

# Response to Phil Shigekuni on Comfort Women

By KOICHI MERA

## Alternative View on Comfort Women

I was pleased to have seen the revised article by Phil Shigekuni on comfort women that appeared in this newspaper on June 15 because of two reasons: the comfort women issue is now discussed in *The Rafu Shimpō*, and also Mr. Shigekuni has recognized an alternative viewpoint on this issue that was apparently argued by a professor from Japan.

However, I regret to note that Mr. Shigekuni does not have thorough understanding on this issue, and did not change his view of supporting the comfort women statue in the City of Glendale. In addition, I regret very much the position taken by JACL on this issue.

There is a deep chasm between many of the Japanese Americans and many of the Japanese in the U.S. and Japan. As one of the plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit against the City of Glendale demanding the removal of the statue, I would like to explain the substance of the comfort women issue in the hope of narrowing the chasm.

In discussing the comfort women issue, Mr. Shigekuni missed the two key points. The first is the fact that the comfort women were not sex slaves, and the second is that this movement by Koreans has been politically motivated rather than for promotion of women's human rights. Let me clarify these points.

## Comfort Women Not Sex Slaves

The comfort women issue started in the global context with the Kono

newspaper, reported Yoshida's story as if he was telling true stories. By 1993, Yoshida's book was found to be a fiction rather than a documentary by academics. However, *Asahi Shimbun* kept reporting Yoshida's stories as if they were true.

Due to pressures from various quarters, *Asahi* openly admitted its mistake of false reporting on Yoshida's writings in August 2014. As a result, the sex-slaves theory lost a principal supporter. As Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated in 2007, the government of Japan was not able to find any evidence of coercive recruitment, except in cases where military officers violated their own military codes by abducting Dutch women in Indonesia during war-time. They were exceptions. Those directly involved were punished by the military courts after the war.

The situation of comfort women is well described in the U.S. Office of War Information Psychological Warfare Team Report No. 49, written in 1944 through interviews of 20 Korean comfort women (not two as reported by Shigekuni, and his description on the contents is full of errors) who were captured in Burma. The report states that comfort women were employed by private agents, were paid more than 50 times what their clients (soldiers) made, were able to purchase luxury goods and had parties with them, and some of them got married to soldiers. They had periodic health checks and were allowed to decline undesirable customers. In conclusion, the report characterizes them as prostitutes or "professional camp followers."

changing in the direction of abduction by Japanese officers from voluntary applications. Moreover, surviving ex-comfort women have been dispatched by this organization to various places as needed such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and New York to demonstrate the pain and agony they insist that they have experienced when they were comfort women. They are now experiencing a new round of pain and agony of traveling long distances and being exposed to the public.

In addition, this movement has a powerful supporter from another direction. When our lawsuit was filed to the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles, the Korean American Forum of California, main promoter of the Glendale comfort women statue, filed an amicus curiae (supporting document) for the defendant, the City of Glendale, but then there was another amicus curiae from the organization called Global Alliance for Preserving History of WWII in Asia, a Chinese American organization in support of Glendale. This organization had helped Iris Chang to write "The Rape of Nanking," which accuses Japan of the massacre that she claimed Japan undertook. This organization filed another amicus curiae when the lawsuit was appealed to the Court of Appeal.

This is an obviously anti-Japan organization. Their objective is to convince people, especially English-speaking people, that Japanese are cruel and barbaric, and to let them hate Japanese. In the case of the comfort women memorial proposed in San Francisco, two Chinese





## Comfort Women Not Sex Slaves

The comfort women issue started in the global context with the Kono Statement of 1993. This statement is often taken as admission by the government of Japan of recruiting women coercively and enslaving many women for sexual services to the Japanese military. However, the Kono Statement was a political compromise on this issue, not a statement of facts, negotiated with the government of South Korea as confirmed with the Japanese government's review of the process of preparing the statement, which was done in 2014.

