

“The Comfort Women were Prostitutes”: Repercussions of remarks by the Japanese Consul General in Atlanta

Shirana Masakazu and Ando Kyoko, *Tokyo Shimbun*, June 29, 2017

Translation and introduction by Kyung Hee Ha

Introduction

“I want Japan to ask for forgiveness.”¹

Ching-lin Yuen, testimony at the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, 2000

Yuen was among 64 women from 8 countries who came to Tokyo to testify about their experiences as former “comfort women.” The judges in this citizens’ tribunal found Emperor Hirohito guilty of responsibility for sexually enslaving women and girls in the Asia Pacific, and recognized direct government and military responsibility for the “comfort women” system, one of the largest and cruelest cases of sex trafficking in the 20th century.

Based not only on sympathy and responsibility, but also on trauma and memory passed down from immigrant family members who experienced Japanese colonization and invasion first-hand, members of Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the United States have stood in solidarity with the former comfort women. Years of grassroots activism resulted in the passing of U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 121 of 2007 calling on the Japanese government to formally apologize to the victims, and in the erection of more than 10 memorials in the United States, in locations including Palisades Park (NJ), Glendale (CA), and more recently, Brookhaven (GA) and San Francisco (CA). These memorials and statues seek to educate the public about these horrific war

crimes and honor the suffering and courage of the victims.

However, the Japanese government and officials have solidified their denialist stance both domestically and internationally. Since the early 2000s, the Japanese government has devoted large budgets to prevent the construction of comfort women memorials throughout the United States and elsewhere. Japan’s neonationalist daily, the *Sankei Shimbun*, styles this as the “history wars.” A number of right wing organizations and individuals have joined these efforts.²

Comfort women denialists often base their argument on three assertions: 1) there is no evidence that recruitment of girls and women was conducted systematically or coercively by the Japanese Army; 2) the numbers of “comfort women” were much smaller than those frequently cited; and 3) comfort women justice movements unfairly single out Japan when other countries committed similar war crimes.

Denialists, including Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, have criticized the “Women Column of Strength” (hereafter, Comfort Women Memorial) in San Francisco in September 2017 as “deeply regrettable.”³ Osaka Mayor Yoshimura Hirofumi conveyed his disappointment in five open letters to the late Mayor Edwin Lee of San Francisco. The two cities have had a 60-year-long sister city relationship. In a letter dated September 29,

2017, Yoshimura insisted that the Comfort Women Memorial represents “uncertain and one-sided claims as historical facts.”⁴ Unless the city and mayor reject the memorial as public property, he said, Osaka would have to “rethink the sister city relationship.”⁵ However, Mayor Lee signed the resolution unanimously passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and it was officially accepted as city property in November 2017.⁶



“Women’s Column of Strength” in San Francisco, CA. Photo by Tomomi Kinukawa.

An excerpt of the inscription of the San Francisco memorial reads, “This Monument bears witness to the suffering of hundreds of thousands of women and girls, euphemistically called Comfort women, who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in thirteen Asian Pacific countries from

1931 to 1945.”

The article translated addresses another instance of the controversy surrounding the building of a comfort woman statue in the City of Brookhaven, a suburb of Atlanta. In February 2017, a local activist group, Atlanta Comfort Women Memorial Task Force, initially reached an agreement with the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta to host the Girls’ Statue for Peace, the identical comfort woman statue located in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Three weeks later, however, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights withdrew from the agreement. *The Georgia Asian Times reports* that the local Japanese consul general met with local business leaders and officials of the Center, Atlanta and others “to express concerns and threaten Japanese business fall-out from erecting this memorial.”⁷

With the withdrawal of the Center for Civil and Human Rights, on May 23, Brookhaven approved a resolution to accept the donation of the statue from the Atlanta Comfort Woman Task Force. Brookhaven then became the first city in the South to install a comfort woman statue. Attempts by the Japanese consulate of Atlanta to block acceptance and installation of the statue failed. The statue was unveiled in Brookhaven Park on June 30, 2017.

In June 2017, when Brookhaven decided to install the Girl’s Statue for Peace, Shinozuka Takashi, the Japanese consul general in Atlanta, in an interview with local media, described the women and girls who were sexually enslaved by Japan’s military as “paid prostitutes.”⁸ Shinozuka criticized the memorial as “a symbol of hatred and resentment against Japan.”⁹ As a result, the interview with Shinozuka prompted outrage, not only from local citizens but internationally. Shinozuka’s refusal to acknowledge the comfort women, as the following article shows, is not an aberration, but a clear manifestation of how denialists are fighting the “history

wars”—by denigrating the women who courageously came out as former “comfort women—true champions of human rights and women’s rights. (KHH)

Responding to the construction of a “girl statue,” symbolizing Japan’s military comfort women, Shinozuka Takashi, the Japanese consul general in Atlanta is reported to have referred to the comfort women as “prostitutes” in an interview with local media, drawing criticism from South Korean and other media.

