28 announcement](#) of retraction and "apology" for its use of the term "sex slave" in its earlier English-language reports. With the "apology," Japan's largest newspaper officially declared to the world that the women who were repeatedly raped by Japanese military members under the direct control of the military were not sex slaves. Japan's public broadcaster NHK has also been known, according to the [October 17 report of The Times](#), to have issued a set of directives called the "Orange Book" including one that instructed English-language reporters not to use the terms "sex slaves" and "be forced to." Those moves, reinforcing the claims of the Abe administration, are precisely the kind of historical falsifications that Yoshimi fears may damage Japan's international reputation. SR

Professor Yoshimi was the person who discovered the official documents revealing the Japanese Imperial Army's inextricable involvement in the "comfort women." He explains, from the perspective of an expert, what needs to be discussed and how to move forward in addressing this issue, while critiquing false reports and misinformation primarily from right wing media, which emerged after the Asahi Shimbun retracted its reports drawing on Yoshida Seiji's testimony on the comfort women.

SK [Shūkan Kin'yōbi]: Ever since August 2014 when the Asahi Shimbun retracted its reports drawing on Yoshida Seiji's testimony on the comfort women, press bashing has been directed against Asahi led by newspapers such as the Yomiuri and Sankei, followed by major weekly magazines. The media even called for retracting the "Kono Statement" [the 1993 statement, issued by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei] that acknowledges the involvement of the Japanese Imperial Army in the comfort women system.

Yoshimi: Yoshida's testimony and the Kono Statement are unrelated. As early as 1993 at the latest, no one took seriously Yoshida's testimony claiming that he had witnessed the Japanese Army's forcible relocation of women in Jeju Island. The Kono Statement was not based on Yoshida's testimony. Nor do scholars researching the comfort women issue draw on it for their argument. In short, Asahi's retraction of Yoshida's testimony due to its falsity should not affect the discussion. Nevertheless, based upon Asahi's retraction, some label the comfort women issue a fabrication, and even deny the existence of comfort women themselves. I find this highly imprudent, though I fear that such assertions now prevail.

SK: Yet others criticize the Asahi Shimbun, because of its article based upon Yoshida's testimony, for misinforming the world and therefore disparaging Japan.

Yoshimi: That is also untrue. The comfort women became known abroad because Kim Hak-soon a former comfort woman, came forward as a victim. I doubt that Yoshida's testimony, made prior to Kim's public appearance, was widely known. A journalist from the New York Times, who visited me when researching the issue, was unaware of Yoshida's testimony. All things considered, what was crucial was that a victim identified herself in public. What is a lie is the very assertion that Yoshida's testimony spread a false story throughout the world.

SK: Aren't we losing the trust of neighboring countries because of the Asahi bashing?

Yoshimi: Not just our neighbors, but the international community. From the beginning, Prime Minister Abe has narrowly defined this problem as whether or not "the Japanese Army and Authorities forcibly relocated (abducted) women by the use of violence or threat."

The Japanese Imperial Army as the Primary Culprit

SK: Abe's point is "enforcement in a narrow sense," isn't it? That is to say, the problem is reduced to whether or not the Army and Authorities directly abducted women. Now that the Asahi has retracted its statements based on Yoshida's testimony, the prime minister insinuates that no abduction occurred.

Yoshimi: Such an argument will invite more questions, logically—whether it is acceptable if women were kidnapped by deception or cajolment [rather than direct force or threat]. Or is it tolerable if it were human trafficking [involving cash payments]? The prime minister's argument cannot address these questions. Even [historian] Hata Ikuhiko and right wingers have admitted that women were taken from the Korean Peninsula through kidnapping and human trafficking.

Kidnapping, human trafficking, and transporting victims beyond national borders were criminal acts at the time as well. When women were brought to a comfort station (*Ianjo*), the Army must have recognized its criminality as they examined women who were going into the station. What the Army should have done was to release those women and return them to their homeland, as they were obviously victims of illegal acts.

SK: Of course.