The Korean side petitioned to Japan for the inclusion of coercive recruitment in the statement to appease the emotions of the Koreans. Then-President Kim Young-sam of South Korea promised to Japan that if coercion was admitted, South Korea would not raise this issue any longer in the bilateral relations. Then, Japan decided to include an ambiguous reference to coercion.

As the government study on this issue prior to this statement did not find any evidence of coercion, the government of Japan denied the use of coercive recruitment methods. This position is clearly shown in the statement made by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shunsuke Sugiyama in February 2016 at the official U.N. Human Rights Committee meeting in Geneva reviewing the situation in Japan (not "September 2015," not at a "U.N. conference and addressed to audience" as presented by Mr. Shigekuni). This government position has been maintained in the amicus curiae brief filed in February 2017 by the government of Japan to the U. S. Supreme Court in support of the petitioners (including myself) in the Glendale lawsuit.

The "comfort women as sex slaves" theory originated from Seiji Yoshida's 1983 book "My War Crimes," in which he described, claiming as his own experience, his and his team's hunting tour of women on Korea's Cheju Island. *The Asahi Shimbun*,<sup>o</sup> a trusted national

undesirable customers. In conclusion, the report characterizes them as prostitutes or "professional camp followers."

The contents of this report corroborate well with a book published by Professor Park Yu-ha of South Korea. She describes the relationship as "comrades," a concept far from "slaves." She also mentions that most Korean women were recruited by Korean agents, not Japanese police or military officers.

Then, the only source for claiming comfort women were sex slaves is statements by those who are claiming they were comfort women between 1932 through 1945. For example, Yi Yong-su, who spoke at length before the U. S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment in 2007, is now presenting quite different testimonial narratives. The transformation of her narratives is presented in detail by Professor of Anthropology Sarah Soh, a native of South Korea, of San Francisco State University in her book "The Comfort Women," published in 2008. The initial narrative in 1993 was voluntary participation in anticipation of exceptional rewards. Now, she says she "was dragged away by the Japanese military."

### Geopolitical Background of Comfort Women Issue

Then, we need to think about the motivation of the current comfort women movement. Even though the current movement was started in Japan by Seiji Yoshida or *Asahi Shimbun*, the idea was picked up in Korea. The current principal promoter is Chong Tac Hyop (Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery), which is substantively managed by North Korea supporters. Many self-proclaimed ex-comfort women are housed in the House of Sharing in Seoul, and their behavior is controlled and monitored by this organization.

Professor Sarah So in her book states that their narratives have changed significantly from the initial narratives to recent ones,

are cruel and barbaric, and to let them hate Japanese. In the case of the comfort women memorial proposed in San Francisco, two Chinese American ex-judges of the Superior Court have been on the front line in this promotion, a Korean organization being in a supporting role.

We should not be confused with the issue of human rights and geopolitical influence. Human rights are important. But what can be gained by erecting comfort women statues on U.S. soil? Human trafficking is a serious crime, indeed. But the comfort women system was a totally different program. This issue is primarily one between Korea and Japan. And South Korea and Japan reached an agreement in December 2015 for settling this issue finally and irreversibly. By memorializing comfort women in the City of Glendale, current human trafficking cannot be curtailed in any degree.

Rather, we need to pay serious attention to the global geopolitical movement of loosening the strong tie Japan has with the United States. The current comfort women movement is aimed at driving a wedge between South Korea and Japan, and also at driving a wedge between Japan and the U.S. so that China can exert strong influence over the western part of the Pacific. It is a part of global geopolitical movements by countries that are oriented to China.

What we need to think about is not so much the merit of the Glendale comfort women statue for memorializing the pain of comfort women over seven decades ago, but more about the future of the United States not being eroded by the influence of communist countries.

---

*Koichi Mera, Ph.D., is founder and president of GAHT-U.S. Corporation (Global Alliance for Historical Truth) and a plaintiff in the lawsuit seeking removal of the comfort women monument in Glendale. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of The Rafu Shimpo.*