While the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made numerous efforts to block plans to construct comfort women statues and memorials in the United States, international society considers this a women’s human rights issue rather than a mere diplomatic issue between Japan and South Korea. Successive Japanese government efforts have revealed its reluctance to acknowledge the dark past.

The interview with Shinozuka appeared in [Reporter Newspapers](#), a local news outlet on June 23.

“The Atlanta Comfort Women Memorial Task Force (TF),” a civic group in Atlanta, Georgia planned to install the girl’s statue in a human rights organization facility with the hope to “never repeat the comfort women system, a crime against humanity.” However, in March 2017, the plan was withdrawn under “pressure from the Japanese government and corporations” (TF Facebook).

The Task Force subsequently donated the already-completed statue to Brookhaven, a neighboring city of Atlanta. The Brookhaven City Council approved installation of the statue in a park in the city in May, and the unveiling is scheduled for June 30th.

The *Reporter Newspapers* interviewed Shinozuka in response to the Task Force’s plan. Shinozuka said during the interview, “This is not a simple art object. This is a symbol of hatred and resentment against Japan.” The article reported that Shinozuka found “no evidence” of coercion in the recruitment of comfort women, and that “Shinozuka described the women as paid prostitutes.”¹⁰

This article, particularly Shinozuka’s description of the comfort women as “prostitutes,” caused wide repercussions both from people in the local community and in South Korea. *Korea Times*, an English-language paper in South Korea, reported this: “A Japanese diplomat has called the victims of sexual slavery prostitutes.” South Korea’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson also condemned the remark as “extremely inappropriate, far from international norms, if the report is true,” *Yonhap News* reported.

Responding to an inquiry from our paper’s “Special Report” section, a representation of the Regional Policy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan said, “Shinozuka was indeed interviewed, however, he did not use the word ‘prostitutes’ to describe comfort women.”

What is the truth? [An article appeared in Reporter Newspapers](#), titled, “Japan consul general’s ‘comfort women’ comments trigger international criticism.” [The interview audio data](#) was published online on the *Reporter’s* webpage, explaining that the “prostitutes” was a *Reporter’s* paraphrase of Shinozuka’s comments, not a direct quote.

Shinozuka’s comments were as follows:

“So first of all, this is a fact of history. Not 200,000, not sex slaves and not taken by force. Maybe you know that in Asian culture, in some countries, we have girls who decide to go to

take this job to help their family....The memorial which the City of Brookhaven would like to have is not a simple art object but a political tool which has many controversial implications. As you can see, this has been [a] symbol of hatred and resentment against Japanese" (cited from *the Reporter Newspapers*, June 27, 2017).

Dr. Tomomi Yamaguchi, associate professor of Anthropology at Montana State University, responded to Shinozuka's remarks. "Although Shinozuka did not directly use the word 'prostitutes,' that was clearly his meaning. That's probably why the interviewer chose the word to paraphrase Shinozuka's comments. It is not surprising that Shinozuka's remarks drew so much criticism since it also deviates greatly from the official view of the Japanese government. It is an extremely inappropriate comment for a diplomat."

Statues and monuments continue to be built in the United States: Japanese government perspectives on human rights differ from international norms

The United States became involved in the "comfort women" issue following Abe's denial of military coercion of the women during his first administration (2006-7). In July 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [resolution 121](#) to demand that the Japanese government "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner."

Following the H.Res. 121 resolution, Palisades Park and Hackensack (both in New Jersey) installed comfort women statues in October 2010 and March 2013 respectively. Nassau County, New York, followed with a statue in a park in June 2012, and both the Senate and House in New York State passed a resolution condemning Japan's wartime sexual slavery as a "crime against humanity."

The Japanese government has addressed the issue. For instance, in 2012 during the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), it demanded the removal of the comfort women memorial.¹¹ Members of the Diet (the-then opposition Liberal Democratic Party/LDP) also visited Palisades Park and argued that the memorial's inscription that read "more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of imperial Japan" to be "factually inaccurate." Opposition between the Japanese government and officials at Palisades Park on the "comfort women" issue became apparent.

Construction of comfort women memorials continued. In July 2013, Korean Americans and other residents completed installation of the comfort woman statue in a public park in Glendale California. In 2014, the [Global Alliance for Historical Truth \(GAHT\)](#) led by Japanese residents in the U.S. filed a lawsuit against the City of Glendale to demand the removal of the statue, but in March 2017 the Supreme Court declined to review the case thus ruling against the GAHT.

Prior to the court ruling, the Japanese government had filed an unprecedented amicus curiae brief arguing that the plaintiffs' appeal should be granted. In the face of GAHT's loss in the court battle, Suga Yoshihide, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, commented, "the construction of comfort women memorials in the United States is at odds with the Japanese government's position. It is very disappointing."

What is "the Japanese government's position"? An official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explains that "Japan has stated its position with regard to comfort women in speeches by the Prime Minister and at the United Nations. At the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in February 2016, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs claimed

that “forceful recruitment of comfort women by the military and government authorities could not be confirmed,” “the figure 200,000 persons as the number of comfort women also lacked concrete evidence,” and “the expression sex slaves contradicted the facts” – points similar to what consul general Shinozuka stated in his interview.