Yoshimi: Also, it was the Army that selected the traffickers who recruited the women. The Army should have arrested those traffickers who broke the law, and prosecuted them. Yet, none of them was pursued. The relationship between the Army and the traffickers indicates the Army's culpability—it was an accomplice to abduction or human trafficking to transport

the victims abroad.

Furthermore, none of these problems would have occurred if the Army had not established the comfort stations in the first place. The Army is, thus, the primary culprit while the traffickers are merely accomplices. There is no evidence indicating that the traffickers abducted women on their own independent of the Army.

Why Sex Slaves

SK: The fundamental issue of the comfort women does not lie in Prime Minister Abe's argument concerning whether the women were forcibly brought into the comfort stations, that is, "enforcement in a narrow sense." Is that right?

Yoshimi: That is right. What the international community pays attention to is not how those women were brought in, but the ways in which they were treated at the station. I have been arguing that there was no justification for depriving the women of freedom and confining them to the station. At the station, the women were deprived of four types of freedom: First, freedom of residence. Obviously, the women were brought to live in a room inside the station where they were forced to provide sexual services to the soldiers. Second is deprivation of freedom of movement. We have a fair number of orders from the comfort stations, and they indicate that leaving the station was strictly regulated or permission for going out was required. Some right wing critics insist that the women were free to go out as long as they obtained permission, but that is a preposterous argument. If permission was necessary to go outside, it means that they were not free.

SK: Don't they understand such a simple logic? I am dumbfounded.

Yoshimi: The third kind of freedom is whether those women were free to decline having sexual intercourse. It is quite obvious that the circumstances did not allow them to turn down soldiers waiting outside in line only because "I am too tired" or "I don't like him." The fourth is lack of freedom to quit. None of the regulations at the comfort station, drawn up by the Japanese Imperial Army, mentions the right to discontinue their work, despite the fact that the Shōgi torishimari kisoku [Female Entertainers and Prostitutes Control Law in effect from 1900-1946] gave women the right to leave their job.

In the past, I twice discussed the issue with Hata Ikuhiko, but he still argues that the women had the freedom to quit, just as women, who were sold and trafficked, could obtain freedom when they paid off their debts. However, freedom to leave one's job is the right to stop working whenever one wishes to do so. According to Hata's reasoning, one is confined until paying off her debts, which is nothing but the system of slavery. When one is deprived of so many kinds of freedom, it is undoubtedly wrong. Regardless of the falsity of Yoshida's testimony, the fundamental structure of the comfort women system remains unchanged. The fact that Asahi's retraction caused such a big turmoil is beyond my comprehension.

Judgment from the International Community

SK: Those women were indeed sex slaves. This is the concern of the UN and other nations. Yet, the Japanese government continues to insist that they were not.

Yoshimi: The current administration tries to appeal to the international community, but they should know what damage they will bring on themselves by doing so. Other nations will lose confidence in Japan, and Japan will sacrifice its national interest. As a result, Japan will end

up in a dire situation. Thus, downplaying the gravity of, or denying the responsibility for, the comfort women, I believe, results in degrading Japan's reputation.

SK: Despite that, the Asahi bashing was intense and still prevents us from having this sort of calm discussion.

Yoshimi: One reason why a firm relationship between Japan and China, and between Japan and Korea, has not yet been achieved, I think, is Japan's lack of historical awareness. This is why we need to "overcome the past" scrupulously. For this, we must properly resolve the comfort women issue. By doing so, we will create a new tradition in Japan, one in which we can take pride. Otherwise, Japan will isolate itself not only regionally in Asia, but also internationally around the globe and no one will take us seriously.

While the Kono Statement provides a fundamental framework for this country, some in the LDP demand revision of it. Revising would be impossible, as it would bring about serious diplomatic consequences. Instead, the current administration, I am afraid, will pretend to honor the Kono Statement overseas, while domestically denying or ignoring it. If this sort of attitude continues, I don't see any bright future.

Yoshimi Yoshiaki is an historian at Chūō University. His book [Comfort Women](#) was published in Japanese in 1995. Translated by Suzanne O'Brien, it was published in English by Columbia University Press in 2000.

This article was translated by Yuki Miyamoto from the October 31, 2014 issue of *Shūkan Kin'yōbi*.

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