“The more the Japanese government denies the comfort women, the bigger the protest it triggers from international society, and the stronger civic activism becomes to build memorials dedicated to comfort women in the United States. The movement to build a memorial is occurring organically led in various forms by citizens and local councils,” says Watanabe Mina, secretary general of the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo.

The comfort women have been discussed in the context of universal human rights issues such as violence against women and human trafficking in the United States. Watanabe points out that “By denying the grassroots movement to wish for peace and build a memorial for comfort women, Japan can be seen as a state that neglects human rights and justifies its past wrongdoings. If a memorial is built in Japan in hopes to abolish nuclear weapons, would the U.S. government protest?”

Tomomi Yamaguchi of Montana State University also emphasizes the fact that “Comfort women memorials do not defame or humiliate Japan. It is an issue of wartime violence against women, and they seek to commemorate the memories of former comfort women and to educate a broader public about the issues.”

Second generation Korean resident of Japan, Yang Ching Ja, a co-leader of the National Movement for Resolving the Issue of the Military Comfort Women, likewise deplored Shinozuka’s remarks: “A girl’s statue is not a symbol of hatred. It honors the former comfort

women who became peace activists to prevent the violence they experienced from ever happening again.” The National Movement released a statement on June 28, 2017 pointing out that “Japanese government officials’ denial of the comfort women issue using perverse logic simply prevents the complete resolution of the issues.”

In the 2015 agreement between South Korea and Japan on the comfort women, the Japanese government offered an apology stating that it was “painfully aware of its responsibilities” and agreed to contribute 1 billion yen to a foundation to be set up by the South Korean government to provide support for the surviving former comfort women. Yang warned, “We are once again reminded that the Japanese government’s words of remorse were mere pretense, trying to buy ‘resolution’ with the 1 billion yen truly reflects the current regime’s attitude. This only added fuel to the anger of South Korea’s public opinion on the issue. Calls will grow louder for demanding the renegotiation of the 2015 agreement.”

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Jordan Sand, [A Year of Memory Politics in East Asia: Looking Back on the “Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan”](#)

[Women’s Fund and the Digital Museum](#)

Totsuka Etsuro, [Proposals for Japan and the ROK to Resolve the “Comfort Women” Issue: Creating trust and peace in light of international law](#)

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Wada Haruki, [The Comfort Women, the Asian](#)

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Notes

¹ Yoneyama, Lisa. 2016. *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 111.

² The Japanese government attempted to end the “history wars” once and for all when it reached an “agreement” with the South Korean government in December 2015. With Prime Minister’s “sincere apology” and one billion yen donation, the agreement states that the discussion of the comfort women issue to be “final and irreversible” without acknowledging any legal accountability or taking into considerations of what the survivors have demanded for decades. Seven demands by the surviving women to the Japanese government are: 1) Acknowledgement of Japan’s military sexual slavery; 2) Comprehensive investigation into the crimes; 3) Official and legally-bound apology; 4) Government reparations to all victims; 5) Prosecution of the criminals; 6) Ongoing education in Japan’s history textbooks; and 7) Construction of Memorials and Museums to remember victims and to preserve history.

“Shame on Shinzo Abe, Taking the Olympics Hostage as Global Calls for Justice Pierce the 2015 ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement,” accessed on February 10, 2018.

³ “PM Abe says San Fran acceptance of ‘comfort women’ statue ‘deeply regrettable,’” *The Mainichi*. November 22, 2017, accessed on February 10, 2018.

⁴ “Open Letter to San Francisco Mayor from Osaka Mayor,” accessed on December 7, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Japanese mayor says he’ll end SF sister city status over comfort women statue,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*. November 24, 2017., accessed on February 10, 2018.

⁷ “Center for Civil and Human Rights controversial withdrawal from proposed ‘comfort women’ memorial,” *The Georgia Asian Times*. March 2, 2017., accessed on February 10, 2018.

⁸ “Japanese consul general: Brookhaven memorial is ‘symbol of hatred,’” *The Reporter Newspapers*, June 23, 2017. accessed on February 10, 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For the discussion of “coercion,” see Yoshimi Yoshiaki, “Reexamining the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” *The Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (January 5, 2015), accessed on February 10, 2018. Yoshimi states, “Even [historian] Hata Ikuhiko and right wingers have admitted that women were taken from the Korean Peninsula through kidnapping and human trafficking.”

¹¹ Hiroki Shigeyuki, Japan’s consul general in New York met with Mayor James Rotundo of Palisades Park to request removal of the comfort women memorial. “In New Jersey, Memorial for ‘Comfort Women’ Deepens Old Animosity” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2012. Despite Japanese government efforts, Mayor Rotundo and the officials in Palisades Park remained committed to memorializing the victims and survivors of Japan’s military sexual slavery—what the Japanese government wishes to obliterate at all cost.